

Great Ming 291

Chapter 291: You Resemble an Official

“Boss, the buyer who is trading with Wu Zimian seems to be Zao Ying, the famous bandit of Yichuan.”

When Wang Zuogua heard the words Zao Ying, a tomboy face flashed quickly in his mind. He clicked his tongue and sighed, “Ugly, refuse! Can’t think, can’t think.”

“Zao Ying, this fellow, has always claimed to be a righteous bandit, specializing in robbing officials, not ordinary people,” Wang Zuogua said. “This fellow has always looked down on us, saying that we coerce the common people and are not good fellows. Screw her mother... cough... her mother probably isn’t good-looking either, forget it. Since she doesn’t consider us the same kind, naturally we can’t consider her the same kind. Later, let’s also snatch her horses.”

Several subordinates chuckled together: “Understood!”

Miao Mei, Feishan Hu, and Big Honglang spread out immediately.

They had been active in Huanglong Mountain for a long time and were extremely familiar with the terrain here. They led their troops around both sides, diving through gullies. By then, the sky had grown dark, and those unfamiliar with Huanglong Mountain couldn’t possibly spot them.

In no time, Wang Zuogua’s large army surrounded Duzhucun.

Li Daoxuan saw this and couldn’t help frowning.

He quickly pressed the “South” button outside the box. At this point, Xing Honglang and Cheng Xu were still four or five li away from Duzhucun. The two were among the latest to arrive.

If they continued forward now, they would soon encounter the Big Honglang division Wang Zuogua had sent out to surround Duzhuncun.

Li Daoxuan didn’t want the two to foolishly walk straight into the enemy’s encirclement. He was just about to remind them...

Just then, two scouts ran back from the front. One scout was Xing Honglang's subordinate, Old Zhu; the other was from the Gaojia Village Militia, Shi Jian.

The two returned before Xing Honglang and Cheng Xu and reported swiftly: "The situation ahead seems a bit complicated. A bandit army has suddenly blocked the way between us and Duzhucun... It's dark, and we couldn't see clearly. We couldn't figure out who that bandit army is. We could only speculate that it might be Wang Zuogua of Yichuan's people."

Li Daoxuan showed a relieved, aunt-like smile. Good, my little people were quite methodical; they knew to send scouts ahead and wouldn't casually fall into others' ambushes. Ah, the nanny Deity worried too much again.

Cheng Xu frowned: "Coming for us?"

"Not at all!" Shi Jian said. "It seems to be coming for Wu Zimian."

Cheng Xu: "Huh? So interesting?"

He turned and exchanged a glance with Xing Honglang.

Xing Honglang chuckled: "Instructor He, what good plans do you have?"

Cheng Xu chuckled: "Naturally, it's to sit on the mountain and watch the tigers fight. Though the Deity doesn't lack silver, if I had to give over thirty thousand liang of silver to a scoundrel like Wu Zimian, I'd still feel a bit uncomfortable. If we can take advantage of the situation to rob, play a round of black eating black... then we wouldn't have to spend a single liang of silver. I'd save the Deity's silver, and the Deity Himself would surely be happy."

Xing Honglang: "Instructor He, why does the way you consider problems resemble a bandit more than a bandit?"

Cheng Xu: "Huh? Really?"

Xing Honglang snorted: "I'll say it straight, you resemble an official!"

Cheng Xu was startled: "Hey hey hey, all officials in the world would protest against you. You actually said officials resemble bandits more than bandits do."

Xing Honglang: "Isn't it true?"

Cheng Xu: "I'm not, I haven't, I'm a good citizen, Instructor He from He Village. The Deity can testify for me."

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes: "There's no He Village in Chengcheng County."

Cheng Xu whistled: "Ah, well then... tonight's moonlight is truly wonderful."

Xing Honglang shook her head and laughed: "This guy!"

Yet, she didn't intend to oppose Cheng Xu's opinion. Though the Deity wasn't short of money, taking the Deity's money to buy horses for a corrupt official felt a bit unreasonable. If they could save tens of thousands of liang of silver, it would be better to give it to the common people.

Xing Honglang said: "Since it's like this, let's play black eating black. But we don't know what's happening in Duzhucun now, or how many enemies there are, what the situation is. If we act recklessly, we might end up eaten ourselves."

Cheng Xu frowned: "That's true! If it really is Wang Zuogua of Yichuan blocking us, then he must be more familiar with the terrain of Huanglong Mountain than us..."

He was just saying this when he suddenly felt he bumped into something. With a "duang," he fell on his butt to the ground.

There was clearly nothing in front!

Cheng Xu quickly looked up and saw a low cloud floating in the sky.

At that, he understood: “Haha, the Deity has come to help. His hand is right in front of us, only we can’t see it.”

Xing Honglang: “Huh?”

Cheng Xu was at the level of a court official in “guessing the superior’s intention.” He immediately understood what it meant when the Deity put down his hand and hurriedly climbed onto it.

Seeing his movement, Xing Honglang also understood: “Right, last time when fighting the He Yang bandits and Fan Shanyue, the Deity set down his hand and lifted you into the air to see the terrain... Ah... this time, can I go up?”

Cheng Xu beckoned to her and laughed: “The Deity hasn’t considered you an outsider for a long time. Come on up.”

Xing Honglang was delighted and quickly reached forward to feel, found the edge of the invisible big hand, then climbed up.

Soon, both were sitting in the palm of Li Daoxuan’s hand.

He gently lifted his hand, carrying the two, and flew them into midair...

...

The setting sun was almost completely down, and the sky was growing darker and darker.

In the last bit of dusk, Zao Ying finally negotiated the price with Wu Zimian’s attendants: thirty-two thousand liang of silver. However, Zao Ying had been chased here by Hong Chengchou’s attendants, so of course, she didn’t carry any silver.

Though she had settled on the price, she couldn't pay. She was racking her brain to think of how to steady Wu Zimian...

Just then!

From the eastern mountains and forests, a drum beat sounded first, then a large crowd shouted in unison: "Wang Zuogua of Yichuan and his whole crew are here. Officials, die!"

After this shout, a thunderous sound came from the forest, and an army charged out.

At the forefront, they were all fierce soldiers wearing official armor!

Turns out, after the Guyuan mutiny, the border army turned to the remaining bandits. Officials everywhere became unstable. Many unpaid soldiers ran off to join the bandit army. Later, when the courier stations dismissed their couriers, another large group of couriers joined the bandit army.

Wang Zuogua absorbed many such official soldiers into his ranks, making his army's combat strength unlike before, greatly improved. Now, when fighting, Wang Zuogua's vanguard was a proper troop of official troops.

When these people jumped out, Wu Zimian was startled: "Damn, Wang Zuogua of Yichuan really dared to come? Left and right! Arrest him for me at once."

Chapter 292: Even Wants to Rob Me Too

"Wow! They started fighting."

Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang hovered in mid-air watching the scene happily.

As Wang Zuogua of Yichuan's vanguard charged, the officials began to panic.

Wu Zimian had originally led three thousand men out for bandit suppression, but he took bribes to let many officers go. These officers then took away their private soldiers, leaving Wu Zimian's force reduced to two thousand.

Moreover, these two thousand soldiers had low morale and were utterly consumed with avoiding battle.

Upon seeing thousands of bandit troops suddenly emerge from the forest—their numbers unknown—Wu Zimian's subordinates immediately panicked.

The only elite soldiers, Wu Zimian's hired guards, didn't charge out to fight the enemy. Instead, they tightly protected Wu Zimian himself.

This made any chance of combat absurd.

With just one charge from Wang Zuogua's vanguard, Wu Zimian's outer formations were thrown into chaos. Before they could recover, shouts erupted from all directions: "Miao Mei of Yichuan is here!"

"Feishan Hu of Yichuan has arrived!"

"Big Honglang of Yichuan has arrived!"

Three top generals under Wang Zuogua attacked from the other three directions.

Wu Zimian looked around: "What the fuck, why are bandit troops everywhere?"

His hired guards shouted urgently: "General, disaster has struck! The bandit army quietly surrounded us."

Wu Zimian asked: "Where are the horses? My five hundred fine horses? They can sell for tens of thousands of taels of silver."

The guards responded desperately: "No time for those now, General, run!"

A group of guards shielded Wu Zimian and desperately fought their way north.

Meanwhile, Zao Ying felt a bit bewildered.

She had just finalized pricing with Wu Zimian's hired guards when, to her frustration, Wang Zuogua of Yichuan suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Zao Ying thought to herself: Enough! At worst, I'll forget this deal. I didn't bring any silver and only stumbled into it by accident. Now officials and bandits clash—I'll just slip away unnoticed.

She hurriedly gathered her followers, mounted up, and prepared to retreat.

The horses of the mounted bandits had been scattered around the village grazing earlier. But after Wu Zimian's men arrived, they had brought the horses back and readied for possible conflict. Now, upon Zao Ying's command, they quickly mounted.

Zao Ying was about to gallop off when a ferocious man blocked her path, grinning widely: "Woman, you're the Yichuan mounted bandit, Zao Ying, aren't you?"

Zao Ying replied: "That's right. And who are you?"

The man chuckled heartily: "I'm Big Honglang of Yichuan. No more talk—hand over all your horses."

Zao Ying paused briefly, then exploded in anger: "Damn! Even wants to rob me too?"

Big Honglang laughed: "Not wants to—already doing it."

With that, he lifted a long spear and thrust fiercely towards Zao Ying.

Zao Ying whipped out her saber and deflected the blow with a clang. Her arm went numb—Big Honglang truly had immense strength.

Her mounted bandit followers tried to charge forward, but behind Big Honglang surged a large crowd of bandit troops, all armed with spears. A spear formation rose before them, completely blocking the path of Zao Ying's group.

She tugged at her reins to turn the horse and break free another way. Yet on all sides, Wang Zuogua's men crowded in, each holding a spear, or sharpened wooden stakes or bamboo poles...

From their posture, it was clear from the start they were here to besiege the horses!

They were absolutely determined to seize both the officials' five hundred warhorses and my own horses.

"Damn it," Zao Ying cursed under her breath, while pondering inwardly: This isn't good. My numbers are small, barely over a hundred, while Wang Zuogua has thousands upon thousands. He's surrounding us from every direction, preventing my cavalry from gaining speed and robbing us of our advantage.

What should I do?

At that moment, Xing Honglang spoke up: "Deity, we could rescue that female horse bandit."

Li Daoxuan: "?"

Xing Honglang swiftly explained: "That woman is Zao Ying, a horse bandit who operates across Yichuan, a forest hero. She has no history of wrongdoing, always targeting only the authorities and never plundering common folk. She can't be equated with the likes of Wang Zuogua. See, Wang Zuogua is attacking her too. She's inexplicably caught in this ambush. It would be a pity if she died here."

Cheng Xu interjected beside them: "Wu Zimian's forces have already been driven off by Wang Zuogua. If we mean to do some 'black eating black', now is the perfect time to strike. We need to hit them while Wang Zuogua's troops are still reveling in their victory, before they can reform their battle lines."

Li Daoxuan slowly lowered his hand, returning both of them in front of their subordinates.

This single action was tantamount to an order for them to act immediately!

Xing Honglang was elated: "The Deity consents to saving Zao Ying!"

Cheng Xu: "The Deity is always benevolent, ever ready to lend a hand to good people. Since that's the case, there's no need to wait. Back up in the sky, we clearly saw the surrounding terrain and the deployment of Wang Zuogua's forces, didn't we?"

Xing Honglang nodded: "Saw it crystal clear."

"Then let's go!" Cheng Xu grinned, chuckling darkly. "Grenadiers! Firearm soldiers! Get ready!"

After Xu Dafu developed the "Fuse Hand Grenade", mass production started immediately. The blacksmiths and gunpowder makers' apprentices worked together and had already produced twenty "Fuse Hand Grenades". As for the firearm soldiers, they now had ten triple-barreled arquebuses, one flintlock firearm, one bird firearm...

The quantity wasn't exactly vast, but the Deity was still overhead. What was there to be afraid of a hammer?

Cheng Xu brimmed with fighting spirit; looking out across the world, half a sign of a grandmother was nowhere to be seen. He swept his arm forward, laughing heartily: "The bandit army is in four units. Two are chasing Wu Zimian and seizing the officials' warhorses. The other two are besieging Zao Ying. We'll smash the encirclement around Zao Ying first."

...

Zao Ying was spinning desperately in circles.

She and her men had horses; with horses, they could run fast. But encircled on all sides by dense spear formations, no matter how fast they were, they couldn't break out. All they could do was run in circles within the tightening ring.

From Li Daoxuan's vantage point above, he could see Zao Ying and her party spurring their horses round and round, constantly rotating inside that massive circle of encirclement.

With every rotation, the circle tightened a step, their space for movement shrinking further and further. If this continued, they wouldn't be able to move at all.

The inevitable endgame was being speared off their horses...

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but secretly admire: Wang Zuogua has truly learned so fast! Before, he was just a bumbling fool, spamming F2A – telling his men to simply charge forward. But this Wang Zuogua now understands dividing forces and coordinated attacks, using spear formations to box in cavalry.

Tsk, tsk, tsk!

Zao Ying's heart had sunk to the absolute depths. She felt this time she was done for, that she would meet her end here.

Just then, Cheng Xu's unit arrived.

The first to hit were the two Fuse Hand Grenades hurled by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu.

After the latest improvements, even an ordinary person could throw a grenade over a dozen zhang. Yet monsters like Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu could manage more than twenty zhang.

Two grenades arced across the sky, plummeting into Big Honglang's spear formation.

BOOM! BOOM!

Chapter 293: Not Saved By Accident

A grenade exploded.

By now, the daylight had dimmed. The flames bursting from the two exploding grenades glared starkly in the dusky world.

As the fire shot upward, shrapnel and iron fragments sprayed out in all directions. Instantly, a cluster of people around collapsed to the ground. Some fell already dead; others wailed in agony. One man stared in disbelief at the hole gushing blood in his abdomen...

“What was that?”

“What kind of freakish thing?”

“Something went into my belly! It hurts! Oh, it hurts!”

Two enormous gaps were instantly torn through Wang Zuogua’s spear formation, with men thrashing and writhing on the ground.

Everyone nearby was stunned by the shock.

Zao Ying too was stunned for a fleeting moment: “What happened?”

Then she heard loud laughter erupt from the south: “Old Ghost from Guyuan has arrived! Hahaha! Stop grabbing nothing! The horses here... all belong to me!”

Now Zao Ying understood. Black eating black had arrived. Old Ghost from Guyuan – the name alone screamed it was the damn border army in Guyuan. Likely a unit that had fled here after the last Guyuan mutiny.

Rushing with pride, she thought: Fantastic! I thought I was dead for sure. Yet here comes black eating black! Amidst this chaos, I might just escape after all.

She raised her saber and roared loudly: “Brothers! Be ready to seize any chance to break out!”

“Wooo!” the mounted bandits behind her roared as one.

Wang Zuogua, observing the battle from a distance, had his attention fixed on Wu Zimian’s official troops. Now, he whipped his head towards Zao Ying’s position: What was that explosion? Why is Feishan Hu and Big Honglang’s troops in chaos?

The two bombs had hit Big Honglang’s forces hardest.

He was in charge of the “southern flank” of Duzhucun village, precisely the direction Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang approached from. Both grenades landed amidst Big Honglang’s subordinates, blowing them into a chorus of pained cries for their mothers.

Big Honglang spun around furiously, bellowing: “Who the hell are you?”

The answer came as the crack of a flintlock pistol.

A flintlock pistol was convenient to fire; just pull the trigger. No need to light a fuse.

One of Big Honglang’s men screamed and collapsed onto his back.

Big Honglang: “Shit? Firearms?”

Next, he saw a large crowd of figures advancing ahead, a dark mass in the deepening gloom. The distance and fading light obscured their precise attire, but he could clearly see the sparking trails of lit match cords in their hands.

“Firearms! Lots of firearms!” Big Honglang hit the dirt with a thud.

But his followers weren’t this sharp. They weren’t elite troops and had little experience handling firearms, having barely encountered even Three-Eyed Divine Firearms before.

With a chaotic volley of “Bang! Bang! Bang!” the Gaojia Village Militia’s muskets and ten Three-Eyed Divine Firearms fired consecutively...

Instantaneously, a swathe of the bandit army fell.

The ten firearm soldiers wielding the Three-Eyed Divine Firearms cheered ecstatically: “Hahahaha! Hit so many! Damn it, I’d just about given up hope in this lousy Three-Eyed Divine Firearm. Didn’t expect it to work quite well slaughtering bandit troops! Hahaha!”

In a heartbeat, the firearm soldiers’ confidence surged again.

“Loading! Loading!” yelled the Captain of the firearm soldiers.

Firearm soldiers were anything but cheerful during the loading phase. They first used a special brush to scrub the residue from previous shots inside their gun barrels. Then they tore open pre-measured gunpowder packets, poured all the contents down the barrel, poked down solidly with the ramrod, dropped in lead balls, and rammed them tight...

This entire process took at least two to three minutes to complete.

Big Honglang scrambled up from the ground and pointed toward the militia. “Damn it! Charge! Slaughter them all before they fire their second shot!”

No sooner had her words faded than two more black spheres plunged from the sky.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were hurling their second volley.

Their grenades required no reloading. So long as they had grenades left and strength in their arms, they could keep throwing.

Two grenades crashed down again: “Kaboom! Kaboom!”

Once more, the bandit army staggered as if struck by a typhoon.

During the first two grenade explosions, they'd been baffled, too stunned to react. But this time they saw it clearly—those exploding things were thrown by the enemy.

Grenades packed with iron pellets and scrap iron dealt devastating damage to soldiers. Everyone within a wide radius of the blast was either dead or wounded. It was sheer terror.

The enemy had thrown two small bronze-hammer-like objects and killed so many soldiers?

What in blazes was this thing?

This dealt a heavy blow to the bandit army's morale.

Human beings naturally fear the unknown.

Especially when that unknown can slaughter dozens in an instant.

The terror multiplied intensely.

Bandit troops under Big Honglang wavered.

They were, after all, bandits—not a border army like Guyuan's, which could push forward despite explosives hurled by militia.

Many trembled so violently they dared not advance further, and some were already fleeing sideways.

As for their spear formation...

Huh? Just a moment ago, it had faced Zao Ying. Now it had completely pivoted toward the militia direction.

By the time they realized this, it was too late.

Zao Ying, a horse thief who'd fought on horseback all her life, excelled at seizing opportunities.

The moment Big Honglang's spear formation diverted, Zao Ying's saber was already pointed that way. "Charge!" she roared.

Taking the lead, she surged forward like a gale, her saber whipping up in an arc. Swish! One blow sent a spear troop's head soaring skyward. Blood sprayed wildly, painting half her fierce face crimson.

Behind her, one hundred and twenty mounted bandits bellowed as they charged headlong.

Saber blades flashed everywhere. In an instant, screams of agony filled Big Honglang's unit as they wailed for their parents.

Against cavalry, infantry without a spear formation were a child among children.

Zao Ying cut straight through Big Honglang's troops almost instantly and broke free.

Emerging outside, she genuinely worried the rebel band in Guyuan might strike them too. Unexpectedly, the rebels immediately retracted their firearms upon seeing her break through.

Zao Ying's eyes narrowed. "Oh? They didn't just accidentally rescue us... This was intentional all along."

A subordinate bellowed beside her, "Boss! Analysis can wait! Get to safety now!"

"Right!"

She thrust her saber toward a distant hill. “To those small slopes!”

Over a hundred riders thundered out of the battlefield in an instant, charging straight toward the flanking hillocks to watch events unfold.

Big Honglang howled with rage. “Fuck! The duck was practically in my mouth, and it flew! Blame those damned Guyuan border troops! Brother Hu! Brother Hu! Reinforce me, quick!”

The unit led by Feishan Hu, originally attempting to flank Zao Ying from another angle, instantly pivoted and raced back at top speed.

Chapter 294: Quid Pro Quo

Feishan Hu’s forces arrived.

Yet another mass of bandit army of chaotic equipment surged forward, their numbers indistinguishable in the pitch-black dusk—just a dark, swarming mass.

Cheng Xu remained fearless and laughed heartily, “Keep throwing bombs! Where are the firearms? Is the second round ready? Fire! Fire!”

The two simpletons Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu swung their arms once more, sending two more grenades hurtling forward. Simultaneously, the flintlock pistols, firearms, Three-Eyed Divine Firearms, and other chaotic equipment discharged again.

A chaotic barrage of bangs and booms erupted, the noise of firearms echoing through forests and mountains.

Feishan Hu’s troops immediately suffered humiliation upon arrival. Like Big Honglang’s forces, their morale dissolved almost instantly.

The collective morale of one bandit horde plus another doesn’t multiply by two—it merely compounds weakness. One bandit group collapsing or two collapsing happens just as fast.

Feishan Hu's troops shrieked in panic, scrambling backward and scattering to the flanks.

Feishan Hu's face darkened. "What in blazes is this?"

Big Honglang cried, "I have no idea either! Their firearms are deadly—strange weapons I've never seen before!"

"Damned idiots! We can't hold! Retreat now!"

Feishan Hu and Big Honglang had no choice but to pull back together.

Their retreat exposed the main force of Wang Zuogua and the battalion commanded by Second Leader Miao Mei.

These two units were still battling Wu Zimian's remnants.

Wu Zimian had already fled under the protection of his household guards, but his Yansui garrison troops continued fighting. Their morale had been low from the start, teetering near defeat... until Cheng Xu's forces suddenly unleashed a relentless bombardment of booms and crashes.

To the bandit army, those sounds were terrifying. To the officials, they were deeply comforting.

A Commander roared amidst the ranks, "Our reinforcements are here! Fear nothing! Reinforcements with firearms—elite troops! Must be Provincial Governor Liu Guangsheng's men from Shaanxi!"

"Reinforcements are here! We can win now! Stand firm!"

Hearing this, the officials' morale soared.

The officials had always been stronger than bandit troops. Though Wang Zuogua's forces included many border army soldiers and former officials, they still fell short compared to proper imperial troops. The bandits only held the upper hand after chasing off Wu Zimian and suppressing his garrison troops' spirit.

Now, with the officials' morale revitalized, the bandit troops stood no chance.

The officials' Spear Formation regained its fearsome might, pressing forward and driving Wang Zuogua and Miao Mei's forces steadily backward.

Wang Zuogua glanced back and saw Feishan Hu and Big Honglang retreating too. He knew disaster loomed.

"Quickly!" he bellowed. "Seize those captured warhorses! We pull out now!"

Big Honglang happened to be a skilled rider and vaulted swiftly onto a warhorse. Her fiercest bandits scrambled onto mounts as well.

A large herd of horses doesn't need every animal ridden—just a few lead steeds spurred forward can draw the herd behind them. Thus these few riders sufficed.

Big Honglang and her trusted henchmen dug their heels into the horses' flanks. "Hyah! Gallop!"

Their dash sent five hundred warhorses charging northeast in their wake.

Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang stared. "Damn it!"

Panic seized them both.

This was outrageous! The militia couldn't outrun horses. If the bandits escaped, how could they fulfill the Deity's command?

Damn it, the greatest crisis since the founding of the civilian corps had arrived.

Li Daoxuan clicked on the Infinity Gloves, turned on the switch, and the Infinity Gems began flashing colorful lights; he was ready to show off.

But just as he was about to act, he suddenly saw an amusing scene.

Zao Ying, who had just climbed the nearby small mountain to watch the show, suddenly swung her sabre, pointed in the direction where Big Honglang was fleeing, and shouted loudly, “Brothers, let’s go intercept those warhorses.”

A subordinate asked, “Huh? Why?”

Zao Ying replied, “The rebel band in Guyuan saved our lives, so we must return the kindness.”

The subordinates exclaimed, “Understood!”

Zao Ying charged ahead, leading the attack.

Behind her, one hundred and twenty bandits shouted together, brandishing their sabres, and chased after Big Honglang.

Now was the time to test their riding skills!

Big Honglang only knew how to ride a horse—she couldn’t be called skilled in riding—but the bandits had all grown up on horseback, with superb riding abilities; though not as good as northern minorities’, within the barrier, each was a top riding master.

Their charge was nothing like Big Honglang’s pace.

Big Honglang only heard the urgent sound of hooves from the side; turning to look, she saw Zao Ying fiercely attacking.

Big Honglang yelled, "Fuck this!"

She quickly raised her spear, thrusting directly at Zao Ying.

But Zao Ying had prepared; she leaned to one side on the saddle, easily dodging the spear. In an instant, as the horses drew close, Zao Ying flicked her wrist, swinging her sabre in a silver arc, sweeping toward Big Honglang's waist.

Big Honglang was scared out of her wits; stuck on the horse, she didn't know how to dodge. In the chaos, she thought of abandoning the horse, gave a strange cry, tumbled down the other side, landed heavily with a thud, rolling over several times.

Zao Ying didn't bother with Big Honglang's fate; she grabbed the reins, taking the horse Big Honglang had just ridden, and led it away. Her troops charged up too, hacking down Big Honglang's few subordinates and dismounting them, seizing their reins to lead the horses aside.

Their actions had a leading effect; the hundreds of warhorses behind all followed them.

Li Daoxuan watched her with interest, thinking to himself, "If you're taking these horses to flee the battle and profit from the chaos, I'll have to intervene."

But human nature seemed less evil than that.

Zao Ying didn't lead the horses away; instead, she circled around with them and charged toward Cheng Xu and his group.

The civilian corps members tensed up, hesitating whether to attack the oncoming cavalry, but Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang both shouted at once, "Stop! Don't strike!"

They could see that Zao Ying bore no hostile intent.

The large group of warhorses was brought before Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang and halted; she tossed the lead horse's reins to Cheng Xu, saying, "Thanks for saving our lives. Here are five hundred horses back, now we're even."

Xing Honglang laughed heartily, "Yichuan Zao Ying is truly as reputed."

Zao Ying stared at Xing Honglang for several seconds before suddenly saying, "Yongji Xing Honglang?"

Xing Honglang laughed, "That's me."

Zao Ying laughed, "No wonder, no wonder, hahaha."

She pointed at the still-warring officials and Wang Zuogua, asking, "What about those over there?"

Xing Honglang replied, "Now that we have the warhorses, let's ignore them and run away. How's that?"

Cheng Xu said, "A fine plan! Let's withdraw then."

Zao Ying said, "Hmm, fighting more won't help either; I'll pull out too."

She clasped her fists toward Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang, saying, "Mountains stand unchanged, rivers flow constant—we'll meet again someday."

As soon as she finished speaking, the sound of arrows slicing through the air came—a forceful arrow flew toward her from behind...

Chapter 295: Come Be Our Guest

An arrow tore through the air, heading straight for Zao Ying's back.

It turned out Big Honglang had fired this arrow.

Knocked off her horse and robbed of her steed by Zao Ying earlier, she burned with humiliation. Yet fearing the militia's firearms, she dared not approach and shot from afar instead.

Her archery was usually poor, missing more often than not. But today, fortune favored her—this shot flew unerringly toward Zao Ying's spine.

The sun had nearly set, light was fading, and the arrow arrived with such speed that almost no one noticed. In a blink, it reached between Zao Ying's shoulders. By the time she heard its whistle, it was too late to dodge.

Just then, a massive iron figure lunged closer.

A huge arm reached out and yanked Zao Ying clean off her horse.

Though Zao Ying was powerfully built—a female gorilla among women, comparable even to Xing Honglang—who could barely be shifted by two or three ordinary men, the iron giant flung her down effortlessly.

Mid-tumble, two massive hands caught and scooped her sideways.

Big Honglang's ambush strike harmlessly pierced empty air.

Heart racing, Zao Ying glared at the iron man: "Who are you?" Instantly regretting her harsh tone toward her rescuer, she added: "My thanks."

The iron man chuckled. "Zheng...cough...Reckless Bull of Guyuan."

Reckless Bull? Zao Ying thought. A nickname's understandable for rebels, but this fits his enormous build too well!

Reckless Bull was Zheng Daniu. Setting Zao Ying on her feet, he grinned. "Captain Ghost, we were fixing to pull out. Getting shot at—leaving without paying them back? Ain't sitting right with me."

Cheng Xu nodded. "It's impolite not to reciprocate, Reckless Bull. Toss them a grenade."

"Right!"

Zheng Daniu roared with laughter, pulling out a Fuse Hand Grenade.

Up close now, Zao Ying studied it clearly. Was this the thing that exploded so fiercely? Looks unremarkable—just a small object...

Before she finished pondering, Zheng Daniu lit the fuse. When half burned, he charged forward, whipped his arm, and hurled it far into the distance.

Just from his explosive stride and throw, Zao Ying jolted: Monstrous strength! So that's why he hauled me off my horse so easily. Against this creature? Pure force is useless.

The grenade flew impossibly far, arching eighty meters before landing near Big Honglang. Boom! Big Honglang dropped fast, escaping death once more, while her fighters crumpled instantly.

So, Zao Ying realized, this terrifying device that mows men down is thrown by this iron beast! Extraordinary.

"Move out!" Cheng Xu signaled.

The militia prepared to retreat. But most couldn't ride; they shuffled uselessly around seized horses. Meanwhile, Xing Honglang's salt smugglers expertly mounted newly claimed steeds, galloping south as their vanguard.

A rush of riderless horses thundered after them southward—gone like mist. The militia now trudged slowly on foot...

Zao Ying yearned to follow, but abruptly saw no path open.

North and west were Huanglong Mountain—now Wang Zuogua's territory.

East? Impossible. Hong Chengchou's men had driven her east into these mountains. Facing him outside again? No.

Can't win—simply can't win.

What now?

Only south remained.

Facing Cheng Xu and Xing Honglang, she stated: "I'll withdraw south too. That's... Chengcheng County, right?"

Cheng Xu hesitated inwardly: This fake Guyuan rebel act must switch back to the Gaojia Village Militia after. A horse thief like her? Makes that switcheroo messy.

He glanced at Xing Honglang. She leaned near, whispering: "Zao Ying's known honor. Won't betray us. Might as well tell her. Besides—Gaojia's militia lack equestrian skills. Integrating five hundred horses? Nearly impossible. Better lure Zao Ying into our village. Skilled with mounts? Put her in charge; make these steeds useful."

Cheng Xu paused—it made sense.

He peered upward at the low cloud. The Deity offered no sign—clearly not opposed.

Since the Deity stayed mute, Cheng Xu's doubts vanished.

A sly grin spread as he addressed Zao Ying. "Boss Zao, why not spend a few days... at our stronghold?"

Zao Ying: "Am I intruding?"

Cheng Xu: "Nonsense. You helped us win back five hundred warhorses! That kindness is worth tens of thousands of silver taels. Repayment's due. Come feast properly at our place! Several good meals—that's least we can do!"

Zao Ying began protesting—But you saved me!—when desperate gulp noises echoed behind. The great disaster made starvation chronic nationwide. "Several good meals" struck like thunder—a hundred twenty bandits instantly flooded mouths with saliva.

Politeness dissolved. For her people, she'd swallow mortification and feast.

"I'll impose... gratefully."

Watching below, Li Daoxuan beamed, delighted. Perfect! A hundred twenty horsemen. Cavalry was our biggest vacancy.

He'd worried endlessly about training riders from scratch after inheriting hundreds of warhorses. Training nonriders? Headache incarnate. Yet Zao Ying crystallized solutions vividly.

To lure them in—food's the gateway. Their starvation-despair glared obvious. Feed them well.

But what to serve?

Li Daoxuan frowned at the "Westin Chinese Burger" clutched in his hand—This shoddy trap—no, treat!—won't shake anybody.

He opened the takeout app, hunting culinary treasures—impressive yet approachable, soul-rumbling meals.

His search hit paydirt: A Qin Feng Restaurant sold Xi'an cuisine nearby.

Xi'an's Eight Great Bowls!

Perfection. Majestic yet intimately Shaanxi—nothing better. Quick click—arrival: one hour.

Chapter 296: Eight Great Bowls of Xi'an

Zao Ying followed Cheng Xu as they headed south.

The militia didn't move fast; after all, everyone wore heavy armor, so their marching speed couldn't be helped. By the time they emerged from Huanglong Mountain, the sky had turned completely dark.

Reaching the Loess Plateau beyond the mountain made walking much easier, and their footsteps lightened considerably.

The salt smugglers who had run ahead were waiting there with five hundred warhorses.

Cheng Xu shouted, "Get on your horses! It's already dark. If we go home on foot, who knows when we'll arrive? Everyone, mount up!"

Gao Chuwu: "But we can't ride!"

"For those who can't ride, lie flat on the horse's back and hug its neck."

Gao Chuwu was familiar with this method. Back when Zhong Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu had attacked Gaojia Village at night, he had gone to seek help from Bai Yuan by clinging to a horse's neck to get back. Doing it again now felt familiar and practiced. He scrambled onto a horse's back and hugged its neck. Others followed his example. The five hundred horses weren't enough, so some salt smugglers doubled up, two riding one horse, finally solving the problem.

The five hundred riders, plus Zao Ying's one hundred and twenty, galloped madly towards Gaojia Village. With warhorses, the distance seemed to shrink instantly. The journey from Duzhucun to Gaojia Village, which usually took half a day on foot, now took just over two hours by horse.

In the distance, the lights of Gaojia Business Circle became visible ahead, a vibrant glow of dazzling colors.

Zao Ying couldn't help but mutter, "Huh?" It was already dark, yet there were still so many lights ahead? In this remote, wild mountain village, not some big city, how could there be such a bustling place?

Cheng Xu chuckled: "That's our nest."

Zao Ying, still believing Cheng Xu to be part of the "rebel band in Guyuan," thought: These rebels have actually built a town inside the mountains, and created such a dazzling scene? No wonder they dared openly invite me as a guest. They must feel confident, unafraid that their base's location would be exposed. With so many common folk living here, if the information were going to leak, these people would have already leaked it long ago.

The fact that the commoners hadn't revealed their secrets demonstrated that these rebels had truly won the people's hearts. The commoners weren't willing to betray them for petty rewards from the officials.

This was something Zao Ying genuinely admired.

She prided herself on being a righteous robber, never troubling the common folk, only targeting wealthy nobles. Since these "Guyuan rebels" enjoyed the people's support, it proved they weren't enemies of the commoners either. So, she could safely and boldly become friends with them.

Cheng Xu smiled: "We can't head to the business circle right now. Arriving in full armor wouldn't be fitting. Let's go to our military barracks first."

Zao Ying nodded: "That's how it should be."

Following Cheng Xu to the barracks, she braced herself for a dirty, chaotic, squalid, run-down camp. Instead, what greeted her was an enormous stone, fortress-like structure – imposingly magnificent, occupying an entire valley.

Though it was night, lights illuminated the entire valley, making it bright as day.

It turned out...

After the militia expanded to five hundred men, they could no longer fit inside Gaojia Fortress. The fortress only had a little over two hundred rooms, inadequate for the militia. So, Li Daoxuan had already arranged a new “military base” for them on the outskirts.

This base was not far from the firearms bureau. It was also constructed using a gigantic “stone vat,” inverted like a bowl. The walls of the stone vat were several centimeters thick. Once placed inside the model world, the scaled-down thickness became terrifyingly substantial – formidable enough that even a nuclear bomb might struggle to breach it.

It was truly perfect for barracks!

After the enormous stone vat was placed, Li Daoxuan left the internal details to the artisans. They partitioned the vast interior into small rooms for the soldiers to live in, built storehouses for weapons, and even stockpiled some grain. This was a contingency in the highly unlikely event that the militia needed to hole up in this barracks and defend it to the death – then there would be food to eat.

Of course, the probability of that happening was extremely small, so the grain was basically unlikely to ever be needed.

Cheng Xu called out at the barracks entrance, “Where are the logistics troops on duty? Tell the cooking teams to get working immediately... Ah! We’ve traveled tens of miles this trip. We’re all starving!”

Hearing the mention of food, Zao Ying snapped out of her shock from the “massive barracks.” She thought: But it’s a year of great disaster... Do they have enough food reserves? Feeding all one hundred and twenty of us bandits would be no small expense.

Just as this thought crossed her mind, the head of the cooking teams ran out from the barracks, face beaming with excitement: “Instructor He! You’ve returned!”

Instructor He? Zao Ying felt confused: Wasn’t it Captain Ghost?

Seeing the cook’s delighted expression, Cheng Xu asked curiously, “Why are you grinning so stupidly?”

The head cook chuckled: “Just before you got back, the Deity bestowed food upon us! He also said that since the militia achieved great merit today, you deserve a special feast!”

Cheng Xu was overjoyed: “Oh? What’s the good food?”

Zao Ying: “The Deity?”

The team leader turned around and shouted towards the barracks: “Bring out the feast bestowed by the Deity!”

A large group of cooks and logistics troops emerged from the barracks. Each carried a large basin. They moved in groups of eight, each group carrying eight basins of food, each basin containing a different dish.

Zao Ying focused her eyes on the basins and drew in a sharp breath: “Braised chicken, steamed pork with rice flour, pork belly with dates, stewed pork knuckle, wind-dried chicken, salted pork, and sweet glutinous rice... This... is... so extravagant?”

It turned out that while they were on their way back, Li Daoxuan’s delivery order had arrived. He had taken out the “Eight Great Bowls” he ordered, scooped a little portion from each bowl into the miniature world, and handed it over to the cooking teams.

The teams then divided Li Daoxuan’s “Giant Eight Great Bowls” into multiple portions, each portion poured into its own basin. They arranged them into sets: eight basins per set, enough for five complete sets exactly.

Behind Zao Ying, her one hundred and twenty bandits once again emitted the embarrassing sound of swallowing saliva.

“This... this is Xi’an’s Eight Great Bowls, isn’t it?”

“It absolutely is the Eight Great Bowls! But here they’re serving them in basins!”

“This is Xi’an’s Eight Great Basins!”

“Hold on... are we truly in a year of great disaster?”

“There’s famine everywhere! How come they can make Eight Great Bowls here?”

“What kind of wealth do they possess?”

Cheng Xu was also deeply stunned at first. He intended to solemnly express gratitude for the Deity’s generous gift. However, hearing the bandits’ embarrassing murmurs behind him reminded him that he couldn’t act too hastily in thanking the Deity right now.

The Deity staging this impressive sight was clearly meant to showcase the militia’s might and awe the outsiders. He couldn’t diminish Gaojia Village’s aura; they needed to shock these provincial country bumpkins with unparalleled grandeur.

So, Cheng Xu temporarily held back his thanks to the Deity. He turned to Zao Ying with an utterly composed smile: “Mere eight small dishes. We eat like this all the time.”

Zao Ying: “All the time?”

The bandits: “!!!!!!”

Cheng Xu was roaring with laughter internally, though his outward expression remained utterly serene: “Why is everyone still standing there stunned? Aren’t you starving? Grab your bowls and chopsticks! Dig in!”

Chapter 297: Why Did You Kick Me?

The luxurious Eight Great Bowls of Xi’an seemed absolutely divine to Zao Ying and her 120 subordinates.

Their chopstick-holding hands trembled slightly.

“How many years has it been since we last ate something so fine?”

“Th... three or four years?”

“Ah, the taste of pork knuckle... I feel like crying...”

“This Eight Treasures Rice is so sweet.”

The 120 men ate while sobbing.

While they had already started eating, the militia on the other side remained unhurried. After all, these men had seen fine food before—they’d experienced both the “Deity’s Unexpected Festival” and “Deity Hot Pot Festival”.

There was no rush for this Eight Great Bowls meal! They wouldn’t appear as though they’d never seen the world.

The group even headed back to their quarters first to remove their armor before returning to dine, eating with elegance—no shoving or grabbing.

As they ate, several leaders naturally gathered at one table.

Cheng Xu picked up a piece of steamed pork belly with glutinous rice flour with his chopsticks, remarking cheerfully to Zao Ying, “Boss Zao, how’s the food here?”

Zao Ying couldn't possibly complain. She sighed, "Haven't seen fare like this in years. Even in ordinary times, only wealthy nobles could afford such meals. Never imagined you serve these to soldiers."

Cheng Xu thought: Best not boast too blatantly; must stay modest, or the truth might surface eventually.

He chuckled, "Well, we don't eat like this often—just once every month or two. Our regular meals are pretty ordinary."

Zao Ying murmured, "Once every month or two is still impressive. Most common folk never get such a meal in their lifetime."

Cheng Xu laughed, "Haha, about that... our training intensity is high. The Deity said we must eat well to match it."

Zao Ying raised an eyebrow, "The Deity?"

Cheng Xu pointed skyward, "The one above us..."

Finally, Zao Ying understood—there was even a wealthy lord above them.

Thud! Xing Honglang plopped down next to Zao Ying like a man, boldly producing a liquor jug. "Come on, drink."

Cheng Xu waved his hand, "I can't. Alcohol's banned in the barracks—Deity's rule."

Xing Honglang laughed, "I'm no soldier—I'm a merchant. Boss Zao here's a guest, so drinking's fine."

Cheng Xu smiled, "All right, you two drink. I'll use tea as my wine."

Zao Ying looked more bewildered than ever. “With grain costing a thousand coins for a dou of rice outside, you still have spare crops to brew liquor?”

Xing Honglang burst out laughing, “Who cares what grain costs elsewhere? Doesn’t concern us here. Come now—Luzhou Laojiao spirits specially awarded by the Deity. Let me pour you a full... oh wait, no... can’t pour full. First-timers with this stuff topple over fast. I’ll give you half a tiny cup.”

Zao Ying glared at the sesame seed-sized cup before her, erupting, “Who do you look down on? What kind of measly cup is this? Only half full for me? Fetch me a bowl—fill it up!”

Xing Honglang squinted sideways. “Don’t get cocky. Take a tiny sip first to test.”

Seeing her odd expression, Zao Ying hesitated. She lifted the cup, cautiously sipping a minimal amount. The moment the fine liquor touched her lips, her face transformed dramatically.

“This liquor... how fierce it is...!”

“Hahaha!”

Just then Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu also made their way over. The two big fellows walked together to the “management” table and promptly sat down, their bulk nearly toppling Cheng Xu beside them onto the floor.

He found these two dopes exasperating, but could only sigh and shift sideways to make room for them.

Gao Chuwu sat down beside Xing Honglang. As soon as he settled, he turned a silly grin her way: “Miss Xing, when can we have another match?”

Xing Honglang gave a snort. “You just lost to me a few days ago. Go train some more first.”

Gao Chuwu sighed. “Ahh.”

Zao Ying sensed something odd. “The two of you sparred? And you couldn’t beat her?”

Gao Chuwu sighed again. “Yes. I can’t beat Miss Xing.”

Seeing Gao Chuwu’s burly frame and imposing presence, Zao Ying thought to herself: No matter how capable Boss Xing is, she couldn’t possibly beat such a powerhouse? A man like this in the army would at least be a fierce vanguard; armored heavily and wielding a long spear, he could hold off a dozen ordinary men without much trouble.

Just as she pondered this, Xing Honglang leaned close to her ear and whispered, “This guy only uses Hong Fist when he spars with me, nothing else. That’s why he always loses. If he used all his skills, I wouldn’t stand a chance against him.”

Zao Ying finally understood. “You two...”

Xing Honglang shushed her. “Shh!”

Zao Ying got it; she understood perfectly.

Having spent so long drifting through the rough world, she found she simply couldn’t resist such tales. For a moment, she actually felt a small twinge of emotion, tears welling in her eyes: Even a woman like Yongji Xing Honglang has someone who cares for her? Maybe I have a chance too?

No! No! What nonsense was she thinking!

I’m a bandit! A deadly fierce bandit! I shouldn’t be wasting thoughts on this sentimental nonsense.

Meanwhile, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were already loudly clamoring for drinks.

Hearing Zheng Daniu’s voice, Zao Ying finally recognized him. This big dopey one, wasn’t he the Iron Man who’d grabbed her, saving her from Big Honglang’s arrow? He seemed to be called the Guyuan Reckless Bull or something?

Zao Ying clasped her fists towards him. "Reckless Bull, thank you for saving me that time."

Zheng Daniu just chuckled goofily. "Small thing, not worth mentioning."

He immediately lowered his head, his attention fixed on the Eight Treasure Rice. Scooping up a huge spoonful, he stuffed half the bowl into his mouth at once. He grinned foolishly. "This rice is so sweet! After I earn some merit, I'll just ask the Deity to reward me with this rice!"

Gao Chuwu laughed. "Daniu, you used to always beg the Deity for happy fat water. You drank so much of it, the Deity said it wasn't healthy and specifically cut you off. Now you've set your sights on this?"

Zheng Daniu protested, "This should be healthy, right? It's rice!"

Cheng Xu scolded him mockingly. "That's made from glutinous rice. Eating too much glutinous rice causes bloating and stomach ache. How could the Deity reward you with much of this? You don't know moderation; you'd definitely eat yourself sick."

Zheng Daniu's eyes widened in disbelief. "Eh? Eh eh eh?"

Seeing his reaction, Zao Ying couldn't help laughing inwardly: This Reckless Bull seemed utterly guileless, pure of mind, and strangely endearing.

Zheng Daniu suddenly grabbed Gao Chuwu's arm. "Ask your wife to help! Get some glutinous rice from Xi'an. We have sugar, we can make our own Eight Treasure Rice, right?"

Xing Honglang snapped, "I absolutely won't help! Glutinous rice is hard to buy. Once bought, it's hard to transport. Once transported, you'll just stuff yourself and have a stomachache!"

Cheng Xu teased, "He only said to ask Gao Chuwu's wife for help. He didn't mention you. Why did you jump into it yourself as soon as you heard 'Gao Chuwu's wife'?"

Xing Honglang froze. “!!!”

After a brief, awkward pause, Xing Honglang sprang to her feet like she'd been scalded. She kicked Gao Chuwu to the ground, then buried her face and bolted, fleeing the scene.

Gao Chuwu climbed up from the floor, utterly bewildered. “Why did she kick me all of a sudden?”

Zao Ying was beside herself with laughter. “Hahaha!” She grabbed a wine cup from the table and threw its contents straight down her throat. Only after swallowing did she remember: Oh no! This isn't the kind of wine I used to drink! This stuff hits hard! I shouldn't have downed it like that!

But it was too late to regret it now. Soon after, Zao Ying let out a “Plop!” and toppled over onto the floor, stone-cold drunk.

Chapter 298: Should We Stay?

The next day, early morning.

Zao Ying got up from bed with a split headache.

The sensation of a hangover was truly unpleasant; she patted her head and suddenly jolted awake, thinking, “Where am I?”

She looked left and right, and discovered she was lying in a small stone hut, with nothing inside except one bed, one table, and one coat rack.

She quickly pushed the door open and went out, only to realize she was inside the super large barracks of the “rebel band in Guyuan,” which was entirely made up of little cubicle-like small rooms, their doors neatly lined up and extending out along both sides of the corridor.

She casually pushed open one door and found one of her subordinates inside, snoring soundly, drooling, clutching his belly, looking happy and satisfied.

That foolish appearance was exactly like that of a full pig.

Rubbing her painfully aching head, she slowly walked out of the barracks; outside, on the open ground, the “rebel band in Guyuan” was already doing morning drills.

The man who called himself “Old Ghost from Guyuan,” but whom others referred to as “Instructor He,” was standing at the front of the formation, demonstrating a martial art routine.

More than five hundred people followed his moves, punching together.

That martial art routine was extremely fierce, every move involved locks, holds, neck twists...

Zao Ying just watched for two glances before breaking out in a cold sweat, thinking: If I faced these people, and they suddenly pulled out a killing move, I’d probably be gone in one blow.

Seeing that she had gotten up, Instructor He waved at her, smiled, and said, “Boss Zao, we’re doing morning drills here, no time to entertain you; you take your people and go get breakfast from the cooking teams.”

Zao Ying thought: After such a great meal last night, today’s breakfast should just be plain porridge or noodle soup to get by, right?

She couldn’t help but run to the cooking teams, and saw that it was all meat buns prepared inside—the kind stuffed full with meat filling, the fragrant scent of meat and dough mixing together; she could even picture the satisfied smiles on her subordinates’ faces as they ate them.

“What kind of place is this? Ah!”

This wouldn’t do; she had to get out and see what was really going on here.

She woke up her subordinates, telling them to hurry and go gnaw on the buns; she herself grabbed two buns in her hands, gnawing as she strolled casually out of the barracks.

After exiting the barracks in that small mountain valley, there was a flat, gray hard road ahead, which surprised her a little, but she was a horse thief; she didn't like such hard roads that hurt horse hooves.

Fortunately, beside the hard road, there remained a dirt path; it seemed those doing road construction had already considered this issue long ago.

She walked forward along the road and soon saw an enormous fortress, a fortress wall three meters high showcasing the owner's formidable power; beside this enormous fortress were fertile farmlands, colorful buildings, a chugging small train...

The sheer volume of bewildering things she took in over a short time made Zao Ying's mind jam repeatedly, almost unable to keep up.

Just then, a middle-aged man approached her and smiled at her, saying, "Boss Zao, how are you? I'm Thirty-Two, the Steward of Gaojia Village. We're just a desolate village in the wilderness; having esteemed guests like Boss Zao come truly honors us."

Zao Ying thought: A Steward was one of the biggest roles besides the master himself; this man couldn't be overlooked. Yet, when he uttered those last words, his exaggerated expression and gestures made her really want to punch him.

She clasped her fists: "Steward Thirty-Two! I just arrived; I don't know the rules here. I'm wandering around aimlessly; please don't mind me."

Thirty-Two laughed: "What do you think of our Gaojia Village, Boss Zao?"

Zao Ying: "Prosperous! Novel! In these times of famine and chaos, it's a rare and precious place."

Thirty-Two silently chuckled; the probe was over. That morning, the Deity had sent him a large paper decree, ordering him to keep Zao Ying to train cavalry; after probing, he felt success was possible.

"Four years of drought." Thirty-Two sighed long and hard: "The people are suffering; thieves are popping up everywhere outside; this Shaanxi region has fallen into... ah... utter ruin."

Zao Ying had question marks in her head: "What did you just say?"

Thirty-Two: "Ah, basically it means very difficult times."

Zao Ying nodded: "Yes, indeed difficult!"

Thirty-Two: "Is the quite promising career of a horse thief difficult too?"

Zao Ying shook her head bitterly: "Hard, getting harder. Back in better times, robbing government grain convoys or birthday treasure shipments was almost effortless, but after three years of drought, birthday treasures are gone, and grain convoys are tougher to rob every time; those sent by the court to oversee grain... they're practically inhuman."

Thirty-Two's mind flashed to the gaunt face of Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor, thinking: That skinny guy is tough? Didn't seem like it. Oh well, not the point here.

"Since it's getting harder to snatch anything." Thirty-Two smiled: "Boss Zao, haven't you ever thought about finding a secluded paradise-like place to stop, settle down, and live stably for a while?"

Zao Ying immediately understood; this guy had been blabbering all this time to try and recruit her.

Mutual absorption and merging among greenwood forces wasn't unusual.

Zao Ying had been recruited before, but she never agreed because she didn't fancy those groups.

But this time...

She unexpectedly didn't reject him outright; recalling the formidable combat strength of the "rebel band in Guyuan" she saw at Duzhucun, then thinking about the luxurious big barracks they lived in, the Eight Great Bowls of Xi'an they ate.

She felt a slight, subtle stirring of interest.

If they attached themselves to such a powerful faction, she and her 120 subordinates could live well from now on, right?

Zao Ying couldn't help but ask: "The rebel band in Guyuan and Yongji Xing Honglang, did you recruit them with the same kind of talk?"

Thirty-Two laughed: "Boss Zao, don't misunderstand; I've never used any special words. Xing Honglang sticks around because she often does business with our village—back and forth, we're familiar—and she can leave whenever she wants; we wouldn't stop her, but she considers this place her home now and doesn't want to leave."

Zao Ying thought: Huh?

Thirty-Two continued: "As for the rebel band in Guyuan!"

He grinned, showing a mouth of slightly yellow teeth, in a very strange smile: "The real rebel band in Guyuan is doing forced labor in our village's prison right now; the force you saw was the militia local gentry of Gaojia Village."

"What?" Zao Ying was utterly shocked: "You mean that was militia?"

Thirty-Two grinned and climbed to higher ground: "Come, come, Boss Zao, look at the real rebel band in Guyuan over here."

Zao Ying climbed the rise after him, following his pointing finger; she saw a gray structure off in the distance, clearly prison buildings because they had many strange barred gates inside; a large group of sturdy men had just gotten up and were being let out from the prison... these men didn't look ordinary—they were spirited and tough, or rather, fierce individuals.

Chapter 299: Gaojia Village Prison

The Great Ming in the Box

Thirty-Two laughed. "That's the rebel band in Guyuan. A few days ago, led by North Water Wolf, they attacked Chengcheng County but were defeated by our Gaojia Village Militia, captured, and locked up here since."

Zao Ying's mouth hung open, remaining agape for a long moment. "So many border army soldiers captured alive?"

"Come on, let's get a closer look." Thirty-Two led her towards the Gaojia Village prison.

Around the prison perimeter, many "guards" were patrolling.

Some of these guards were seconded from the militia, some were newly recruited, and others were previously among the first batch of labor offenders. After serving their sentences, they were rehired as guards. These men best understood the minds of labor offenders, making management much easier.

Head guard Zhong Gaoliang hurried forward upon seeing Thirty-Two. "Steward Thirty-Two, what brings you to the prison today?"

Thirty-Two wasted no words, simply pointing towards the sky.

Zhong Gaoliang looked up and saw "the low cloud" of the Deity. He immediately understood. The Deity was watching over this place. This was a prime chance to report his work to the Deity. He promptly said, "Since the Deity is watching, please, both of you, come in."

Leading the way, he continued, "The Guyuan rebels have been imprisoned here for several days now. But these past days, I haven't rushed them out to labor... These men are too formidable. Letting them out casually could pose a threat to the villagers. So, all this time, we've been working to diminish their fighting spirits."

Thirty-Two nodded. "That's how it should be."

Zao Ying, however, thought silently: Diminish fighting spirits? How? These are border army men, monsters who lick blood from blades. Even my caravan has to steer clear when encountering border soldiers. How do you plan to make them obedient here?

Zhong Gaoliang was currently reporting to the Deity. Without waiting for Zao Ying's question, he elaborated in detail: "The first step is ensuring they are well-fed, well-rested, and feel safe, securing them against fears of execution. This way, they're less likely to constantly plot trouble or escape."

"I issue them ample provisions every morning for them to cook themselves. Look, it's time for breakfast distribution right now." Zhong Gaoliang pointed towards a corner of the prison. Several guards were pushing a handcart, laden with flour, towards the cell. A small door was opened, the cart was pushed inside, the guards retreated, closed the door, and shouted into the cell, "Come get your flour. Cook it yourselves."

The fiercest warrior among the prisoners, Old Nan Feng, waved his hand. A few border soldiers came over, retrieved the cart, and proceeded to cook around the makeshift mud stoves and pots that Zhong Gaoliang had arranged for them.

Having full meals was actually quite unexpected for this group!

They had anticipated inhuman treatment upon their capture, but instead, found themselves eating their fill every day – an immense surprise indeed.

While some were cooking, others surprisingly took out comic books titled "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale" to browse. These were specially sent into the prison by Zhong Gaoliang for the border soldiers to read.

During their last encounter with the Gaojia Village Militia, the border soldiers had been terrified speechless by the "giant golden palm," mistakenly believing it to be a demonic hand. But after reading "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale," they now understood the formidable force they had provoked.

Witnessing this scene, Thirty-Two couldn't help but nod approvingly. "Zhong Gaoliang, you actually grasp this. Impressive."

Zhong Gaoliang chuckled. "It stems from my own experience. When we, led by Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu, were incited into attacking Gaojia Village, and we witnessed the Deity manifesting... we nearly pissed ourselves from fright. Later, it was the villagers explaining the Deity's story that turned us into true residents of Gaojia Village. So I thought, these rebels also need to learn about the Deity."

Zao Ying listened beside them, utterly confused. "What exactly is this... Deity?"

Thirty-Two pulled a copy of "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale" from his sleeve and handed it to her. "Take a look, Boss Zao."

Zao Ying flipped through it casually and was dumbfounded: What odd tale is this? A giant hand descending from the sky? Utter nonsense! A White Lotus propaganda pamphlet? However, this place lacks the desperate fervor typical of the White Lotus Sect. All I sense is a palpable happiness born of prosperity. It doesn't seem like a cult.

Just as this thought crossed her mind, she saw a guard standing atop the prison wall, loudly declaiming something to the labor offenders below. Cocking her ear to listen closely, she realized the guard was preaching doctrines.

He spoke about principles of conduct – matters of good and evil, the hardships of common folk, how these offenders themselves were once children of common folk, and then denounced their past acts of robbing the people...

Many labor offenders listened with expressions of shame, bowing their heads.

Nearing the end of his speech, the guard began to say that they must atone for their previous sins through labor, that they must reform diligently and earnestly; their parents and elders were waiting for them to return; only by purging themselves of sin could they start anew, and so on...

After listening, Zao Ying understood: It culminated in an optimistic scenario.

Zhong Gaoliang observed, "We've actually made some progress in ideological education. I feel these labor offenders are about ready to start working."

Thirty-Two nodded. "Then be bold. Let them out and see what happens. Since the Deity is watching today anyway, there's no need to fear even if they cause any troublemaker. This is what's called acting with assurance."

Zhong Gaoliang nodded. "Understood. Let's begin today."

He shouted loudly towards the prison interior: "Labor offenders, listen up! I am Head guard Zhong Gaoliang. Starting today, you will be released for labor reform: road construction! The sooner you begin your reform, the sooner you can atone for your sins and rejoin society. But if you cause trouble during your labor, your sentence will be extended. You might even spend your whole life inside this prison. Consider it carefully!"

The labor offenders: "Cheers!!"

Many were overjoyed.

But a glint flashed in Old Nan Feng's eyes.

Zhong Gaoliang declared, "Alright, the cell door will now be opened. Tools like shovels will be outside. Each of you take one, then follow directions to the road construction site."

The cell door swung open...

The guards were already prepared, tools laid out for this day.

Each labor offender took a tool and obediently filed out.

When it was Old Nan Feng's turn, he let out a low chuckle. He deliberately selected the shovel with the firmest handle, gripping it like a long-handled mallet. His eyes darted around as he followed the other labor offenders, slipping out of the prison.

The moment they stepped beyond the prison gates, many labor offenders excitedly waved their arms. "Locked up for days, finally out!"

"Even road construction beats being cooped up any day!"

"Hey!"

"Come on, come on, let's dig, atone for our sins."

Some walked off obediently.

But Old Nan Feng softly whistled. Several labor offenders subtly drifted towards him, naturally forming a tight-knit squad of eight men.

Old Nan Feng whispered, "Be ready to escape at any time. Await my signal."

The other seven murmured their assent: "Got it."

Chapter 300: Eight Escaping Prisoners

The labor offenders were escorted by a large group of guards into a stretch of wasteland.

Zhong Gaoliang pulled out a "work diagram" and examined it. "Our Gaojia Village plans to build a new road from this spot, leading straight to Fengyuan Town," he declared loudly. "Your job is to dig in that direction, all the way to Fengyuan Town."

The labor offenders gave a feeble acknowledgment and got to work.

Zao Ying's gaze swept over the group of prisoners, scrutinizing them carefully, then flickered toward the Gaojia Village guards. "If these fellows suddenly cause trouble," she whispered, "your guards won't hold them back."

Thirty-Two nodded. "True. They wouldn't hold."

Zao Ying raised an eyebrow. "Yet you show not the slightest fear?"

Thirty-Two lifted his eyes to the low clouds drifting in the sky and smiled. "Foolproof."

Zao Ying stared blankly. "???"

Utter confusion painted her face.

As the labor offenders dug, Zao Ying soon noticed something amiss. Eight of them were acting strangely. While ostensibly digging, they were subtly inching toward the edge of the worksite.

She leaned in close to Thirty-Two. "Third Manager, I fear those eight need closer watching."

Thirty-Two glanced at the positions of the eight men, then lifted his gaze. The low clouds above had drifted directly over them. "No need, no need," he chuckled. "Don't fret, Mistress Zao."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than chaos erupted on the worksite.

Old Nan Feng suddenly lunged upward with explosive force, shoving the nearest guard. The guard, hardly a skilled fighter—merely one of Gaojia Village's earliest batch of reformed labor offenders, possessing the combat ability of an ordinary villager—was no match for a hardened border army warrior. Sent staggering by the shove, he landed hard on his backside.

With a whistling sound, Old Nan Feng darted past him.

Seven subordinates sprinted hard on his heels.

All eight were exceptionally agile; their running speed, in modern terms, would rank them nationally as Class B track athletes. In the blink of an eye, they'd surged past the worksite perimeter and vanished behind a small earthen mound.

The other guards were utterly slow to react...

Several seconds later, the fallen guard finally bellowed, "Ow! Labor offenders escaping!"

Zao Ying couldn't contain her whisper. "Third Manager, should I gather my brothers? We can mount up swiftly and pursue them for you."

Thirty-Two shook his head with a smile. "Thank you for the kind offer, Mistress Zao. Relax and enjoy your visit. We have this handled."

With that, he raised his voice and called out to the entire worksite, "Steady! Everyone remain calm! Hold your positions. Those eight are being dealt with by the Deity himself."

The guards paused momentarily, perplexed, then noticed. A low cloud was trailing in the direction the escapees had fled...

Understanding dawned on them.

The guards began to chuckle. "The Deity's got 'em."

"Ah, never mind then. Let 'em run."

"Let's see who's faster: men on the ground or a god in the sky?"

"Hahahahaha!"

Old Nan Feng and his men covered several zhang in mere moments. They flipped over a slope, vaulted a ditch, and sprinted dead north.

Though unclear about the local terrain or their exact location, they knew they were in Chengcheng County. Huanglong Mountain certainly lay to the north. Once they reached its cover, fear would abandon them.

Li Daoxuan watched the eight prisoners flee in disarray, thinking: How should I deal with you?

Simply smacking you home with one palm? Too dull!

These eight fellows deserved a far greater shock.

Since you enjoy prison escapes, I'll let you experience the phrase "escaping prison" to its fullest thrill.

He frantically rummaged through the miniature toys he'd bought home and soon discovered something perfect: "Hamster Adventure."

It was a large half-meter-square box filled with various "ferocious" traps: rotating plastic blades, terrifying plastic cockroaches, flipping traps, water pits, and more. To play, you'd place a hamster at the entrance and food at the exit. Then the little hamster would "bravely advance," "overcoming every obstacle" to reach the goal for its meal.

Li Daoxuan adjusted his view northward, found a clear area big enough for the "Hamster Adventure," and carefully set the box down. He followed the instructions: filling water where needed, placing rolling balls where indicated, arranging plastic cockroaches in their spots, inserting batteries, and flipping the switch...

Ready!

He then shifted his focus back to the eight escapees.

They were still running frantically, constantly glancing back over their shoulders.

The work site was now far behind, with no pursuers in sight.

Old Nan Feng cheered: "Seems we made it!"

The other seven also rejoiced: "Fantastic! Sticking with Brother Nan Feng was the right call, hahaha!"

Old Nan Feng felt quite smug: "Those amateur guards thought they could hold Old Nan Feng? Utterly delusional! I'll escape clear to Huanglong Mountain, far from this cursed place—never returning."

A subordinate whispered: "Aren't we going to seek revenge?"

Old Nan Feng snapped: "Seek revenge? Against what? Did you not see that Dao Xuan Deity? That enormous hand? So huge! How do you fight that? Escaping alive is heaven's mercy—and you talk of revenge?"

The subordinate murmured: "I didn't dare consider revenge, merely asked."

Old Nan Feng: "I deliberately didn't harm the guards while escaping—just pushed them aside—precisely to avoid provoking vengeance..."

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan smirked: Interesting, he knows restraint. Useless, though. Restrained or not, he'll return to labor camp. And before that, punishment for escaping! Time to feel the Dao Xuan Deity's terror fully.

He slipped on the Thanos Gloves and—whoosh—brought one hand crashing down onto the ground right before the eight runners.

They were sprinting wildly when a massive golden hand suddenly descended from the sky ahead—THUD—slamming the earth directly in their path, identical to the scene witnessed earlier outside Chengcheng County.

“Aaaah!” All eight screamed in unison, collapsing to the ground with a collective thud.

“It’s over... can’t escape!”

“We’ve been spotted.”

Their faces twisted in despair, hearts sinking with dread.

No good outcome followed prison escapes. But he had avoided harming guards—perhaps leniency might yet be possible?

Just as this thought surfaced, the colossal golden hand slid behind them, looming like a massive wall pushing forward to crush them.

Utter terror seized the eight. They scrambled back up, sprinting desperately forward: “Run! It’s coming for us!”

Li Daoxuan carefully steered his hand, driving the eight figures toward the “Hamster Adventure” like panicked ducks.