

## Great Ming 281

### Chapter 281: What to Bring as a Meeting Gift?

Song Yingxing ate a bowl of rice noodles and felt invigorated.

After a journey filled with dried rations and northern dishes he couldn't adapt to, finding southern-style rice noodles here in Gaojia Village was utterly moving.

He was, for a moment, struck by a surge of sentimentality!

Just then, a mother and son entered the rice noodle shop—Gao San Niang and Gao Sanwa. They sat at a table next to Song Yingxing and ordered two bowls of noodles.

Gao Laba served them and, instead of returning to the counter, settled beside Gao Sanwa. "Sanwa, you're just in time. Could you help Uncle Laba calculate the accounts for the past three days?"

Gao Sanwa smiled and replied, "Sure, no problem."

Gao Laba presented his account book—a tangled mess. He couldn't read or write; he recorded transactions solely through drawings. A single noodle bowl sold was a circle ○□, two bowls were two circles ○○□. A grain of rice purchased was an oval ○, a bundle of bamboo chopsticks was a series of lines — — — —.

As soon as the account book was laid out, Song Yingxing inhaled sharply beside them: How could anyone make sense of these scribbles?

He watched Gao Sanwa pick up a pen and begin jotting down calculations on paper—addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. In no time, the boy announced, "Uncle Laba, your expenditures over the past few days totaled one thousand five hundred thirty-two wen coins. Your income was three thousand two hundred thirty-two wen coins. That means your profit is one thousand seven hundred wen."

Song Yingxing thought, "!!!"

He stole a glance at the boy's paper. It was covered in symbols he couldn't comprehend.

Song Yingxing frowned. First, in the county town, some child had baffled him with physics. Now, in Gaojia Village, another boy was flaunting advanced arithmetic. This place made the pressure feel enormous!

Early in the morning the next day, Song Yingxing was roused from his plastic bed by a loud "clunking sound" outside. He stretched, got up, and opened the window to witness an enormous, garishly colored giant train rumbling into the distance.

Song Yingxing thought, "!!!"

Two servants burst in from an adjacent room, panic-stricken. "Master, Master! A strange, giant machine passed by, making weird noises. It was terrifying!"

Song Yingxing snapped, "Calm down! It must be some special device built in Gaojia Village. We'll study it gradually—we'll uncover its principles."

The servants forced themselves to settle.

Song Yingxing mused, "Today, I visit the school to request some books... but what should I bring as a meeting gift?"

The servants replied helplessly, "We've nearly exhausted our travel funds along the way. We lack any respectable gift."

Song Yingxing furrowed his brow in thought.

The three descended the stairs. Song Yingxing sought directions to the school and noticed a fabric shop next door. He stepped inside—

And paused. The shopkeeper, oddly enough, was a young woman.

She wasn't strikingly beautiful but possessed a gentle refinement—notably unlike a rural farmwife. Clearly educated, yet utterly unruffled, unlike the demure daughters of official families. She greeted Song Yingxing candidly, "May I help you, sir? We carry quality cotton cloth and ready-made cotton clothes. We also offer tailoring to your measurements. Prices are very reasonable!"

Song Yingxing privately wondered: Why does she give me an impression of a brothel girl?

He'd guessed correctly. This woman, Chunhong (a classic brothel name), was one of four brothel girls "bought outright" by Li Daoxuan. Assigned by Gao Yiye, she managed the fabric shop in Gaojia Village.

The shop was a cooperative founded by the village women. Previously mired in disorganization, it now flourished under Chunhong's management—business boomed, accounts were orderly, everything ran smoothly.

The women bought cotton from the village treasury, wove cloth at home, and sold it at the shop. They also provided tailoring services, measuring customers for custom clothes. Their incomes surged considerably, boosting their influence within their households.

Song Yingxing said, "Apologies. I'm not here to buy clothes. I wondered if you could tell me the way to the school?"

Chunhong smiled, "The school? Head this direction... You'll see an enormous five-story building with bright white walls. That's it—impossible to miss."

Song Yingxing said, "Thank you, young lady."

He turned to leave just as another woman entered the shop—the woman he'd glimpsed at the noodle shop last night, Gao San Niang. Behind her, two laborers carried a battered weaving machine.

She hurried over to Chunhong. "Shopkeeper Chun, terrible news! My weaving machine broke. I brought it—can someone look at it? Can it be fixed?"

Chunhong answered reassuringly, "That's simple. I'll send word to the artisans' well to fetch a woodworker—"

As they spoke, Song Yingxing darted suddenly to the loom's side. He examined it left and right, then shook his head decisively. "This weaving machine is obsolete. Not worth repairing." He addressed Gao San Niang, "Madam, you don't strike me as impoverished. Why not commission a new machine?"

Gao San Niang blinked. "A new one?"

Song Yingxing nodded emphatically. "This style is inefficient. Jiangnan no longer uses these. Here—" He promptly pulled out paper and pen. "I'll sketch a new, modern design. Take it to your woodworker."

Right there, he began drawing—

Gao San Niang and Chunhong stared, bewildered. What kind of master is this? Sketching a weaving machine design on the spot? Was he just boasting?

But Song Yingxing was not bragging.

He was genuinely formidable.

He'd memorized every component of Jiangnan's latest weaving machines. Drafting one was effortless. Swift, precise strokes soon brought the advanced loom to life on paper. Rice paper couldn't capture intricate details, though. Explanatory notes were necessary—a bit tedious.

He blew the ink dry and handed Gao San Niang the drawing. "Show this to the woodworker. If he has questions, tell him to find me. Once built, if you struggle to operate it, come find me too."

Gao San Niang carefully took the paper, baffled. Who is this man? Can I trust him?

A sudden confidence straightened Song Yingxing's posture. My dilemma about the school gift is solved. Gift my knowledge. Offer what I know to gain knowledge I lack. A fair exchange. Perfect.

He drew himself up to full height, radiating newfound assurance. To the school—proceed!

Chapter 282: Math Was Needed Everywhere

Not long after, Song Yingxing arrived at the school entrance.

From the gate, he saw a vast playground inside, its spaciousness immediately lifting his spirits.

Just as he was about to step in, a sharp shout rang out from the gatekeeper's lodge: "Who goes there? What business do you have at the school?"

Song Yingxing startled, turning to find a burly man glaring at him.

This man was the school's "guard." Li Daoxuan took children's safety seriously; he hadn't hired some frail old man but chose a strong fellow instead—someone who could handle trouble. A weak elder wouldn't cut it.

Song Yingxing cupped his fists in greeting. "This one is Song Yingxing, from Fengxin County, Jiangxi. I've come to the school in Gaojia Village seeking knowledge."

The guard: "Ah! Mr. Song! The Deity instructed that you may freely explore the school. Please, come in! All classrooms and the library are open to you. Just... try not to enter or leave classes while the children are in session."

Song Yingxing: "Huh? The Deity? Who is that?"

The guard chuckled knowingly. "You'll understand soon enough."

Song Yingxing felt puzzled. After a moment's thought, he suspected Ma Tianzheng's involvement—these Daoists loved throwing around titles like "Deity."

Entering the school grounds, Song Yingxing was instantly awestruck by the five-story teaching building. What kind of engineering could erect such a massive structure so high? How was its structure not collapsing?

He hurried inside, planting firm knocks against the wall. Immediately, he sensed its remarkable solidity—unyielding, shaking it was impossible, and collapse? Utterly unfounded.

This construction skill is extraordinary! I must study it later.

He moved to the first classroom...

Located on the ground floor's very front, beside the entrance hung a sign: "Grade 1, Class 1."

Song Yingxing glanced inside. A large group of children sat perfectly straight, listening as a teacher taught the foundational text—The Three Character Classic.

Song Yingxing nodded approvingly. This school really is impressive.

He continued on—Class 1-2, Class 1-3, Class 1-4...

The subjects were roughly the same.

But stepping toward Class 1-5, he sensed something off. The figure at the lectern appeared barely twelve or thirteen—and unmistakably a girl.

This girl was Third Miss, entrusted by the Deity to teach "Elementary Math."

Pointing to the number 5, she declared, "This is 'five.' Remember it clearly! Five!"

The children chimed in unison: "Five!"

Peering from outside, Song Yingxing thought: Huh? I've seen this symbol! Last night, at the rice noodle shop, that little helper calculated accounts using it. So this symbol represents five?

His feet froze to the spot. He simply stood outside silently eavesdropping.

First-grade math proved understandable. In minutes, he'd memorized the Arabic numerals and grasped the signs for addition and subtraction. Instantly, the equations he saw Gao Sanwa write last night flooded his recollection. Processing them mentally, it clicked: So that's how it works!

This so-called "Elementary Math" was essentially a remarkably efficient system of calculation.

Using these "Arabic numerals," complex problems became succinct. Say, 3,232 plus 32? Now simply  $3232 + 32$ —instantly clearer and far easier to compute. This is excellent! I must learn it.

Just as Song Yingxing stole these lessons with glee, recess arrived. Third Miss declared with a giggle, "Class dismissed!" and bolted out the door.

Students stretched lazily, immediately shedding formality.

Song Yingxing: "Eh?"

He hadn't gotten his fill of sneaky learning.

Unsatisfied! So deeply unsatisfied!

Suddenly, he remembered Young Master Bai mentioning a library—a place housing all knowledge, where he wouldn't need to pilfer learning class by class.

He promptly dashed through the corridors, scouring the building. Not on the first floor. Nor the second. Third? Fourth? Also empty. Song Yingxing bounded toward the fifth...

On the stairway between the fourth and fifth floors, he encountered a scholar visibly struggling. This was Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng, gasping mighty breaths as he hauled himself upward. Seeing Song

Yingxing zip past, the scholar wheezed, “Sir... Brother... Pull... Pull me... please... This fifth floor... I... can’t... make it...”

Alarmed by how starved for air the man seemed, Song Yingxing hastily steadied and hauled him to the top.

Zhao Sheng panted, “Hoo... Tha... Thank you... Brother... Thought I’d... drop dead... on four...”

Song Yingxing privately wondered: Just how feeble are you?

Naturally, he kept his complaint silent. Outwardly, he inquired: “I seek directions to the library. Could you guide me, Brother?”

Zhao Sheng: “F... Front... Fifth... door...”

Song Yingxing: “Appreciated!”

Swiftly moving to the library, Song Yingxing surveyed it—shelves neatly lined within, laden with books: The Three Character Classic, Hundred Surnames, Analects, Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean...

These held little sway over him. Gliding past, he spotted precisely what he craved on the second shelf: “Elementary Math.” Twelve entire volumes stood alongside each other. Next to them rested “Middle School Physics”—six volumes—and “Middle School Chemistry,” also six...

Song Yingxing snatched a physics volume and skimmed jubilantly: Gravity... I’d sensed this concept but lacked this precise articulation... Mass? Wait—processing mass requires... math! Gears? They cover gears here! Blast it—more math! Buoyancy and weight? Gah! Still math!

He swiftly flipped the physics book. On nearly every page lurked “math”—nine out of every ten lessons demanded it. Ignorant of math’s symbols, comprehension utterly eluded him.

Grabbing chemistry next, he gleefully scanned: Properties of matter... transformations... processes, phenomena... Our laborers mastered bronze crafting in the Shang Dynasty... iron and steel smelting since the Spring and Autumn period...

Hahaha! Exactly my passion! This I burn to learn!

He read intensely...

Thump!

He crumpled face-down, orz-style. Yet again... math.

Rap-a-tap-tap!

Gentle knuckles drummed the nearby desk. Glancing up, Song Yingxing recognized the scholar who'd nearly perished climbing stairs—now recovered and smiling genuinely.

“Mr. Song,” Zhao Sheng reassured kindly, “fret not. The Deity decreed these subjects challenge ordinary folk? Negligible. With such a mind? You’ll grasp this with a wink.”

Song Yingxing snapped his head up. “And you are...?”

Zhao Sheng bowed slightly. “Zhao Sheng. Vice Principal of this school.”

Chapter 283: The Wheel of History Turned

Song Yingxing was somewhat moved: “So many fine books, all freely available for me to read and study as I wish. How am I worthy of such great favor?”

Zhao Sheng smiled: “You possess exceptional talent, Mr. Song. Only when books like these are given to you can their greatest value be realized. If not for you, then who should see them?”

A sudden thought occurred to Song Yingxing: “Eh? Wait... Is it possible... that Daoist Ma was sent by you...”

Zhao Sheng: “Indeed. Deity specifically tasked Daoist Ma to go out and invite you here. Deity also gave the instruction that these books are entirely at your disposal. You needn’t worry about any expenses—food, clothing, living costs here in Gaojia Village—Deity has arranged everything. You need only focus your mind on your research.”

Song Yingxing was puzzled: “Exactly... who is the Deity?”

Zhao Sheng: “The Deity is the god of Gaojia Village.”

Song Yingxing didn’t quite grasp this, assuming it referred to some local gentry or petty king instead. He clasped his fists respectfully: “Then this humble one truly thanks the Deity. However, I feel uneasy accepting such provisions without contributing. I wish to impart everything I know to the school.”

Zhao Sheng: “Haha, that would be most excellent! In fact, Deity already has something specific in mind, Mr. Song. We hoped you could teach the village blacksmiths.”

Song Yingxing: “?”

Zhao Sheng: “Firearms!”

Song Yingxing smiled: “So, Firearms. The methods for crafting them are hardly secret knowledge. If the Deity requires it, I am certainly willing to teach the blacksmiths.”

He took out paper and pen, and with swift strokes, sketched right there and then. In no time, a design for Firearms appeared on the paper, every small component depicted clearly.

Zhao Sheng smiled as he collected the drawing, then continued: “Deity has another matter to discuss with you.”

Song Yingxing: “?”

Zhao Sheng produced a spring: "You've already encountered this, Mr. Song?"

Song Yingxing nodded: "I have. It's quite fascinating."

Zhao Sheng said: "Deity points out that Firearms currently require the ignition cord to be lit before firing, which is cumbersome. Why not install a piece of flint at the touch hole? Set a striking anvil beside the hole. When firing, pull the trigger. Under the spring's force, the flint would strike heavily beside the fire hole, producing sparks that ignite the gunpowder... Thus, the Firearm could fire instantly, eliminating the need to wait for the cord to burn."

Hearing this, Song Yingxing froze entirely. After several seconds, he slapped his forehead sharply: "So that's how it could be done! Right! With springs, this can actually work!"

Zhao Sheng smiled: "The method of creating a firing pin using springs has already been mastered by our village blacksmith, Blacksmith Li Da. By slightly modifying the device he made, it can be adapted into a flintlock ignition mechanism... However, the spring elasticity he achieved still isn't optimal. We would appreciate your help, Sir, in further refining it."

Song Yingxing's eyes lit up: "Introduce me! I need this blacksmith's assistance to build the device I just envisioned! Hahaha! I can see it! The method to transform the Firearm into a Flintlock Firearm!"

High in the sky, Li Daoxuan's face broke into a satisfied smile. Excellent, excellent. Having recruited a top-tier scientist truly made a difference. The weaponry of the Gaojia Village Militia was set to make a tremendous leap forward.

And he hasn't even begun learning mathematics, physics, or chemistry yet, Li Daoxuan mused. Once he starts studying those... alas... all sorts of chaotic equipment could be built.

Very good. No need to rush. Gentle guidance is the way.

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Ningxia, Yinchuan, a relay station.

Li Zicheng, working there, was feeding hay to a station horse, when he suddenly heard the stationmaster's voice: "Huang Laier, come here!"

Huang Laier was Li Zicheng's childhood name.

Hearing the call, Li Zicheng obediently approached the stationmaster: "Leader, what do you require of I, your humble servant?"

The stationmaster sighed: "The Emperor has ordered funding for relay stations cut. You're aware of this, I assume?"

A sense of foreboding rose in Li Zicheng's heart: "I am."

Stationmaster: "You're a smart lad. Hearing that, you should understand."

Li Zicheng felt his heart sink: "Leader, the Emperor cut the station funding to prevent passing officials from demanding extravagant station services beyond the allowable standards. We merely need to reduce the provisions we give to officials. Why must you dismiss me?"

The stationmaster sighed again: "The Emperor's intentions were good—wanting us to lower our expenditures on entertaining officials—but the reality is, the silver demanded by those officials simply must be provided! Trying to save money under these circumstances? The only option left is to cut down on station personnel."

Li Zicheng: "..."

Stationmaster: "You are a capable man. You'll survive outside this station. Here is three taels of silver from me personally. Take it and return to your hometown to make a living."

Li Zicheng sighed heavily, clasping his fists: “Leader, you also face difficulties. Huang Laier won’t accept this silver. When one door closes, another opens. I’m off.”

The stationmaster waved to him: “Huang Laier... live well.”

Li Zicheng gathered his belongings and strode out of the station. He pondered the vastness of the world, yet nowhere seemed a fit place for Li Zicheng. Ah well, better just go back to my old hometown, Mizhi.

In Chongzhen Year Two, facing grim economic conditions, Emperor Chongzhen Zhu Youjian, in a bid to save money, abolished numerous relay stations. Li Zicheng found his rice bowl shattered.

Li Zicheng became an unemployed youth.

The wheel of history began its relentless turn forward.

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Chengcheng County town.

Gao Yiye was overseeing Xia Lü, Qiu Ju, and Dong Xue, the three young women, working diligently on the illustrations for the fourth volume of “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale”. By this volume, the exquisite level of their drawings could rival any fine picture book.

These young women were truly commendable examples of educated women in ancient times—mastering the lute, chess, calligraphy, and painting. In that era, women with such broad “miscellaneous learning”, surpassing even that of a brothel girl, were rare finds. Yet their skills could only find employ in brothels, a stark reminder of the era’s tragedy.

After Gao Yiye redeemed and freed them, the women no longer had to kowtow and flatter men. Their new benefactor insisted they merely draw pictures and do a bit of writing and calculating, in exchange for warm clothes and sufficient food.

They felt their talents were respected, and naturally responded with immense gratitude and dedication to their work.

Just then, Gao Yiye heard a voice: “Yiye!”

Gao Yiye quickly looked up: “What are your commands, Deity?”

Li Daoxuan chuckled: “Under Song Yingxing’s guidance, the carpenters back in Gaojia Village have built the latest models of spinning and weaving machines. I’ve ordered Thirty-Two to deliver those two items to the county town as soon as possible.”

Gao Yiye understood instantly: “So women in the county town can also start spinning and weaving?”

“Precisely!” Li Daoxuan affirmed. “Women represent vital productive capacity. Leaving them idling at home is a massive waste of social resources. It’s time to mobilize the women here in the county town as well. Follow the model of Gaojia Village’s fabric shop here. Sell cotton to the women at low cost, then buy back the finished woven cloth at standard market prices.”

Gao Yiye responded promptly: “As you command!”

As their exchange concluded, Xia Lü suddenly spoke up: “Honored Deity, in our Chengcheng County town, the women possess one special skill that might merit your attention.”

Li Daoxuan: “Oh? Please elaborate.”

Chapter 284: Intangible Cultural Heritage

Xia Lü respectfully said, “The embroidery of Chengcheng County is quite renowned. Many women among the common folk excel at it, and this little girl knows a little as well.”

“Oh?” It was the first time Li Daoxuan had heard of such a thing. He casually opened his computer and searched online. Not checking was one thing, but once he did, it was truly fascinating. It turned out that Chengcheng embroidery was one of China’s National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritages—this wasn’t something Xia Lü was just boasting about.

Xia Lü added, “During the three long years of drought, all women were too weary to embroider. But now, the Deity has provided food and wages to everyone. With full bellies and renewed strength, women can once again take up embroidery. Our Chengcheng women’s hand-embroidered works are highly favored by the wealthy nobles in Xi’an.”

Li Daoxuan was delighted. “Excellent! This intelligence you’ve provided is extremely valuable. Going forward, report similar information to me first thing.”

Praised by the Deity, Xia Lü couldn’t help but feel overjoyed, giving a graceful bow in response.

Li Daoxuan secretly admired how different courtesans were from ordinary women. Women in this era had limited spheres of movement, little knowledge, and poor judgment in many matters. Yet courtesans understood things ordinary women did not.

Buying up women cheaply had indeed been the right move—he would do it again if the chance arose.

“Xia Lü,” Li Daoxuan continued, “I entrust both the fabric shop and embroidery matters to you. Establish a fabric shop company and be its main manager—selling cotton, purchasing cotton cloth, buying embroidered works from the women of Chengcheng County, then shipping them uniformly to Xi’an to reap silver from the hands of the wealthy nobles.”

Xia Lü was elated. Having been just a lowly courtesan before, she was now catapulted to the position of a main manager—a drastic reversal of fate.

There was no time to lose. She would start immediately!

With the Deity backing her, Xia Lü felt emboldened. Next to the bookstore was a grain shop that had long been closed. Xia Lü rapped loudly on its door, and when the manager answered, she slammed down the silver given to her by Li Daoxuan and bought the shop outright.

Next, she visited the Official Workshops, hired craftsmen, and transformed the grain shop. In less than two days, she successfully opened the “Deity Fabric Shop.”

Li Daoxuan did not intervene directly, offering only material support.

But courtesans in this era truly had remarkable abilities—fearless of public exposure, personally dealing with every required connection, and quite persuasive. Xia Lü quickly smoothed out all necessary channels.

Cotton bestowed by Li Daoxuan soon filled the fabric shop's warehouse. While selling this cotton at low prices, Xia Lü hung a sign promising to "purchase cotton cloth at high prices." Soon, women who owned spinning machines at home came to buy cotton.

For those without such tools, it was no problem. New-style spinning machines crafted by carpenters from Gaojia Village were promptly transported over.

Xia Lü soon bought a wealthy family's residence, converted it into the "Deity Textile Factory," filled it with numerous spinning machines, and began hiring women workers.

Women of the era were reluctant to appear in public, making hiring difficult at first.

But some women from impoverished families, seeking extra income to help support their households, risked criticism and entered the textile factory. Thus, the small factory slowly began to operate.

While the fabric shop was running, Xia Lü also raised a sign to "purchase embroidered works," attracting women skilled in embroidery to craft embroidered pieces at home and sell them to the shop.

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That evening, Li Daoxuan was noisily slurping down a bowl of Lanzhou hand-pulled noodles.

Suddenly, Xia Lü rushed into Gao Yiye's room and handed over a piece of embroidered cloth with both hands. "Saint Lady, look! This horse cloth was embroidered by me."

It was Li Daoxuan's first time hearing the term "horse cloth," and he was greatly intrigued. Quickly shifting his "focus" onto it, he discovered that a "horse cloth," as the name suggested, was a decorative cloth draped over a horse's back.

Such things were naturally not for the poor; only wealthy nobles, merchants, and the gentry had use for them. Xia Lü made this specifically to profit from Xi'an's affluent.

The horse cloth featured an embroidered tiger's head surrounded by a ring of copper coins—bold yet elegant.

It was beautiful!

Li Daoxuan felt a sudden spark of inspiration. This seemed like yet another profit-making opportunity.

Shouldn't he promptly create a video?

After sifting through footage captured by the camera, he quickly found a segment of Xia Lü embroidering, clipped it out, selected just a few snippets, and produced a 30-second short clip. At the end of the video, he dipped a pair of tweezers into the Tiny Kingdom and swiftly snatched the horse cloth from Xia Lü's hands...

Startled, Xia Lü jumped up to retrieve it, but immediately realized it was just the Deity playing with her. She giggled behind her hand.

At the end of the video, Li Daoxuan presented the actual tiny horse cloth in the normal world. "Super-Micro Embroidery Craft" exclaimed the overlay—the entire horse cloth was just 3 millimeters long. The miniature tiger's head and copper coins embroidered on it were exceedingly hard to see—utterly impressive!

This time, he couldn't even be bothered to set a price, leaving it to fate or deep pockets of potential buyers.

He finished editing the video and clicked "upload."

Suddenly, Director Gao of the Chengcheng County Bureau of Culture and Tourism came to mind. That cadre had been putting tremendous effort into promoting tourism for Chengcheng County; he should get a copy of this video too.

Thus, the short video was simultaneously posted on Li Daoxuan's personal TikTok account "Daily Life of the Tiny Kingdom" and the official website of the Chengcheng County Bureau of Culture and Tourism.

Just as he finished this task, he glanced back into the tank to find County Magistrate Liang Shixian, accompanied by the Clerk from Shaoxing, had arrived at the bookstore.

By now, Liang Shixian had clarified that Gao Yiye was not the Li Family master's wife. The head of the Li Family was, after all, a celestial deity. This so-called "master's wife" was actually the Deity's chosen mouthpiece in the mortal world—the revered Saint Lady.

The nature of this Saint Lady was entirely different from a "White Lotus Saintess."

The White Lotus Saintesses were simply charlatans, but Gao Yiye, the Saint Lady, genuinely spoke for the Deity—an essential distinction to recognize.

Thus, whenever Liang Shixian needed to consult the Deity, he too came to Gao Yiye to relay his inquiries.

The bookstore attendant ushered Liang Shixian into the inner courtyard. Gao Yiye came out to greet him, and the two sat facing each other across a table before Gao Yiye inquired, "County Magistrate Liang, what urgent matter brings you today?"

Liang Shixian replied, "This official just received news that Hu Tingyan, the Provincial Governor of Shaanxi, has been dismissed by the Emperor."

Li Daoxuan inwardly cheered: Finally! That corrupt official is out!

Liang Shixian continued, "His Majesty has appointed Liu Guangsheng as the new Provincial Governor of Shaanxi. He has also appointed Yang He as Three Boundary Governor, responsible for bandit

suppression in both Shaanxi and Yansui. This time, the imperial court is truly serious about dealing with Shaanxi's banditry."

Chapter 285: Using Liang Shixian

Liang Shixian said, "In past bandit suppression campaigns, we bandits enjoyed operating across provincial borders. When Shaanxi forces pursued them, they slipped into Yansui—leaving Shaanxi troops unable to continue chasing. When Yansui troops gave chase, they fled into Shaanxi—rendering Yansui forces helpless..."

"Now Emperor has appointed Yang He, Three Boundary Governor, to oversee Shaanxi, Gansu, Yansui, and Ningxia. This way, even if bandit army darts across border zones of multiple provinces, officers can bypass boundaries with Yang He's authorization and pursue relentlessly."

Li Daoxuan already grasped this reasoning without hearing elaboration, so this explanation served only Gao Yiye, Mr. Wang, Qiu Ju, and Dong Xue.

Mr. Wang suddenly understood, "This explains why imperial suppression always failed before—bandits merely crossed a provincial border to escape."

Liang Shixian nodded. "From Three Boundary Governor's appointment, the court signals genuine resolve. Interprovincial pursuits will become routine, driving bandits constantly on the run... Chengcheng County may face frequent incursions."

Gao Yiye asked, "What does Magistrate Liang propose?"

Liang Shixian cupped hands toward the sky reverently. "This humble official implores the Deity to bestow additional supplies to train and arm militia across all villages. We must expand their numbers and combat capability for unforeseen crises."

Li Daoxuan inwardly delighted—Ah, a request to grow militia!

This was certainly feasible!

Previously, with only Gaojia Village's five thousand occupants, Li Daoxuan had maintained just five hundred professional soldiers. But now his visible scope covered the county and surrounding towns—tens of thousands fell under his purview. Expanding the professional force was essential.

These past days, he had pondered plausible methods to maneuver Liang Shixian. Unexpectedly, the magistrate took initiative without coaxing. Perhaps Liang Shixian assumed a deity wouldn't interfere in Earthly regime changes—that the Deity merely saved commonfolk, unaware of ambitions to forge a new nation.

Using Liang Shixian's position to form a broader new militia seemed entirely workable. Strengthen ideological control, and Liang Shixian would train warriors for the Emperor while actually cultivating troops for the Deity.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "A reasonable request. Supplies shall be granted. However, each militia unit must appoint a chief instructor. This role requires a trustworthy individual. Should corrupt or avaricious elements secure it, materials bestowed shall be embezzled."

Liang Shixian contemplated intently—Yes, the militia chief instructor must be impeccably reliable.

He lifted his head. "Has the Deity any candidate in mind?"

Li Daoxuan declared, "Bai Yuan of Bai Family Fortress styles himself a nobleman and walks that path. Thrice, bandits assaulted Bai Family Fortress, thrice he repelled them through skill and virtue. Local populace reveres him. With competence and integrity, he perfectly suits the chief-instructor role."

Without hesitation, Liang Shixian recalled Bai Yuan—whose mathematical prowess crushed him while visiting Gaojia Fortress.

"Such a man indeed deserves the post," affirmed Liang Shixian. "This official will summon all militia instructors across villages to the county seat. Under Bai Yuan's leadership, expansion strategy shall be formulated."

Li Daoxuan chuckled internally: Then this large militia shall fall into my grasp—without ceremony.

Liang Shixian turned skyward again. “Under Deity’s grace, the county seat has largely recovered. Yet many surrounding villages still endure bitter hardship—Fengyuan Town, Quangou Village... Your blessings haven’t reached them. If granted permission, this humble servant could divert part of supplies to aid villages beyond county boundaries.”

Since Li Daoxuan’s field of vision encompassed most of Chengcheng County, he’d witnessed poverty plaguing remote settlements. These villagers hadn’t heard of Dao Xuan Deity, ignored country distributing congee initiatives, and missed labor-relief programs.

Ancient infrastructure stifled information flows. Many villagers never traveled beyond ten miles of home; news reached them glacially. Li Daoxuan lacked time and resources to manifest divinely at every obscure hamlet, assimilating them individually.

Therefore...

He would utilize Liang Shixian once more.

Li Daoxuan promptly approved, “Permission granted. Proceed. Where roads obstruct travel, you may construct cement roads, replacing relief with paid labor. This is the optimal strategy.”

Linking villages with cement roads would permit the public sun chariot to traverse whole Chengcheng County, enabling seamless communication.

Liang Shixian felt rushing with pride. So agreeable was the Deity—bestowing funds, grain, and willingness to aid public works. Truly, a benevolent deity!

His spirits surged. “This official shall dedicate all efforts to realizing this goal. Cement roads reaching every township... constructed roads shall bring lasting benefits for ages.”

...

Two days later, dawn.

Bai Yuan arose early. Attendants draped him in flowing white robes while he strapped a huge bow across his back and belted a gleaming sword. The effect—undeniably majestic.

At over forty years old, remaining this dashing pleased him immensely—an ideal image for Chengcheng County militia chief instructor.

Leaving Bai Family Fortress, he spotted one mass of low cloud hovering overhead. Clearly, the Deity observed this venture.

Bai Yuan bowed deeply toward the sky. “Deity rest assured—watch my performance.”

Head high, chest forward, he marched to the station where small train awaited him.

Instead of boarding the carriage, Bai Yuan directed loyal servants to load his horse inside. He strode purposefully to the engine compartment. “Driving requires personal command,” he announced, displacing two drivers, who exchanged helpless glances.

Bai Yuan boomed with laughter, “Small train! Depart!”

Smacking the activation lever, the train surged forward... only to falter abruptly. Momentum alone sustained movement as it slowed... slowed... halted.

“Eh? Eh?” Bai Yuan stared in disbelief. “What happened?”

Amused, Li Daoxuan recalled—“Oops, forgot swapping batteries!”

He retrieved A4 paper, printed a message, and unfolded it inside the realm:

“Bai Yuan! Bring both train drivers and exit the engine!”

Chapter 286: Testing New Weapons

Bai Yuan jumped off the train with a bewildered look, and the two drivers followed him down.

Then, they saw the train engine being lifted as if by an invisible giant hand, flipped over in mid-air to reveal the bottom, where a large cover moved aside, and two strange cylindrical objects flew out from inside.

These cylinders were, of course, size AA batteries!

Li Daoxuan took out two of the AA batteries from the box, replaced them with new ones, and with a click-clack sound loaded them into the train's belly, covered it, and placed it back down.

The vehicle was set straight again.

"It seems that should work now," said Bai Yuan, seeing that the engine had been reconnected to the carriages behind, and Deity seemed to have no further actions. So he led the two train drivers back up into the engine cab.

He pressed the switch again, and the train started moving once more.

Bai Yuan suddenly realized, "Those two cylinders that Deity took out and replaced were the key to this 'immortal realm train' running. If I can discover how to make that thing myself, I won't need Deity's assistance anymore. I'll take it apart later to study it."

A large paper appeared in the sky, saying, "Haven't learned to walk yet, and already eager to learn to fly."

Bai Yuan hastily bowed in salute, saying, "Apologies, I was too self-important."

Before long, the train arrived at Gaojia Village.

Bai Yuan got off there, planning to switch to the public sun chariot to head to the county town.

On his way from the train station to the car station, he saw a large group of blacksmiths running out from the artisans' well, led by Artisan Master Gao Yiyi, with Li Da, Song Yingxing, and others behind. They were holding a strange firearm and heading to Gaojia Village Firearms Bureau.

Bai Yuan, being a curious fellow, asked, "Folks, what are you playing with?"

Gao Yiyi smiled, "Mr. Bai, you've come just in time. We're about to test a new firearm. Do you want to join us?"

Bai Yuan said, "Huh? A new-style firearm? Hehe, I'm quite interested."

He no longer rushed to the county town and ran alongside the blacksmiths to the firearms bureau.

Soon, they reached the firearms bureau, where Xu Dafu, Cheng Xu, and others had been waiting for a long time in an open field outside, specifically for weapons testing.

Seeing how serious they all looked, Bai Yuan knew it was a big day and guessed that the item being tested was no small matter, so he got excited, thinking, "Looks like I stumbled upon great fun today."

Gao Yiyi handed over a firearm with both hands, "This is a firearm designed by Mr. Song Yingxing. It's far superior to the Three-Eyed Divine Firearm. Let's try this one first."

A firearm soldier from behind Cheng Xu came forward, who was the captain of the old ten Three-Eyed Divine Firearm soldiers. He took the firearm and weighed it in his hand, "It's lighter and the barrel is longer than the Three-Eyed Divine Firearm."

Song Yingxing smiled beside him, "A longer barrel improves accuracy, unlike the random shots of the Three-Eyed Divine Firearm. It can even shoot down birds in flight, hence it's called a firearm."

Even Li Da, Gaojia Village's best blacksmith, couldn't make it and had only just learned; he shouted excitedly nearby, "Enough talk, hurry up and test fire it!"

The firearm soldier took a pre-measured paper packet of gunpowder from Xu Dafu, poured it into the barrel. Then he took a ramrod and rammed it into the barrel to pack the powder tight. He then loaded a small lead ball weighing three qian inside and rammed it again with the ramrod. He pre-lit the gun's fuse, opened the touchhole, pulled the trigger, and the burning fuse was pulled by the mechanism into the touchhole.

This complex operation appeared far slower than the loading of a Three-Eyed Divine Firearm.

Cheng Xu, Bai Yuan, and Xu Dafu, who had seen firearms before, weren't surprised, but the blacksmiths witnessing firearm operation for the first time thought to themselves, "The food would grow cold before you finish all that! How can you fight like this?"

As soon as they thought that, a "bang!" sounded, and the firearm fired.

A wisp of blue smoke rose from a cliff wall a hundred steps away.

The blacksmiths were all stunned, "It shoots that far?"

"Hey, it's way farther than the Three-Eyed Divine Firearm," said the test-firing firearm soldier, overjoyed. "That nasty Three-Eyed Divine Firearm only shot six or seven zhang, but this firearm can shoot a hundred steps. Good heavens! With this, we firearm soldiers are finally useful, hahaha, finally useful."

"But it has clear flaws," said Song Yingxing. "When the touchhole opens, the wind is so strong it blows out the fuse; fixing the fuse damages the touchhole. After one shot, the enemy cavalry arrives fast as the wind, making it useless for defense. Recently, there are bamboo-beaked variants and self-sealing touchhole ones, but they're still troublesome. After the Three Great Campaigns of Wanli, the border army ditched firearms for Three-Eyed Divine Firearms due to these faults."

Everyone stayed silent.

Song Yingxing swiftly pulled out another firearm from behind him, "So we needed to improve it. After a hint from Deity, I redesigned and made this flintlock pistol. It uses a spring-driven clamp to strike a flint

against the touchhole, sparking to ignite the powder. This overcomes the issues, and I call it the 'Flintlock Firearm'."

He handed the Flintlock Firearm to the firearm soldier, "Try this now."

The firearm soldier repeated the loading steps: pouring in gunpowder, adding the lead ball. But at the firing step, it was entirely different. No need to light a fuse or open a touchhole—just raise the firearm, aim, and pull the trigger.

"Bang!"

The firearm fired instantly, smoke swirling, and blue smoke rose again on the distant cliff wall.

Song Yingxing said, "Hey, it worked!"

Everyone paused in surprise, then cheered, "It worked!"

"A firearm that fires with a trigger pull."

"Incredible!"

Song Yingxing was quite pleased, as achieving such inventions is a scientist's lifelong pursuit.

Now, it just needed refinement to make it lighter and the firing mechanism more reliable.

But...

He sighed helplessly, "Even with this, we can't stop the Jurchens. Changing the firing method doesn't fix the slow loading. In the time for one shot, Jurchen cavalry could close in."

Bai Yuan got excited, suggesting, "Could Master Mu Ying's Three-Segment Firing tactics solve the problem of enemies rushing in after one shot?"

Song Yingxing shook his head, "Three-Segment Firing can partly offset the slow rate, but it demands more firearms, thicker formations, and massive financial backing. It also requires extremely high coordination and training complexity, which regular soldiers can't achieve. That tactic mostly remains on paper and rarely sees real combat."

Chapter 287: Fuse Hand Grenade

Hearing Song Yingxing's words, everyone present couldn't help but smile.

Need immense financial support?

Hah!

Well, this new scientist still doesn't understand what "Deity's protection" means. Mere supplies are no issue at all. What we truly lack is a sufficient number of blacksmiths. With enough blacksmiths, we could pile flintlock firearms into mountains.

Naturally, the shortage of blacksmiths remains a critical problem.

Flintlock firearms can't be quickly mass-produced. Moreover, the Deity strictly controls militia troop levels, prohibiting too many able-bodied men from being drafted for battle. Consequently, firearm soldiers remain scarce. Gaojia Village must find other methods to compensate for the firepower gap.

Just then, Xu Dafu raised his hand again. "You've finished testing your new firearms, right? Now it's time to test my new creation."

The blacksmiths asked curiously, "What new thing do you have now?"

Xu Dafu replied, "Remember those small iron shells and iron pellets I asked you to forge last time?"

Gao Yiyi recalled it. Xu Dafu had him forge a small, hollow iron shell resembling a jar and a pile of iron pellets. But when asked about their purpose, Xu Dafu had refused to reveal it.

Now the final product was complete. Could the mystery finally be unveiled?

All the blacksmiths had heard of this and were brimming with curiosity. They stared wide-eyed at Xu Dafu, eager to see what he would produce.

Xu Dafu pulled out a box, opened the lid, and carefully took out a peculiar little hammer. Its upper half was cylindrical—precisely the small iron container the blacksmiths had made. The lower half had a wooden handle for gripping.

Li Daoxuan instantly beamed upon seeing this thing. This was a quintessential WWI/WWII-style hand grenade! Though the interior differed, its shape perfectly matched those grenades. Any war movie depicting my forces showed them using this exact device in large numbers.

Gao Yiyi muttered, “A little hammer? No... impossible... This jar is hollow. It couldn’t be used to hit anyone.”

Everyone else thought: Xu Dafu works with gunpowder. So this thing must be related to explosions, right? Could this iron container be filled with gunpowder?

Cheng Xu remembered the paper-wrapped black powder bombs he’d thrown during the fight against the rebel band in Guyuan. He had a sudden insight. “Isn’t this a bomb meant to be thrown for exploding enemies? Though it has many differences from the last one.”

Xu Dafu chuckled. “Correct! It’s for throwing and exploding enemies. But unlike last time, it has a wooden handle. This lets you throw it much farther.”

Delight surged in Cheng Xu’s heart. “Makes sense! The farther the throw, the more useful it is.”

Xu Dafu continued, “The last bombs also lacked sufficient power. When landing amidst the rebels, only those at the explosion point got blasted away. Others nearby just stumbled. They only disrupted formations. But this one’s different...”

“The Deity also instructed me to pack it with many small iron balls. When it explodes, those balls will scatter everywhere... heh heh heh... Plus the iron shell itself shatters upon ignition, creating deadly shrapnel that flies everywhere with the small steel balls...”

Even imagining this scene made everyone present shudder.

For someone like Cheng Xu who actually fought on battlefields, just picturing the enemy having this weapon felt like seeing grandmothers dancing before his eyes.

Xu Dafu declared, “Alright, I’ve explained it. The Deity named this thing ‘Fuse Hand Grenade’. Let’s test it now.”

As soon as he finished speaking, everyone scrambled backwards in unison, putting significant distance between themselves and the grenade. “Don’t detonate that thing near us!”

Xu Dafu called out, “Gao Chuwu, come try it.”

Gao Chuwu quickly walked over and took the Fuse Hand Grenade. He weighed it in his hand, grinned broadly, and declared, “I can throw this at least twenty zhang far.”

“Good. Please throw it at least that far. Otherwise, the explosion might wound our own people with the steel balls.” Xu Dafu pulled out a tinder box, striking it swiftly. The grenade’s fuse ignited instantly.

The onlookers scurried even further away...

Gao Chuwu flashed a wide grin, took two running steps forward, swung his arm, and launched the grenade forcefully...

The grenade, trailing burning fuse, soared far, far away. It truly flew over twenty zhang before landing. A reverberating “Boom!” echoed as the grenade detonated. Instantly, nearby scarecrows in the testing field rattled violently.

Walking closer, the group saw multiple scarecrows riddled with countless tiny holes in their clothing—holes punched entirely by the scattering steel balls and iron fragments.

Witnessing this, Cheng Xu planted his hands on his hips and roared with laughter. “HAHAHA! Incredible! This thing is simply incredible! More potent than any firearm I’ve ever seen!” He turned to Xu Dafu. “HAHAHA! Xu Dafu, produce them! Produce them like mad! Stock twenty for every one of my men! With these, I could carve a path straight to the capital!”

Xu Dafu rolled his eyes. “Stop dreaming. One rainy day on the road, and your whole force would be wiped out.”

Cheng Xu froze mid-laugh...

Meanwhile, Song Yingxing swiftly pulled out paper and pen. “Magnificent! I must sketch this! Sketch it immediately! Heh... Another wondrous device for ‘Heavenly Mechanisms and Fabrics’...” Ignoring surroundings, he plopped down right there, sketching furiously on his stomach. In seemingly no time, he drew the grenade’s outline and added lengthy notes. Holding up the paper, Song Yingxing was utterly delighted.

Watching his little people achieve another technological breakthrough also pleased Li Daoxuan greatly. Their militia troops’ combat power just surged significantly! Fighting the border army previously proved perilous. Despite his continuous intervention, many militiamen still got wounded.

But as Gaojia Village’s firearms continued advancing, future strategy should focus on destroying the enemy within their firing range, before they close in. Only then could the little people’s casualties be minimized.

After all, those little lives were extremely precious!

Having witnessed the spectacle, Bai Yuan prepared to continue towards the county town. Yet he lingered, tugging Gao Yiyi’s sleeve. “Artisan Master Gao, once your new-style flintlocks are finished, could I have one? Let me practice with it too!”

Gao Yiyi smiled reassuringly. "Mr. Bai, how could you say that? You and Gaojia Village are practically family! The Deity will surely equip Bai Family Fortress' militia troops with new weapons too. Are you implying the Deity would forget you? Flintlock firearms and grenades? You'll definitely get yours!"

Bai Yuan was ecstatic. "Splendid! Though I can overlook grenades for now, mastering the flintlock firearm's firing technique matters deeply to me. Heh heh heh... In the Six Arts of Gentlemen, I take the 'archery' discipline very seriously. I aspire to become the most formidable firearm soldier!"

Everyone stared at him incredulously. "You? The esteemed Bai Family Fortress lord? Why on earth do you want to be a mere firearm soldier?"

Chapter 288: A Batch of Military Horses

At the same time, Huanglong Mountain.

Huanglong Mountain lay at the junction of Luochuan, Yichuan, and Chengcheng counties.

At the northern slope of Huanglong Mountain, it was the territory of Yichuan County.

The sky had already approached dusk. A troop of Ming court's official troops had just arrived at the foot of the mountain.

These official troops were a bandit suppression force led by Yansui General Wu Zimian. They were acting on orders from the newly appointed Provincial Governor of Yansui, Zhang Mengjing, to eradicate the fierce bandit Wang Zuogua of Yichuan, who was entrenched in Huanglong Mountain.

A General held no official grade. When warfare arose, the General would carry his seal into battle and return it afterward.

Though he held no grade, his authority was high, roughly equivalent to a military region commander.

Wu Zimian was a middle-aged man in his forties. Fat-headed and large-eared, he was so fat the very folds of his brain seemed glistened with grease. His armor seemed on the verge of bursting from his flesh. Mounted on horseback, the warhorse wheezed heavily under his weight, strikingly similar to Zhao Sheng just after climbing five flights of stairs.

He lifted his head and glanced at the towering Huanglong Mountain, sneering, "Damn it! That accursed Zhang Mengjing. A new official lighting three fires? He insists on burning out the bandits. Damn rotten luck! Eight lifetimes of misfortune must have brought me under this fool's orders, getting shuffled around to suppress bandits. Is Huanglong Mountain even a place for humans? High peaks, deep woods, crisscrossed ravines. If I, your father, go in there for a round, I'd come out several pounds lighter."

His trusted body servant sidled up and chuckled softly, "This task is tough, but Zhang Mengjing provided plentiful army grain. We can feign suppression, pocket the grain, and make a tidy little profit, eh?"

Wu Zimian grinned, "Ah, you understand me, lad. Let's not fight tooth and nail for nothing. Effort and trouble with no gains? Bah!"

They had just spoken when a captain slipped in from outside. Seeing Wu Zimian, he immediately knelt and kowtowed. "General, this humble one is Captain Li from the Yansui garrison. A man of no account, you likely don't remember me."

Wu Zimian asked, "Oh? What brings you to report to this General?"

Captain Li whispered, "I heard that with you, General, one can pay to avoid service. I have prepared silver..." He presented a large pouch of silver. "I beg not to enter the mountains to suppress bandits. I fear dying in these treacherous hills. All I ask is to buy my life with this silver."

Wu Zimian weighed the pouch in his hand, pleased. He nodded, "Granted. Take my written order, leave through the north camp gate. Claim you're on secret military orders from the General. After leaving camp, evade notice and slip home quietly. Don't boast everywhere for this General, or later, when military justice comes calling, you'll face only death."

Captain Li was overjoyed. He kowtowed in thanks, took the order, and slipped away.

No sooner had Captain Li left than Captain Zheng and Thousand-House Zhang entered...

Before long, a crowd had slipped from the army. They even took many subordinates with them, greatly diminishing Wu Zimian's force. But combat readiness mattered little. Officials traveled a thousand miles only for wealth. Silver earned was enough. Who cared about capability? Give it to whomever wanted it.

But he hadn't earned enough yet. He needed methods to earn more.

Wu Zimian tilted his head. "What other ways to rake in silver? Entourage! Quickly devise ideas for this General!"

His trusted body servant leaned closer. "General, the Governor prepared many military horses for us. Those horses could also be sold! Later, if the Governor inquires, we simply say bandits shot them dead. Already buried."

Wu Zimian beamed. "An excellent plan! Quickly find me a buyer. Before Zhang Mengjing, that fool civil official, catches wind, we must offload the military horses swiftly!"

...

Gaojia Village was also steeped in joy and peace.

Before Li Daoxuan sat a large pot filled to the brim with Tieshanping's specialty pepper chicken. The fiery, numbing spice made him suck air through clenched teeth.

Inside the box, yet another "Martial Tournament to Win a Bride" was underway.

How many times had Gao Chuwu faced Xing Honglang? Again came Jin Hong Fist against Guanzhong Hong Fist. Thudding sounds of blows rained down until Gao Chuwu slammed heavily onto the ground. Thud! Dust billowed.

Spectators cried: "Ah! Getting less and less exciting!"

"Gao Chuwu! Can't you try hard, just once?"

"Men of Gaojia Village feel ashamed for you!"

Xing Honglang laughed heartily, rubbing her slightly bruised fists as she walked out from the circle. Suddenly, her subordinate Old Zhu hurried over. He whispered, "Boss, a very promising deal is buzzing along the grapevine."

Xing Honglang asked, "Oh? What deal?"

Old Zhu lowered his voice. "Military horses! A batch of top-grade military horses. Five hundred strong, seeking buyers."

Xing Honglang sucked in a breath. "Can it be true? Five hundred military horses? This is no small deal. Who has such clout to dump prime goods like this into the black market?"

Old Zhu murmured, "The supplier refuses to reveal his origin. Only stated these are proper Great Ming army horses, open for inspection. Each guaranteed a top-grade mount."

Xing Honglang hesitated. Damn. This sounds huge. If truly first-rate army horses, flipping them could yield profits of thousands of silver taels. But finding buyers for such goods would be tricky.

Still hesitating!

Li Daoxuan wasn't about to hesitate. We want this! Damn it all!

Gaojia Village's militia lacked nothing... damn it all... except horses.

Li Daoxuan could almost cheat, providing supplies of all kinds—but "living creatures" he could not. He'd long wanted army horses for the militia. Nowhere to acquire them.

Now, hearing the underworld had goods? Why pass it up?

Gao Yiye wasn't currently in Gaojia Village. So paper would serve. Li Daoxuan spread a large sheet and revealed it below: "Xing Honglang. This batch—we'll take it."

Xing Honglang, still pondering, looked up at the sky's glowing words. Hesitation vanished. She said swiftly, "Old Zhu! Where is this deal happening?"

Old Zhu answered, "The supplier is powerful. Says anywhere in Shaanxi or Yansui. They can deliver the horses anywhere within these two provinces."

Xing Honglang cursed under her breath, "Government?"

Li Daoxuan also thought: Government? But how could officials sell horses via the underworld? Something felt off...

As he pondered, Xing Honglan sneered coldly. "Seems some corrupt official is stealing army horses. He must be a high-ranking officer. At least a General level... Thinking this way—who else but Wu Zimian himself?"

Li Daoxuan was speechless. Very well. Another lesson learned. So late Great Ming generals pulled these stunts? Great Ming! Great Ming! How could you not collapse?

Xing Honglang said gravely, "Though the supplier says 'anywhere,' we can't have him deliver to Gaojia Village. That's inviting future disaster. We must find a remote place. Acquire the horses there, then secretly transport them here. I need to think carefully..."

Chapter 289: Meeting at Duzhucun

Five hundred military horses—that was a large number. Xing Honglang stood before Cheng Xu: "I only have thirty-eight men, and there's no way I can safely transport so many military horses back. Instructor He, I need your help this time."

Cheng Xu, upon hearing it was the Deity's command, immediately agreed without hesitation: "No problem, I'll personally lead the militia to escort these military horses back."

This time, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu did not repeat their foolish talk about carrying the horses back. Instead, they raised their hands with proud smiles: "We know how to lead horses!"

Xing Honglang flared up in anger: “Shut up, you fools! What’s so great about knowing how to lead horses? Tell me, who in this world doesn’t know how to lead a horse?”

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu: “ ...”

Cheng Xu chuckled: “If we can get these horses back, we can form a cavalry unit in Gaojia Village.”

Xing Honglang nodded: “The Deity must have that in mind too.”

Cheng Xu said: “Good, we must do this well. Have you discussed the delivery location with the seller?”

Xing Honglang replied: “I’m thinking about it. The delivery location can’t be too close, lest it bring trouble to Gaojia Village, but it can’t be too far either, or the journey back with the horses won’t be safe.”

The two unfolded the map...

Li Daoxuan also looked at the map and instantly picked out a good spot.

Huanglong Mountain southeast, Duzhucun.

This place was right at the edge of Li Daoxuan’s field of vision, a place he could “keep an eye on.” It was about forty li straight-line distance from Gaojia Village, a small mountain village that had long been uninhabited.

He was about to print the name “Duzhucun” and put it into the box when he saw Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang almost simultaneously point to it: “Duzhucun!”

Xing Honglang said: “This place is within Huanglong Mountain territory. Trading with Wu Zimian here, afterwards we can say that some bandit hiding in the mountains bought the horses, so they won’t suspect Gaojia Village.”

Cheng Xu nodded: "The surrounding terrain is complex, making it easy to secretly lead the warhorses back to Gaojia Village."

Xing Honglang said: "Good, it's settled then."

Cheng Xu said: "I'll first take people over to scout ahead, get familiar with the detailed terrain around, and hide the militia nearby. You send someone to contact Wu Zimian."

As for Li Daoxuan, he tapped the three characters "Duzhucun" outside his box, and his view shifted over instantly...

This was the outermost edge of his field of vision, a declining small mountain village. There were only about a dozen houses in the village, and it seemed it had only contained a few dozen people. After the severe drought outbreak, Duzhucun had become an empty village.

The view didn't extend much north of the village, only about two li, but to the south, Li Daoxuan could see all the terrain—several mountain paths winding through valleys and over slopes, leading towards Chengcheng County and Hancheng directions...

It was late in the evening. Yansui General Wu Zimian was preparing to sleep.

A close confidant servant came in from outside and whispered: "General, we've finally found a buyer."

Wu Zimian was overjoyed: "Five hundred first-rate warhorses—the silver required isn't a small sum. Have you carefully verified the buyer's capability?"

In good times, a warhorse cost about twenty taels of silver, but now times were bad—not only were bandits rampant, but Jurchens beyond the passes were frequently invading, so the price of warhorses had risen to between fifty and seventy taels of silver each.

Five hundred warhorses would require between twenty-five thousand and thirty-five thousand taels—really not a small sum. A buyer without resources wouldn't dare take the goods.

The servant whispered: “The buyer refused to reveal his true identity, but from his accent and build, I suspect he’s a salt smuggler from Shanxi.”

Wu Zimian frowned and thought for a moment: “A salt smuggler from Shanxi? Heh! Could it be Yongji Xing Honglang? If it’s really her, well, she has the resources to handle this. Fine, let’s sell to her.”

The servant added: “The other party said they want to make the delivery at Duzhucun on the southeast slope of Huanglong Mountain.”

Wu Zimian brought out his military map, looked, and said: “It’s not far from here, either. Alright, ship the goods to Duzhucun.”

“Then we need to pass through Huanglong Mountain,” the hired guard whispered, “Wang Zuogua of Yichuan is stationed there.”

Wu Zimian laughed heartily: “If I don’t go looking for trouble with Wang Zuogua, he should count himself lucky. Does he dare to provoke me? I’d advise him to hide well; otherwise, I might just eliminate him and report to the court for some rewards.”

The hired guard laughed: “What the general says is true.”

Wu Zimian continued, “Send someone to report to Provincial Governor Zhang Mengjing. Tell him this general is dedicated and tireless, determined to eliminate Wang Zuogua of Yichuan, and I will personally lead the way into Huanglong Mountain. Hehe... At the same time, order the entire army to gather tomorrow and cross Huanglong Mountain, aiming for Duzhucun.”

The hired guard replied: “The general’s wisdom is unmatched.”

...

Meanwhile, on the eastern slope of Huanglong Mountain, in Hancheng.

More than a hundred disheveled riders, looking like thieves, were fleeing in panic.

Behind them, a group of hired guards was desperately chasing after them.

Leading the escape was the famous female horse thief of Yichuan County, Zao Ying (a historical figure).

Chasing after them were the hired guards of Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor Hong Chengchou.

Zao Ying was a fierce female horse thief, and her appearance was, well... quite similar to Xing Honglang.

As she ran at full speed with her subordinates, she yelled angrily: "Damn that Hong Chengchou! I just wanted to steal his grain, and he sends troops to chase me for over ten miles!"

Zao Ying prided herself on being a righteous thief, only robbing the wealthy and powerful, never the common folk. She was known for her exceptional riding skills, disappearing without a trace, often raiding official transport teams. Items like the birthday tribute and the official silver convoy were her prime targets.

This time, she had come out to raid an official grain transport team, which happened to be under the charge of Hong Chengchou.

It was a wrong move.

Zao Ying and her subordinates were beaten severely by Hong's hired guards, causing them to lose their helmets and armor, becoming scattered and disorganized, and they had no choice but to flee. Had it not been for their superb riding skills, they likely would have been captured by now.

After running for over ten miles, they finally reached the eastern slope of Huanglong Mountain.

Seeing Huanglong Mountain, Hong's hired guards stopped chasing them.

Military strategy states that when faced with a forest, do not pursue; the same goes for mountains.

The hired guards shouted after them, “You damn horse thieves! We’ll let you go this time. If you ever see our Hong family banner again, get as far away as you can. If you dare to disturb us again, we’ll chop you into pieces!”

Zao Ying was furious, but this anger meant “powerless rage”; expressing it would only lead to mockery. She couldn’t afford to lose focus, so she kept her head down and fled into Huanglong Mountain, needing to run deeper into the mountains to avoid being chased again by Hong’s men.

As Zao Ying and her group ran, they spotted a dilapidated little mountain village ahead. Finally, they could stop and rest. She turned to her subordinates and asked, “Where are we now?”

One subordinate replied quietly, “Huanglong Mountain, Duzhucun.”

...

Like Xing Honglang, Zao Ying was one of the leaders of the Yiyang Meeting’s thirteen households and seventy-two camps of the righteous army. Historical records only left names without any deeds, and it was uncertain if they were male or female, so in the novel for storytelling purposes, Zao Ying was portrayed as female.

Here are the names of six of the armed forces’ leaders:

He Shuangquan, New Tiger, Nine Dragons

King of Disruption (Gao Yingxiang), Leading Mountain, Brave General

Mantianfei, A Dragon, One Zhengqing

Hong Tianxing (Huntianxing)

Three Hands, One Character King, Chuang Jiang (Li Zicheng)

Scorpion Block, Mantianxing, Seven Dragons

Guan Suo (Guan Suo), Eight Kings

Zao Ying, Zhang Miaoshou, Eight Kings of Xiyi (Zhang Xianzhong)

Old Zhang Fei, Zha Shou, Xing Honglang

Chuang Taitian (Liu Guoneng), Horse Hawk

Southern Camp's Eight Heavenly Kings, Hu Claw, Hong Shi Wang (Hun Shi Wang)

One Cloud, Lawless King, Great General

Guo Tianxing (Hui Dengxiang), Second General

Hong Tianwang (Hun Tianwang)

Meng Hu, Alone Tiger, Old Huihui (Ma Guangyu)

Gao Xiaoxi, Sweeping King, Neat King

Five Dragons, Five Kings of Hell, Xing King of Disruption

Cao Cao (Luo Rucai), Rice Straw, Forcing on the Road

Four Tigers, Huanglong, Great Heavenly King, Pizhizhen

Zhang Fei, Stone Taitian (She Taitian Li Wanqing)

Xue Rengui, Golden Winged Roc, Eight Golden Dragons

Shoe Sole Shine, Roof Tile, Liu Bei

Drilling Sky Hawk, Sky Dragon

From their names, it is clear that many in this group have read “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” and “Water Margin.”

Chapter 290: Everyone Arrives

The setting sun stretched the mountain’s shadow long and thin.

Li Daoxuan held a Chinese meat pie in his left hand while his right pressed buttons outside the box—north, south, east, and west—studying the terrain around Duzhucun for amusement.

Studying it, he soon spotted Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang seven or eight li south of the village. Each led a group, marching directly toward Duzhucun.

Seeing his little people always filled Li Daoxuan with joy. His finger tapped the “north” button, scanning the path ahead of them for any sign of ambushed enemies, beasts blocking the way, or similar dangers.

The babysitting Deity was utterly devoted when protecting his own.

He tapped northward the entire way. The roads held no beasts or ambushers. Tap, tap, tap, and the view shifted back to Duzhucun village itself.

Just then, Li Daoxuan couldn’t help but utter an “Eh?”

There were people in Duzhucun!

And they were clearly not officials. Judging by their attire, they looked like... mounted bandits!

Roughly one hundred twenty men, each with a horse. Naturally, they weren't mounted now. Their horses grazed nearby while the men sprawled haphazardly across the village center, resting.

Li Daoxuan thought to himself: What's going on? What bunch is this now?

Interesting!

This could lead to some inexplicable event unfolding.

His fingers frantically jabbed the buttons again, shifting the view. Soon, just over a li north of the village, he saw a large troop of officials. They flew no banner, but there was no doubt—this time, it had to be Wu Zimian arriving.

A good show was coming!

Li Daoxuan lowered the lid over the box, making the low cloud representing him vanish. He entered full "spectator mode."

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Zao Ying and her one hundred twenty followers had rested for over an hour, eaten some rations, and finally regained their spirits. Being chased by Hong Chengchou's household troops had terrified them out of their wits.

Who knew an official in Shaanxi territory could be so vicious!

Zao Ying stood up, slapping the dirt off her backside. "Alright, rested enough? Up! Get ready to move."

Her subordinates began rising to their feet. At that moment, a lookout posted at the village entrance sprinted toward them. "Leader, leader... A big troop of officials one li north! They've got tons of warhorses with them too."

Zao Ying's heart clenched. "Hong Chengchou's men caught up again?"

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan was mildly surprised: Oh? So you were the ones fleeing Hong Chengchou's chase?

The lookout answered, "Not Hong's people. But they deliberately hid their banner. Didn't identify their unit. Can't tell who they are."

Zao Ying snorted a laugh. "Officials, marching with banners furled? Seems this lot isn't any respectable sort either. Must be up to some shady business. Carrying loads of horses... I get it. Yansui General Wu Zimian. Word's been going around for days—he's selling a batch of warhorses."

Li Daoxuan nearly laughed aloud. Was Wu Zimian that notorious? Xing Honglang had guessed it was him the instant horse-selling was mentioned. Now this mounted bandit leader hears "horses," and immediately figures it out too.

Wu Zimian was practically famous among both sides of the law! How could an official infamous for such shady deals not fear punishment from the court?

The lookout whispered, "Boss, should we avoid them?"

Zao Ying scoffed, "Why avoid Wu Zimian? He's no Hong Chengchou. 'General'? More like 'Sleazy Merchant Wu.' Let's just talk to him. Maybe buy a few horses off him straightaway."

Zao Ying and her group decided to stay put, settling down to wait right there in Duzhucun.

Before long, Wu Zimian's large forces arrived.

This fellow was still quite cautious. The main army camp did not enter the village; he only sent a small team in first. Seeing Zao Ying and her companions, the leading servant shouted loudly, "What is three plus two?"

Zao Ying thought to herself, "Password, huh? Good thing I already knew Wu Zimian's contact password. This was no secret in the jianghu." She replied loudly, "Thirty-two."

The servant was overjoyed. "Good, you're the buyer."

Zao Ying said, "Hehe, I heard you have a batch of military horses for sale."

The servant said, "Exactly, no need for idle talk. Five hundred horses for thirty-five thousand taels of silver. Hand over the money, and we hand over the goods. Our general values honesty in business."

Zao Ying said, "The price is a bit high..."

The two began bargaining.

Li Daoxuan watched this from outside the box and couldn't help but feel amused. "This is a bit unfair, isn't it? I was the one who spotted these warhorses first; I want them! I can send small people all kinds of supplies; only living things are impossible to send. Where did this female horse thief come from? Poaching business?"

This was intolerable!

However, Li Daoxuan wasn't cruel enough to kill someone just because they snatched his business. Killing for such a reason would be too unreasonable; he couldn't do it.

His mind started churning. He thought, "Should I reach down and float Xing Honglang over here, so all three parties can bargain and compete for the deal?"

As this thought crossed his mind... suddenly, more people appeared from the northeast of the village!

And this time, there were many people, up to thousands. Their attire was chaotic: some wore officials' armor, others had on tattered burlap clothing, and still others wore silk merchant clothes, but with no merchant-like grace at all—the outfits were clearly ill-fitting.

Li Daoxuan exclaimed in surprise. He saw that this new group flew a large flag with the big character “Wang” written on it. Wang Zuogua of Yichuan had arrived!

His arrival here wasn't strange. Since the peasant uprising in the early Chongzhen era, Wang Zuogua had been active around Huanglong Mountain.

Wang Zuogua looked completely different from when he first attacked Bai Family Fortress. Now, his aura seemed deeper, and his clothes were higher quality—no longer ragged, but a set of Mountain-patterned Armor worn by a general, impressive and imposing.

Previously, he gave a sense of sheer ferocity, but now, that ferocity was tinged with a hint of craftiness.

He turned to his trusted general Miao Mei and asked, “Wu Zimian is just up ahead?”

Miao Mei chuckled. “Yes! He stopped at Duzhucun ahead and appears to be trading warhorses with someone in the village.”

A smug smile flashed across Wang Zuogua's face. “Wu Zimian is worthless; his men are insignificant. But if we charge recklessly, he'll surely flee with the warhorses. Our two legs can't catch up to four.”

“Miao Mei, Feishan Hu, Big Honglang, each of you take one division. With my main force, surround Duzhucun from the four directions: north, south, east, and west. Ensure we seize those five hundred warhorses.”

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The names of Big Honglang and Xing Honglang differed by only a single character. If the eunuch had chosen the names personally, he wouldn't have made two characters in the book so similar, but both were historical figures.

The eunuch could only sneer at the naming skills of those involved in the peasant uprising towards the end of the Ming Dynasty.