

Great Ming 311

Chapter 311: Placing an Apple on Your Head

Hearing this, Bai Yuan turned his head and saw Ground Rabbit lying prone. He couldn't help but be overjoyed: "Are you well enough to get out of bed and move around? That's wonderful! You... right... what was your name again?"

Ground Rabbit: "Ground Rabbit!"

Bai Yuan: "Ah, right, right! Your name is Ground Rabbit. I remember it very clearly."

Ground Rabbit: "..."

Bai Yuan: "Thanks so much for last time, holding that room door to the death. Otherwise, I would have been killed by those villains."

Though he often struggled to match faces to names, he was not an ungrateful man. What Ground Rabbit had done for him, he truly remembered clearly. He bowed deeply and solemnly to Ground Rabbit in a formal salute.

Ground Rabbit said: "Mr. Bai, are you studying firearms?"

Bai Yuan lifted the flintlock firearm in his hand: "This is a flintlock mechanism fitted onto a musket, making a flintlock musket. According to Mr. Song, muskets have extremely high accuracy, enough to shoot down flying birds— hence the name Bird Gun. But... no matter how much I use it, I just can't hit a flying bird! This thing has no accuracy at all! I'm really troubled by it."

Ground Rabbit: "Huh? This... well, I don't understand this."

Bai Yuan sighed dejectedly: "This thing isn't even as accurate as my bow and arrows."

Ground Rabbit immediately broke out in a cold sweat: "Not even as accurate as your arrows? Then... well then... don't use it maybe..."

Bai Yuan: "What's the meaning of that expression? Trying to say my archery is no good? Preposterous! Archery is one of the Six Arts of Gentlemen! I am quite serious about it. Want to bet? I bet I could put an apple on your head and stand a hundred paces away and shoot that apple right in the center with a single arrow."

Ground Rabbit was horrified: "This... this! Absolutely mustn't try that! Please don't!"

Bai Yuan: "That clearly shows you don't believe me! Someone! Put an apple on his head."

Ground Rabbit was thoroughly frightened: "Gouzi! Get us out of here!"

Zheng Gouzi hastily pushed the wheelchair and raced away in a puff of smoke.

The two retreated far from the firearm soldier's practice field. Suddenly, the sound of hooves approached from ahead. A cavalry unit of over one hundred men charged past them. Every one of them was clad in armor, holding spears in their hands, and carrying Kaiyuan Bows on their backs. At their head was a female general, fully armored... and she looked really, really formidable!

Ground Rabbit jumped: "Who is that? Does our Gaojia Village have such a woman? At first glance, I thought it was Xing Honglang!"

Zheng Gouzi: "That's the brave woman who joined Gaojia Village when we were protecting the Saint Lady in the county town. Her name is Zao Ying. She commands the cavalry camp now. She's very powerful."

Ground Rabbit watched the imposing scene of the over one hundred cavalymen charging past, a touch of longing in his eyes: "Ah, this Rabbit also wants to join the cavalry camp! Charging into battle atop a horse with a spear is simply too dashing! Don't you think that perfectly matches the presence of Mr. Rabbit?"

Zheng Gouzi: "Just now you said you wanted to join the grenadiers."

Ground Rabbit: "Mr. Rabbit will join the grenadiers first, then join the cavalry camp. Then, Mr. Rabbit will throw grenades from horseback! Wouldn't that be outrageously awesome?"

Zheng Gouzi: "..."

It sounded impressive, but something about it felt fundamentally wrong?

Just as they were thinking this, they saw another group of riders approach. These, however, looked considerably less imposing. They looked extremely nervous on horseback, their faces tinged with green.

Zheng Gouzi said: "These are the guys recently promoted to cavalry. See how they look as if their souls have left their bodies just trying to make the horse trot a little faster? They are still a long way from fighting on horseback. If you join the cavalry, that's how you would look too. Can't even keep up with the riders in front? What kind of imposing presence is that?"

Ground Rabbit: "Tsk! The cavalry camp isn't even useful during mountain bandit suppression! Hmph! Mr. Rabbit decides not to join the cavalry camp!"

Zheng Gouzi: "..."

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Northern Shaanxi, Mizhi County.

Unemployed youth Li Zicheng held a sharp knife in his hand. Drops of fresh blood dripped from its blade.

Because his wife Han Jin'er had committed adultery with another man, putting a green hat on him, he had just personally stabbed her to death.

His nephew Li Guo pushed the door open and saw the corpse on the floor with the dagger still in his uncle's hand. He couldn't help gasping, "Uncle, did you kill this filthy woman?"

Li Zicheng replied, "Killed her! What would be the point of keeping her?"

Li Guo asked, "Though this woman deserved death, the authorities will surely investigate her killing. What should we do now?"

Li Zicheng said, "Flee, of course. What else can we do?"

Li Guo pressed, "Where could we possibly run?"

After thinking seriously, Li Zicheng answered, "In Mount Huanglong to the south, a righteous army is stationed. Their leader is called Wang Zuogua. I've heard he's a brave man with over ten thousand brothers under his command. We might as well join Wang Zuogua."

Li Guo exclaimed, "Good!"

The two quickly gathered their belongings, fled Mizhi County, and headed toward Mount Huanglong.

In Chongzhen Year Two, unemployed youth Li Zicheng executed his unfaithful wife in rage and embarked on the path of banditry...

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Just as Li Zicheng killed his wife, turned bandit, and set off for Mount Huanglong,

a fast horse streaked like an arrow into Gaojia Village, charging straight toward Bai Yuan. Its rider turned out to be Patrol Officer Fang Wushang.

His sudden arrival genuinely startled Bai Yuan.

Li Daoxuan, sitting by a crate gnawing on a large beef bone, couldn't help muttering, "Huh? Fang Wushang came alone again? Surely no one's following him?"

Sweeping his gaze southwest of Gaojia Village, he indeed spotted over a hundred soldiers still panting and sweating as they jogged toward the village from afar. Fang Wushang, ever impatient, hadn't waited for them.

Bai Yuan asked, "What troubles you, General Fang?"

Fang Wushang urgently blurted out, "Instructor Bai, why are you still idling in Gaojia Village? Immediately muster all militia units. Fighting is imminent in every village and town."

His words alarmed Bai Yuan, "What happened this time?"

Li Daoxuan also furrowed his brows.

Fang Wushang continued, "Just days ago, General Wang Chengen of Shaanxi, under the new Provincial Governor Liu Guangsheng's orders, crushed the rebel Fan Shanyue in Heyang County. Thoroughly defeated, Fan Shanyue backed down and meekly accepted pacification."

Bai Yuan remarked, "Huh? Pacification sounds like good news."

But Li Daoxuan thought to himself: Good news? Accepted pacification without enough grain for relief, no land for farming? It's pacification in name only!

Fang Wushang added, "Though pacification succeeded, Fan Shanyue's subordinates remain unruly. En route back to their hometowns, they've occupied villages, unleashed their gangs, and plundered everywhere, calling it 'grain extraction.' When envoys sent by the court questioned them about accepting pacification yet causing chaos, they brazenly claimed they couldn't get food on their journey home and must steal their way back."

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan couldn't help sighing. He thought: Exactly! Just as I'd predicted.

Bai Yuan frowned, "This..."

Fang Wushang urged, "No time for lamenting! Though Fan Shanyue operated mainly in Heyang County, many of his followers hail from our Chengcheng County or neighbouring Bai Shui County. These men will wreak havoc in Chengcheng during their journey home."

Bai Yuan suddenly understood, "We need to organize the militia to subdue these scoundrels."

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Unofficial histories record that after killing his wife, Li Zicheng first joined the Gansu border army, became a squad leader, then mutinied later to join Wang Zuogua.

Yet in Gu Cheng's Peasant Wars of the Late Ming Dynasty, Li Zicheng's uprising led him straight to Bu Zhan Ni...

The records are utterly chaotic! No source stands as authoritative.

The eunuch trusted none, wrote his own version, and made Li Zicheng head straight for Wang Zuogua.

Chapter 312: Returning Bandits

Fang Wushang produced a map, analyzing it in detail alongside Bai Yuan.

Fan Shanyue had accepted appeasement in Heyang County. After his subordinates disbanded, they would splinter into countless small groups returning home.

Most returned to various villages and towns in Heyang County, but some ventured back to places like Bai Shui County, Chengcheng County, and Hancheng.

Fang Wushang's finger traced along the ridge marking the border between Heyang County and Chengcheng County, dragging southward...

"Mr. Bai, every village along this line is potentially at risk of being raided for grain by these appeased bandit troops."

Fang Wushang added, "I will coordinate centrally, reinforcing wherever the bandit strength is heaviest. Ordinarily, all villages rely on your militia for defense. You need to allocate militia instructors to every village and town, ensuring they hold their positions."

This required no explanation from Fang Wushang; Bai Yuan understood perfectly.

Scanning southward, Zhengjia Village appeared first. Fan Shanyue had once battled the militia fiercely there, where Sui Fengxiong and Erchun had perished. His men were highly likely to enter Chengcheng through Zhengjia Village again.

Further south lay Beisi Village, Shijia Gou, Bangou Village, Beipo Village, the Zhang family's He Village, Quangou Village, Changjia He...

Fang Wushang tapped Quangou Village on the map. "I'll station myself here, ready to support other villages at any moment."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Then the other villages will be guarded by the militia I deploy. Rest assured, General Fang, I'll arrange the militia effectively."

Fang Wushang cautioned, "These appeased bandits differ from ordinary ones. Having nominally accepted appeasement, they're now 'commoners' recognized by the court, simply 'returning home.' We cannot proactively block or attack them. We can only act to stop them once they begin causing trouble. This complicates matters significantly."

Bai Yuan frowned. "Indeed!"

Previously, when Fan Shanyue's men scaled the heights towards Zhengjia Village, the Gaojia Village Militia could have just unleashed rolling logs and stones without a word. But now, that wasn't permissible. As the climbers were officially 'returning home,' not 'attacking,' the militia launching stones would forfeit moral justification. They simply wouldn't hold the moral high ground.

It meant being profoundly passive!

If the bandits exploited their 'returning home' guise to ascend, bypass the natural defenses, and then launch a sudden assault, it truly would be an unpredictable threat.

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but frown as well.

I'll need to watch this entire situation carefully, no oversights. Otherwise, my little people could incur heavy losses unwittingly.

After Fang Wushang and Bai Yuan conversed, his hundred-odd soldiers finally caught up, panting heavily. "General Fang... pant... we finally made it."

Fang Wushang replied, "Ah? Good. Mr. Bai and I are done. We head to Quangou Village immediately now."

He slapped his horse's rump. "Hya!" Once again, he charged alone towards Quangou Village.

Over a hundred subordinates cried out collectively, "Huh? Running off again?"

Their protest was futile; Fang Wushang vanished into the distance. The soldiers had no choice but to resume their grueling march towards Quangou Village...

The deputy inspector sighed deeply. "I truly miss when Patrol Officer Cheng was still here."

The archer squad leader echoed, "Absolutely! Cheng Xu was excellent, ah! Such a pity he was killed by the Imperial Guards."

"A-choo!" Cheng Xu, hiding in a distant grove, sneezed. "Who? Who's talking about me behind my back?"

...

Gaojia Village was already mobilizing, preparing to enter Huanglong Mountain and confront Wang Zuogua. Now, hearing the He Yang bandits might scatter their way, they simply shifted their focus to the He Yang threat.

Cheng Xu only emerged from behind the trees after Fang Wushang's group had departed. "Zhengjia Village will undoubtedly be our primary defensive point. So, I shall lead the main force of the Gaojia Village Militia to remain stationed there."

Bai Yuan concurred. "The cavalry unit led by Zao Ying can stay centrally positioned, ready to support, without being tied down to specific villages. Let me consider... I'll return to the county seat once and mobilize the newly formed large militia stationed there. Dispatching groups of two hundred men each to garrison the villages along the border."

Li Daoxuan suddenly spoke up. "Bai Yuan, the dilemma you face isn't an inability to defeat these returning bandits. It's the constraint against striking first. Mingling with them is perilous; you must maintain distance. Simultaneously, you must deter them with overwhelming strength, making them hesitate to cause trouble at the mere sight of your forces."

Gao Yiye had just then arrived beside them, allowing Li Daoxuan to issue direct instructions.

Bai Yuan, rushing with pride after hearing this, responded, "I share that exact thought. However, the specifics of how to intimidate them still elude me."

Li Daoxuan stated simply, "Demonstrate your military power."

Bai Yuan pressed, "Specifically... how...?"

Li Daoxuan instructed, "Lead your militia back to Gaojia Village. Have the artisans' well equip them with weapons and gear. Ensure every man is armed to the teeth. We want the returning bandits so awestruck by their presence, their resolve crumbles instantly. They won't dare make trouble."

Bai Yuan experienced a flash of understanding.

Li Daoxuan continued, "Furthermore, grain! Ample grain is paramount for stabilizing these men. Immediately transport vast quantities of food to stockpile in these villages. When the returning bandits arrive, host them and feed them until they are full. This prevents hunger from driving them to turn blades on the villagers."

Bai Yuan bowed long and low. "The Deity's benevolence."

Li Daoxuan added sternly, "Fan Shanyue has plagued Heyang County for over a year. Some bandits have long turned bloodthirsty predators, incapable of reverting to farming. Some will inevitably grasp for more even after receiving kindness – eating our grain, then seeking to plunder further... Any such wretch must be executed. Hang their heads for public display."

Bai Yuan, rushing with pride once more, affirmed, "I understand everything now."

He leaped onto a horse and, accompanied by several servants, sped swiftly towards the county seat. Simultaneously, Thirty-Two began organizing the grain convoy to transport provisions to all the villages along the border. This was no easy feat.

Most of these villages lay in remote areas, inaccessible by cement roads. Grain would have to be hauled over mountains and through ravines by manual pushcarts...

It required mobilizing a significant labor force.

Li Daoxuan had a sudden inspiration. "Thirty-Two, head to the prison. Organize the labor offenders into groups of one hundred. Have each group transport grain to a designated village. Once they deliver it, issue each man a weapon to guard that grain."

Hearing this, Thirty-Two instantly grasped the Deity's intent and chuckled. "That truly is an excellent stratagem. Those returning bandits... if they behave, fine. But dare they covet our grain... heh heh heh... they'd be truly bringing disaster upon themselves."

However, Thirty-Two voiced a lingering concern. "But... what if these offenders abscond with the grain carts during transport?"

Li Daoxuan stated calmly, "I will be watching."

Chapter 313: The Deity Fortress

The Great Ming in the Box

A winding rugged mountain road stretched from Gaojia Village southward, all the way to Shijia Gou.

Shijia Gou was a remote small village on the border between Heyang County and Chengcheng County, with only about a hundred people in total.

This pitiful village had also suffered the brutal ravages of the drought, forcing the villagers to live in great hardship. Only when Li Daoxuan's vision reached them did they finally receive grain, obtain rain, and escape their misery.

Now, the over hundred people in the village were working desperately on road construction during their free time from farming, aiming to build a cement road connecting Shijia Gou directly to Gaojia Village. That way, they could link up with the "public sun chariot," and in the future, go to Gaojia Village to "work."

However... with just their hundred or so people, no one knew how long it would take to build such a road.

On that day, as the villagers were fiercely digging the dirt road, a team of wheelbarrows rattled along the mountain path, the carts all stacked high with grain. Guarding this transport team was a group of burly and ruthless men.

The villagers were startled by the men's ferocious aura, but seeing the overflowing grain carts, they deduced this must have come from Gaojia Village.

The Village Chief of Shijia Gou gathered his courage and approached: "Who might you be?"

The leader of that fierce group was Old Nan Feng, a fierce commander from the rebel band in Guyuan.

He had brought one hundred labor offenders to transport grain to Shijia Gou, then station there, protect the grain. If “returning bandits” passed by, they would feed them full. If anyone tried mischief, they would chop off the head and hang it as a warning.

He explained his purpose to the Village Chief of Shijia Gou, then ignored the old man. He led his men into the village, scouted around, and set up camp beside the mountain wall. Out of habit, he also ordered the labor offenders to unload the grain from the wheelbarrows, push the empty wheelbarrows out, connect engine to tail end, circle them around their “camp,” forming a simple “vehicle wall.”

In the camp center, a large pile of grain was covered with oilcloth. One hundred border army tents were pitched around the grain heap, making it all look orderly.

A subordinate sidled up to him and whispered: “Brother Nan Feng, now is our perfect chance to escape. That Dao Xuan Deity might not be watching us. If we steal this grain and flee, we’d be free as the sky is high and the sea vast.”

Old Nan Feng certainly wanted to escape, but barely had the thought formed when he recalled his last flight attempt. The Dao Xuan Deity had herded him into a “wooden castle,” where he faced all sorts of traps, barely surviving a narrow escape.

He slapped a subordinate with a resounding crack: “What the hell are you thinking? Is our opponent human? He’s a god! A god! A god!” He repeated it three times: “A god capturing you, can you really escape?”

The subordinate, hit, clutched his head, groaning in pain.

Old Nan Feng said: “The Deity said: Our crime is called ‘war crime.’ Normally, it means ten years of labor reformation, but with good behavior, we can have reduced sentences. Didn’t Head Guard Zhong tell you all the story? He used to be a Gaojia Village labor offender, like us now. Later, he behaved well, got his sentence reduced, became a resident, and is living quite comfortably.”

Here, Old Nan Feng sighed: "To be blunt, being a labor offender in Gaojia Village is much better than being in the border army at Guyuan before. Here, though we lose freedom, we eat our fill every meal, and sometimes even get sugar and meat..."

A subordinate felt a flicker of emotion upon hearing this: "That's true! We have no freedom here, but back in the border army, we also had no freedom—strictly managed by those above us."

Old Nan Feng: "Exactly, being managed like hell is the same everywhere. What difference does it make? Eating enough is already good. No more talk of escape—I'd rather die than ever set foot in that cursed castle again."

Just as he finished, another subordinate rushed to report: "Brother Nan Feng, ten soldiers escaped, from Captain Wolf's former personal guards."

Old Nan Feng: "Oh? Right? Then let's enjoy the show..."

He sprang to his feet at once, scanning the sky all around. Quickly, he spotted a giant wooden castle slowly descending in the air not far to the east.

"Look!"

Old Nan Feng pointed at the wooden castle and declared: "That thing is down; the ten escapees will enter it soon. Summon every non-escapee; we're heading over for some fun."

The remaining ninety men ran eastward behind Old Nan Feng. Soon, they ascended a small mountain, where they could see the wooden castle already positioned in the valley ahead.

Last time, Old Nan Feng was inside the castle and missed the full view. This time, looking down from the outside mountaintop, he clearly saw the entire structure.

What an immense castle! Inside, it had complex passageways, terrifying traps, and giant monsters crawling about, their eyes glowing red.

Inexperienced soldiers gasped: “What is this exactly?”

Old Nan Feng huffed: “This is called the ‘Deity Fortress.’ Only those who’ve gone in know its horror. You’re lucky to spectate from outside. Watch closely what horrors befall these escapees.”

At that moment, Captain Wolf’s ten personal guards were sprinting wildly down the hillside. Suddenly, a golden hand descended from the sky and began herding them from behind.

Old Nan Feng laughed loudly: “That’s the move—just how the Deity chased me into this ‘fortress’ last time!”

Those ten also had to run toward the big fortress when pressured by the giant hand. In no time, all ten entered the castle. Then, like Old Nan Feng’s past venture, they started the cute “Hamster Adventure.”

“Ahhhhh!”

One person fell into an underground tunnel and was scared into unconsciousness by an electric cockroach.

“Ahhhhh!”

Another triggered a device, tumbled into a pool, and was swallowed whole by a plastic shark.

One fled a giant iron ball hopelessly, fell with a thud, and had the ball crush him. Oddly, he survived—it wasn’t a real giant iron ball, just a large balloon.

The ten were tormented severely by the traps; no one escaped successfully. Finally, all were captured by devices, Game Over!

Then the Deity's hand descended, stuffed the ten into a glass cup, and carried them back to Shijia Gou. Poured out before the watching ninety, they rolled softly from the glass cups, collapsing limp at Old Nan Feng's feet.

Old Nan Feng strode over, kicked one of them, and said: "Still want to escape?"

The ten weakly murmured: "Dare not anymore."

Chapter 314: Kill Them, Kill Them All

The Great Ming in the Box

Gaojia Village welcomed the first batch of "returning bandits" who entered Chengcheng County from Zhengjia Village.

The leader's nickname was "Bull Push," a native of Chengcheng County.

He was an old hand who had started rebellions in Year Seven of Tianqi. Back when Bai Shui Wang Er led the uprising, Bull Push rallied over forty villagers to rebel, starting their nomadic life as bandits all over. Later, "Bai Shui Wang Er was killed by Cheng Xu, and his head was hung at the Chengcheng County town gate as a warning," which greatly weakened the rebels' momentum.

Bull Push felt it was no longer safe in Chengcheng County, so he escaped to neighboring Heyang County. After some back and forth, he ended up following Fan Shanyue.

A few days prior, Fan Shanyue accepted the court's "amnesty," suddenly becoming the government's "Defender of Heyang." He disbanded his forces, telling most of his subordinates to "return to their villages," so Bull Push had no choice but to journey back to his hometown in Chengcheng County.

Crossing the slope ahead would bring them to Zhengjia Village in Chengcheng County.

Bull Push was consumed with thoughts: What to do from now on?

Although the rebellion charge had been pardoned by the authorities, going home to farm? Don't be foolish! The severe drought still raged; farming could yield nothing worthwhile.

One subordinate moved closer and whispered, "Leader, look, Zhengjia Village seems untouched by disaster. You can see green crops in the fields on the slope."

Bull Push looked ahead and indeed it was!

It was early autumn in Chongzhen Year Two, and the fields were full of crops almost ripe for harvest, growing robustly and hinting at an imminent bumper yield.

Bull Push exclaimed joyfully, "So it rained in our Chengcheng County?"

The subordinate murmured softly, "If we plundered a village like this, we could make a tidy haul, couldn't we?"

Hearing this, Bull Push hesitated.

As he was weighing whether to be good or bad,

an army suddenly appeared ahead—five hundred soldiers, not a large number, but imposing. All five hundred were armored and armed with firearms, spears, hand crossbows, and the like, each appearing ready for all-out combat.

At the front stood a masked general in Mountain-patterned Armor, who greeted them amiably, "Are you under Fan Shanyue of Heyang? Returning home after acceptance into the fold?"

Bull Push was startled by the troops' appearance and quickly confirmed, "Yes! Yes!"

Cheng Xu chuckled, "Since you've been pardoned, you're upstanding citizens now, so you get food."

He waved his hand, and a cooking team stepped forward from behind, placing pre-prepared large pots in front. Cooked food inside emitted a savory aroma.

Cheng Xu's tone immediately hardened, "But if you still plan to engage in illegal activities... then... heh heh... our weapons aren't ornamental."

Bull Push didn't dare cause trouble. The enemy force looked too intimidating, and any fleeting bad thoughts vanished. He urgently directed his dozens of men to eat meekly and stay orderly.

As they ate obediently, Cheng Xu approached and stood beside Bull Push, "Are you their leader?"

Bull Push nodded, "These villagers have been following me around for over a year."

Cheng Xu snickered, "Feeling lost? You return home, can't farm due to the drought, and might only rebel again?"

Bull Push felt awkward but didn't dare admit it, replying fast, "No, no, I'll quietly farm when I return."

Cheng Xu shot back, "You can't fool me. You know you can't farm."

Bull Push: "..."

Cheng Xu patted him hard twice on the shoulder, "Instead of dealing with Fan Shanyue, why not join me? I guarantee you'll eat your fill, stay warm, and get top-notch weapons and armor. Isn't that ten times better than messing with Fan Shanyue?"

This terrified Bull Push, “Eh? I thought you were a court general, but that sounds like... you’re also a bandit? Who... which group are you part of? Wang Zuogua of Yichuan? Bu Zhan Ni?”

Cheng Xu grinned and chuckled: “Gaojia Village Hao Jiu.”

That title didn’t sound right!

Bull Push felt a lot of pressure.

Then he looked closely at Cheng Xu’s excellent equipment and imposing military appearance, gritted his teeth, and said: “Fine, I’m joining you.”

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Meanwhile, in Shijia Gou,

Another group of returning bandits arrived there, but they numbered far more than Bull Push’s group, totaling over three hundred men. Their leader, with the nickname Bullfrog, was a fierce bandit under Fan Shanyue’s command.

Old Nan Feng, like Cheng Xu, brought out food to serve these three hundred men a full meal. Then he asked them if they wanted to join Gaojia Village, promising that they would have enough to eat and warm clothes in the future.

Bullfrog wore a strange smile: “Of course, no problem—we also want a good life.”

While he was dealing with Old Nan Feng, he turned his hand behind his back and gestured a “slit the throat” motion to a subordinate.

The subordinate understood, quietly retreated into the ranks of the returning bandits, and whispered to each captain: “Wait for the boss’s order later, then suddenly attack and kill all those guys who claim to be from Gaojia Village.”

“They just gave us food—do we really kill them?”

“Hey, instead of letting them give us grain as charity, we should kill them and grab the grain to split it ourselves. Doesn’t that make sense?”

The subordinates listened, and agreed it made sense.

“Anyway, we’ve been robbing everything along the way to kill our way home—that’s a real grand return, hahaha.”

These three hundred men, having just eaten their fill and regained strength, agreed on their plan and decided to premeditate a surprise assault.

They picked up their weapons and quietly surrounded Old Nan Feng’s group.

Everyone gathered their strength, waiting only for Boss Bullfrog’s command to strike all at once and wreak havoc.

Bullfrog put one hand on Old Nan Feng’s shoulder, looking like they were close brothers: “Brother Nan Feng, you’re part of Gaojia Village?”

Old Nan Feng said: “Yes, want to join us? Eat well, dress warm—life’s good.”

Bullfrog laughed heartily: “I see, we’ll go to Gaojia Village soon...”

Here, his tone suddenly changed, his voice turning vicious: “And plunder it to our heart’s content!”

As the words leapt out, his free hand swiftly drew his waist knife and slashed down toward Old Nan Feng’s face.

At the same time, three hundred subordinates also drew their weapons and charged at Old Nan Feng's group.

Bullfrog thought his premeditated strike was certain to succeed.

But he never expected that Old Nan Feng seemed fully prepared. With a reach, he grabbed Bullfrog's knife-wielding hand, twisted it gently, spun the knife around, and cut it back against Bullfrog's neck with a thud.

Blood from Bullfrog's neck artery sprayed out half a zhang far.

The three hundred subordinates were only halfway through their charge and stared in shock.

Old Nan Feng "hmped" and shouted loudly: "Kill them, kill them all!"

His one hundred fierce border army soldiers roared in unison and charged at those three hundred brigands.

Chapter 315: Preparing to Enter the Mountains

Throughout several days, Li Daoxuan continuously switched perspectives high above, surveying how the issue of the "returning bandits" was being handled across various regions.

The situation unfolding before his eyes was extremely grim.

Over half of the returning bandits had lost all desire to reintegrate into society.

On their journey home, they either plundered or slaughtered indiscriminately.

Whenever they encountered official troops led by Fang Wushang, they pretended to have meekly accepted recruitment and surrender, claiming they only wished to return home and start anew. Fang Wushang would then refrain from attacking them. Yet, the moment Fang Wushang's forces departed, these bandits would immediately resume their looting.

Had it not been for Li Daoxuan watching from the sky, many innocent lives in several villages would have already fallen prey to these miscreants.

Angry, he extended a giant's hand, crushing several groups of returning bandits.

Six hundred convict laborers from the Guyuan rebel band, the Gaojia Village Militia, the cavalry camp, and the large militia organized by Bai Yuan were stationed in villages along the route. They were fighting returning bandits nearly every single day. Only after several hundred heads were displayed at village entrances near the county border did the arriving returning bandits, seeing the gruesome trophies, finally dare not cause trouble. They obediently succumbed to Gaojia Village's offer of grain, deciding to start farming again.

Li Daoxuan dared not readily accept these men into Gaojia Village or populous areas like the county town. He feared they might revolt when his watchful gaze wasn't upon them, resulting in the deaths of his own people.

The only solution was to settle them in remote, nearly deserted villages, isolating them from contact with genuine, law-abiding common citizens. Only this way could he prevent them from harming his people.

Then, he would send supplies of ample grain to demonstrate that survival didn't necessitate robbery. Slowly, they might regain a normal human mindset.

Even possessing infinite grain, managing these returning bandits was this difficult for him. The Ming Dynasty court, lacking such resources, faced challenges beyond imagination.

Liang Shixian soon received reports: returning bandits around Hancheng on the Tongguan Road were rampaging wildly, committing atrocities, murdering numerous innocent common citizens. This stirred widespread resentment among Hancheng's populace towards the "appeasement policy."

These reckless actions inevitably provoked the wrath of the formidable official Hong Chengchou stationed in Hancheng.

Hong Chengchou adopted the exact same approach as Li Daoxuan – capturing troublesome returning bandits and executing them, displaying the severed heads at village and town entrances to intimidate those yet to arrive and dissuade them from causing disturbances.

Sadly, unlike Li Daoxuan, Hong Chengchou lacked an infinite grain supply and couldn't pacify them with food. Even with heads displayed everywhere, he couldn't truly control the situation. Initially cowed by the heads, the returning bandits refrained from violence. But after several days of hunger, they inevitably turned to plundering the common citizens.

There was no choice but to keep killing...

This chaos endured for several days. Only after all the He Yang bandits had "returned home" did it finally subside.

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The golden autumn of October brought a bountiful harvest to Chengcheng County.

Villages and towns reaped vast quantities of grain.

A series of miraculous interventions by the Dao Xuan Deity – "hauling the Dragon King to make it rain," "creating a lake," "digging reservoirs" – helped the people of Chengcheng overcome the severe drought. The entire Chengcheng County now pulsed with vibrant life force.

Simultaneously, the Gaojia Village Militia, expanded to a thousand men, began preparing to enter the mountains to suppress bandits. Their aim was to avenge the four of their own who had been assassinated.

Early in the morning, Gao Yiye arrived at the militia camp gate.

Her arrival signaled to everyone that the Deity intended to oversee this mission personally.

Although preparations had spanned months, that the Deity still vividly remembered the blood debt owed to those four fallen comrades after such a long time solidified his new moniker among the troops: the "Vengeful Deity." He effectively earned it himself.

“Yiye, have them report on the armaments.”

At the Deity’s command, the thousand soldiers of the Gaojia Village Militia formed orderly ranks on the large parade ground, ready to report.

Three hundred flintlock firearms.

One hundred grenadiers.

The remaining six hundred still wielded cold weapons.

Interestingly, without Li Daoxuan offering any design suggestions, the blacksmiths of Gaojia Village had independently developed “bayonets” for the flintlock firearms. It seemed human ingenuity operated universally; certain technological stages naturally sparked similar innovations.

After firearm soldiers complained once that their weapons became useless upon the enemy closing in, the blacksmiths racked their brains. They finally conceived the idea: simply attach a blade to the front of the firearm...

This blade couldn’t be too wide, or too thick, and mustn’t impede firing. The solution was a narrow, elongated spike. Thus, the “bayonet” came into existence.

Li Daoxuan scanned the militia ranks, using his “Focus” ability to meticulously examine their gear. He felt quite satisfied. A thousand men equipped thus, provided they avoided reckless blunders, should be sufficient to deal with Wang Zuogua and his ilk.

As for their commander, Cheng Xu? He was exceedingly unlikely to commit tactical blunders. Steady and reliable – Li Daoxuan had considerable faith in him.

“I must oversee Gaojia Village,” Li Daoxuan stated gravely. “Once you enter the Huanglong Mountains, I won’t be able to watch over you. You must fight this battle without my aid. This is a reality you must

face eventually. I cannot protect you forever. Ultimately, you must rely on your own strength to win difficult battles.”

Hearing this, the militia grew uneasy.

Accustomed to the Deity’s protective gaze overhead, the news that He wouldn’t accompany them this time left everyone feeling considerably less assured.

Morale even faltered slightly.

Cheng Xu was swiftly pondering the risks. With the Deity present, victory was assured. Without Him? Wang Zuogua commanded tens of thousands – his forces intermixed with border army soldiers, defected imperial garrison troops, former imperial couriers, and others. Their fighting prowess had improved notably.

Facing ten thousand such foes with a mere thousand men, despite having firearms, absolute victory wasn’t guaranteed. Falling into an ambush leading to close combat might negate the firearms’ advantage, risking defeat. The chance of failure, Cheng Xu calculated, was at least “two-tenths” (20%).

Just then, a beautiful grandmother flew serenely across the sky ahead, trailing dozens of long, colorful ribbons, ethereal as the celestial maiden Chang’e... Ah, it was his grandmother from her youth, about twenty years old.

Was this the meaning of “two-tenths” (20%)?

Cheng Xu suddenly felt the pressure weighing down on him.

Li Daoxuan involuntarily shook his head, seeing their lackluster state.

But they had to undertake this risk. This militia needed combat experience. Sooner or later, they must be tested. He would have to let them fight independently someday. Facing that necessity against Wang Zuogua was surely preferable to confronting it against the Manchus.

“Understand this paramount point,” Li Daoxuan spoke gravely to his people. “Your lives are the absolute priority. Do not sacrifice yourselves casually merely to suppress some bandits. The timing of the suppression matters little. But your lives, once lost, are gone forever.”

Chapter 316: No Need to Fear Them at All

The militia replied in unison: “At your command!”

Cheng Xu, upon hearing it wasn't a life-or-death order, breathed a sigh of relief: Whew! Great! That meant I could retreat if in danger; I didn't have to fight Wang Zuogua to the death, huh? The safety was much improved then...

Grandmother instantly became ten years younger, turning into a ten-year-old little girl (loli). She wasn't playing with ribbons anymore; instead, she landed on the ground, giggling and running wildly all around, even darting to the field edge to catch loaches.

The young Grandmother looked so adorable!

“Alright, let's march forth,” Gao Yiye said loudly. “The Deity's decree is finished; what I say next is from myself: May you win a swift victory.”

Cheng Xu was rushing with pride: “Move out!”

The thousand militia began to set off. First, they arrived at the railway station and boarded the train to Bai Family Fortress. Then, from Bai Family Fortress, they entered Huanglong Mountain.

Once they entered the mountains, it wasn't a matter of coming back in just a few days.

The mountains were high, the forests dense, and the valleys crisscrossed. It was hard even to find Wang Zuogua there; subduing him was even tougher, and no one knew when they might return.

Xing Honglang stood on a remote hillside, watching the large army enter the mountains. At the head of the Grenade Troops stood that big iron-can man, precisely Gao Chuwu. She silently watched Gao Chuwu's figure grow farther away.

Suddenly, a strong female voice rang out beside her: “Boss Xing, if you’re so worried, join them too. Mountain forest fights are your specialty, after all.”

Xing Honglang turned and saw Zao Ying. She quickly hid her little-girl expression and snorted: “What am I worried about? Nothing to worry about! I’m not concerned about anyone.”

Zao Ying laughed: “Gao Chuwu, that foolish guy, is really dumb. If he’s not looked after, I’d worry he might run off randomly.”

Xing Honglang’s expression turned briefly flustered, but she forced control again: “He’s not Ground Rabbit. Although he’s dumb, he obeys orders well; he won’t wander off.”

Zao Ying chuckled loudly: “You’re anxious, you’re anxious! Just go along with them.”

Xing Honglang shook her head: “I can’t go. For bandit suppression, having one more person doesn’t help much; losing me doesn’t matter much. I’ve more important tasks. Some county-town women produced a batch of embroidery. I need to transport it to Xi’an and sell it to wealthy nobles. The Deity said this was a crucial major event, tied to women’s production liberation or something... I don’t quite get it...”

Zao Ying: “No matter how big a deal it is, it can’t be as big as your own man, right?”

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes: “That fellow isn’t my man! Not!”

Zao Ying laughed heartily: “Fun! Teasing Boss Xing is such fun.”

Xing Honglang, unable to bear the bullying, quickly shifted topics: “Aren’t leading the cavalry camp? How do you have time to chat awkwardly with me here? Aren’t you joining this battle?”

“Of course not!” Zao Ying chuckled. “I’m cavalry; fighting in mountains isn’t my strong suit. Forget that—let’s talk about Gao Chuwu.”

Xing Honglang was overwhelmed and bolted.

Zao Ying chased after her: “Boss Xing, don’t run! Did Gao Chuwu make you any promise before marching out? Like he’d return after battle to marry you?”

Xing Honglang flushed crimson, frantic: “No, never! How could he ever make such a promise? People die from that! Don’t follow me—I refuse to talk to you.”

Zao Ying: “Oh, chat with me please...”

Xing Honglang: “No chatting, no chatting! I’m a true forest hero; I never chatter about romance.”

Zao Ying: “I’m a forest hero too, specializing in romance chatter.”

The two women looked like she-apes but spoke softly. One fled, one chased, and soon they dashed far off.

...

Huanglong Mountain, northeastern ridge.

In a hidden valley hid a bandit army totaling 12,000 troops.

Wang Zuogua of Yichuan’s force.

Though the total number was 12,000, over 6,000 were actually elderly, weak, sick, or disabled. Just over 5,000 were real fighters.

Those 6,000-plus elderly and infirm spent their days digging grass roots, stripping tree bark, picking wild fruits, catching rabbits, pangolins, mice...

But the 5,000-plus fighters often went north of Huanglong Mountain to Yichuan County to burn, kill, and loot. Like in Water Margin where Liangshan sometimes hit Zhu Family, sometimes Hu Family, sometimes Li Family, they attacked village after village, seizing grain.

Yichuan County found this excruciating and launched several suppression campaigns. Wang Zuogua fought the officials in battles at Yaozhou City, Yizhou, Sanshui, Hancheng, and elsewhere. Each time, they ran into Hong Chengchou, and each time Hong crushed them brutally. But each time, he escaped just before collapse. He kept losing but never died.

Hong Chengchou also found him a big headache.

At that moment, Wang Zuogua sat in his tent. His left arm hugged a young woman snatched from a country gentleman's family, while his right hand gestured grandly. He chatted with Miao Mei, Feishan Hu, Big Honglang, and others about where to raid next.

Suddenly, a bandit troop dashed in: "Boss, Bai Family Fortress in Chengcheng County suddenly sent a thousand-man army into Huanglong Mountain. Looks likely aimed at us."

Actually, since Wang Zuogua's failed assassination attempt on Bai Yuan, he'd watched Bai Family Fortress, seeking another shot at Bai Yuan.

So when the militia entered from Bai Family Fortress, he got word instantly.

Wang Zuogua scoffed coldly: "Seems Bai Family Fortress wants revenge for the fort-master assassination attempt? Ha! They stole our military horses; me sending killers back was fair. What's to complain about?"

The Second Leader Miao Mei beside him sneered coldly: "That Bai's too arrogant, right? Huanglong Mountain is our turf; officials hesitate to enter. Some militia dares bother us? Only a thousand men—we shouldn't fear!"

Feishan Hu frowned slightly with worry: "Their firearms look powerful. Last fight for the military horses, when those strange bombs blew up, our troops fell in waves."

Big Honglang said: “Powerful firearms like that use a lot of gunpowder. Even the imperial officials can’t mass-equip them. How could one Bai Family Fortress have many? Last time we were just startled—this time, why fear?”

Wang Zuogua nodded: “Right! Such deadly weapons can’t be plentiful. They probably have just a dozen firearms, a few odd bombs. Here on our land, we needn’t fear them. Pick a good spot, set up an ambush, wipe out Bai Family Fortress’s forces, then hit back and plunder everything.”

The crowd: “Good!”

Just then, a stranger’s voice sounded nearby: “Everyone... I have a word to say.”

They turned to see a newcomer from Mizhi County, nicknamed “Chuang Jiang.”

Chapter 317: Unable to Hit a Flying Bird

The “Dashing General” from Mizhi, was of course Li Zicheng.

He and his nephew Li Guo had joined Wang Zuogua. Because he was literate, possessed formidable martial skills, and had seen the world, he was quickly promoted to “management” upon joining Wang Zuogua’s army, gaining the right to enter the hall for deliberations.

However, as it was just him and Li Guo, without any subordinates, they could not form their own unit, making him ineligible to become a Captain.

As Li Zicheng spoke up, Wang Zuogua, Miao Mei, Feishan Hu, and Big Honglang all turned to look at him: “Oh? It’s the Dashing General! What do you have to say?”

Li Zicheng: “It has been some time since I came under Big Brother Wang’s command. I often hear soldiers talking about the Bai Family Fortress. Several veterans mentioned that we’ve already lost when attacking it several times, haven’t we? One time, we were defeated by strange catapults, giant crossbow vehicles, and large, bizarre stones that could fly extremely far and crush us. Another time, we were defeated by strange bombs and a dozen firearms...”

Wang Zuogua looked somewhat embarrassed: “Such old matters, better not bring them up.”

Li Zicheng thought to himself: Just mentioning lost battles makes you embarrassed? Seems your tolerance is rather limited. A true hero should learn lessons from failure, not be ashamed to mention it.

Li Zicheng: "I bring it up only to remind the leaders that this Bai Family Fortress is strange and treacherous; it's likely no ordinary Local Gentry. There's assuredly some strange force behind it, providing him with all manner of bizarre weapons."

Wang Zuogua: "What strange force could it be? The officials?"

Li Zicheng shook his head: "Clearly not the officials! The officials would never provide armor and firearms for a civilian militia. Behind this Bai Family Fortress might well be a force even more lawless than us. Without figuring that out before hastily engaging in battle, we court only danger..."

"Nonsense! Damn rubbish you're spewing." Big Honglang said: "We allowed you a voice in our army because you've seen some of the world. But the moment you arrive, you start spouting nonsense to undermine our morale?"

Li Zicheng: "No, that's not what I meant at all. I simply feel that in matters of war, greater caution is always better."

Big Honglang: "So what? Should I also go investigate Bai Yuan's eighteen generations of ancestors to see which one is blessing him from beyond?"

Li Zicheng: "..."

Wang Zuogua waved his hand, silencing Big Honglang: "Fourth Brother, stop arguing! Dashing General, you needn't worry needlessly either. What force behind the Bai Family Fortress could be more lawless than us? That's pure absurdity. In all this world, is there any forest hero more reckless and daring than yours truly?"

Li Zicheng: "..."

Wang Zuogua: "We just need to send out more scouts, carry out reconnaissance properly, then lure them into our ambush zone. One strike will decide the victory."

Li Zicheng clasped his fists together and said no more.

He excused himself to relieve himself, slipped out of the main camp, seized his nephew Li Guo by the arm, and dragged him into the woods behind.

Li Guo asked, puzzled: "Uncle, what's wrong?"

Li Zicheng: "Pack our things, we're leaving."

Li Guo: "???"

Li Zicheng said: "This Wang Zuogua is worthless. He's not worth us pledging ourselves to. Moreover, his death is not far off. Staying here will only mean we get dragged down with him."

Li Guo: "Then where shall we go?"

Li Zicheng thought for a moment: "Just the two of us, uncle and nephew, we will ultimately struggle to achieve great things. Even after joining Wang Zuogua's band, he doesn't value us. After much thought, I've concluded we must have our own core group."

Li Guo: "Where can we get such a core group?"

Li Zicheng: "First, we return to Mizhi. We'll gather elders and villagers from our hometown and form a unit. Then, with a troop, we'll go join Bu Zhan Ni in Luochuan. That way, we won't just be two mouths offering advice; we'll at least become a Captain..."

Li Guo brightened up with understanding: "If we become Captains, our voice will be much stronger."

Li Zicheng chuckled: "Exactly! Having a troop of our own men gives us the capital to carve out our place in the world. With our capabilities, uncle and nephew, what concern is there that we may fail in our grand endeavor?"

"Right! Uncle, let's go back to Mizhi."

The two quietly slipped away from Wang Zuogua's army, plunged into mountain paths, traveling day and night, heading back towards their hometown in Mizhi County...

When the militia first entered the mountains, Li Daoxuan could still watch over them.

His field of vision had expanded several miles into the Huanglong Mountain range, but Huanglong Mountain covered too vast an area. The entire territory of Chengcheng County combined with Heyang County and Tongguan Road still couldn't match the size of Huanglong Mountain.

Li Daoxuan's current field of vision covered only a small southern portion of Huanglong Mountain.

He could only watch as the militia walked to the very edge of his sight. Cheng Xu looked up and bowed deeply to the low cloud that had followed them throughout their journey. Then the entire militia crossed beyond the limits of the box, disappearing from Li Daoxuan's view.

"Don't die!"

Li Daoxuan could only silently offer them his blessing.

After seeing them off, Li Daoxuan shifted his gaze back, quickly returning it above Bai Family Fortress.

Baijia Castle was bustling with activity.

By Horseshoe Lake, a group of fishermen were drawing in their nets.

It was already autumn. Farmers on land were harvesting their crops, while for the fishermen by the lake, it was prime time for gathering shrimp and crab. Every year at this time, shrimp and crab began to grow plump and succulent.

Horseshoe Lake was a body of water Li Daoxuan had forcibly created by pouring water. It originally had no fish or shrimp, yet mysteriously, they had appeared.

After a year, the fish were still sparse and not very fat, but the shrimp had grown significantly.

The fishermen used nets with large meshes, catching only big shrimp and letting the small ones go.

Li Daoxuan saw many fishermen's boats already laden with several large baskets full of live shrimp, splashing and rustling energetically inside.

"Quick, quick, quick! The next train is coming!" A fisherman, dipping his basket of shrimp into the water, handed it to his wife. "Take this basket, catch the next train to the Gaojia Business Circle. Sell them while they're still alive!"

The woman moved swiftly, hoisting the large basket of shrimp and running towards the train station. She had barely arrived when the train pulled in. Scrambling aboard using both hands and feet, she climbed onto the small train.

She wasn't the only woman doing this; several others were also carrying baskets of shrimp.

The small train then took them aboard and whistled its way towards Gaojia Village.

Given Gaojia Village's current purchasing power, their shrimp would be snapped up immediately upon arrival at the business circle. After all, it was protein...

Li Daoxuan's face broke into a gratified, almost matronly smile. What he loved seeing most was scenes like this, where his little people's lives were settling into a steady rhythm.

Just then, he heard a loud “BANG!”.

He quickly looked toward the sound. Bai Yuan stood in a grove beside Bai Family Fortress, holding a birding firearm modified into a Flintlock Firearm. Staring at a small bird startled into flight in the sky, his face was etched with disappointment.

“Sigh! No matter how much I practice, I still can’t hit a flying bird.”

Bai Yuan wore a deeply troubled expression. “The ‘archery’ in the Six Arts of Gentlemen... I should just cross it off my list.”

Chapter 318: Rifling Process

Seeing Bai Yuan looked crestfallen, Li Daoxuan was secretly laughing to himself: They’ve started pursuing accuracy.

That was inevitable!

Since firearms came into existence, many firearm inventors had continuously strived for improved accuracy. The shift from Three-Eyed Divine Firearms to Firearms itself was an attempt to achieve better accuracy. Artisans of that time used “longer barrels” to stabilize the bullet’s direction at the moment of discharge for greater precision.

However, no matter how much accuracy was pursued, smoothbore guns were fundamentally ludicrous. Because the inside of the barrel was smooth, the bullet would just fly wildly upon leaving the muzzle. No one could control that.

If bullets were to fly steadily forward, rifle barrels were absolutely necessary.

Rifle barrels weren’t some highly advanced technology. Back in 1498, the Germans had already invented rifled barrels. Now it was Chongzhen Year Two—1629—over a hundred years later. With Ming Dynasty craftsmanship, making rifled barrels had become possible. The challenge lay in the difficulty of manually carving them, a slow and laborious process that hindered mass production.

Since the technology allowed it, Li Daoxuan had no reason to hold back. He decided to give it to them outright.

He took out the rifling technology documents prepared long ago and tossed them straight down onto Bai Yuan below.

He provided relatively simple blueprints for “straight rifling,” much easier to produce than “spiral rifling.” Start simple, then advance.

Bai Yuan was holding a firearm, aiming at a bird flying across the sky. He aimed left, then right, unable to find a satisfying sight. He sighed and fired a shot randomly with a loud “BOOM!”

Just as the bullet left the barrel, the papers Li Daoxuan dropped drifted down.

The bullet struck the large sheet of paper, punching a small hole right through its center.

Bai Yuan jumped in fright: “Aiyo?! Terrible! I hit the heavenly scriptures bestowed by the Deity!”

The paper fluttered down and landed before him. He focused his gaze; it depicted and described techniques to improve firearm accuracy. But right on the most critical diagram section, the illustration of the “rifle barrel” itself—was a large hole. The cross-section of the rifling was completely missing.

“AAAAAHHH!”

Bai Yuan screamed in distress: “Ruined! Finished! The Deity bestowed a method to improve firearm accuracy, and I completely wrecked it! Heavens! AAAAHHHH! I actually destroyed the heavenly scriptures! AAAAAHHHH!”

Thump! He collapsed face-first to the ground.

His nearby servants rushed over and helped him up.

Bai Yuan, face filled with regret, lamented: "It's over. I don't know how to atone. Of the Six Arts for gentlemen, 'Rites' — I have shattered. Cross it out, cross it out!"

Li Daoxuan laughed heartily. He printed off another sheet and lowered it down once more.

Only then did Bai Yuan perk up, rushing with pride: "Wonderful! There actually was a second copy of the heavenly scriptures! Wrecking one doesn't matter after all!"

Dismissing his regret, he spread out the huge sheet. He climbed a nearby tree to look down upon it...

He stared at it for a long while. He didn't really understand!

As it turned out, Bai Yuan had only studied mathematics so far, not physics or chemistry. Without studying physics, many subtle principles were very difficult to grasp.

Still, misunderstanding it was no problem. He immediately ordered the "heavenly scriptures" rolled up. He led his group of servants, ran to the train station, waited for the next train, stuffed the large paper scroll into a carriage, and boarded as it clanked and clanked its way off towards the Gaojia Village School.

The Gaojia Village School had become utterly fantastical.

Next to the five-story school building leaned a massive microscope. Many students climbed to the fifth floor, ascended a pre-built scaffold onto the microscope, and peered down through its lenses. People on the second floor placed objects to be observed onto a tray elevated to that level...

Besides the microscope, the school grounds hosted many other enormous experimental instruments. Most leaned against the school building for students to access easily after climbing several floors.

These giant experimental apparatuses significantly accelerated the students' learning of physics, hastening their comprehension of "science."

Bai Yuan, however, had zero interest in these things.

Anything outside the Six Arts of Gentlemen held no appeal for him.

He dashed into the school building, heading straight for the library.

Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai were still inside, reading and relaxing.

Bai Yuan beckoned to his servant behind him: "Quickly, bring here the heavenly scriptures!"

The enormous paper unfurled before Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai.

Young Master Bai understood immediately: "So that's it! That's precisely it!"

In matters of physics, Bai Yuan long recognized he couldn't match his son. But since this wasn't "mathematics" and fell outside the Six Arts, he cared not one whit. He grinned and asked: "Young Master, what is the meaning of these heavenly scriptures?"

Young Master Bai pointed to the rifling diagram: "This is to stabilize the bullet! Lead bullets are relatively soft. On firing, they deform slightly. The deformed part then embeds itself into the rifling grooves. This prevents the bullet from continuously sliding and banging against the barrel walls, meaning it won't fly wildly upon exit. Just as train wheels only move along the tracks... the bullet will slide along the rifling grooves... I believe it must work like this."

Beside him, Song Yingxing nodded: "Indeed. That is plainly how it functions. Young Brother Bai, your grasp of physics is truly excellent."

Bai Yuan, overjoyed: "Meaning that by incorporating this... rifle barrel thing inside the gun's barrel... the fired bullet will fly straight forward? We can hit whatever we aim at?"

Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai nodded in unison: "Exactly!"

Bai Yuan: “Hahaha! So how exactly do we make it happen?”

Song Yingxing indicated the large paper: “Doesn’t the heavenly scripture specify? First, heat the gun barrel red-hot. Then, using a special boring broach, pull it forcefully through the glowing barrel’s interior... and the rifling forms! The key, most challenging step here is ensuring the pull is utterly even and stable during the broaching. The rifling must not warp. Otherwise, the bullet won’t fly straight.”

Young Master Bai gave a knowing chuckle: “Therefore, it’s best not to pull by hand. Pure manual broaching is very prone to warping. Even if it looks straight to the naked eye, it’s likely crooked. We’ve observed this phenomenon repeatedly under the microscope.”

Song Yingxing: “Hence, we should first build a wooden machine. Similar to a spinning machine. Install perfectly straight guides upon it. Affix the broaching tool upon these guides. Using such a device to secure the broach’s stability will produce perfectly straight rifling.”

The two put their heads together. Within minutes, they devised a thoroughly workable plan.

Bai Yuan stood to the side listening, feeling foolish. Much of it went over his head.

One thing did register clearly, though: making the rifling was achievable swiftly.

Thrilled, Bai Yuan clapped his son on the shoulder: “Hahahaha! Not bad at all, my boy! You’re actually useful to me now! Hahaha! When I grow old, I can pass Bai Family Fortress into your hands without worry, right? Hahahaha!”

Chapter 319: Something Will Break Once Action Is Taken

Cheng Xu led the army and had already advanced deep into Huanglong Mountain.

Honestly, commanding a thousand troops to fight deep in the mountains was also a first for Cheng Xu. He was not a seasoned Great General at all, but had formerly been a mere ninth-rank inspector, so his combat experience was not that extensive.

However, he was cautious by nature and always acted carefully, fearing to make mistakes that might cost him his life—a trait that suited mountain forest warfare well.

Ahead loomed a valley.

Cheng Xu scanned the valley walls on both sides and spotted a pair of grandmothers, one on the left cliff face and one on the right, singing to him: “Good great-grandson, come into the valley, come into the valley. The enemy is on slopes either side of the gorge, ready to hurl boulders down at once. Then you can come see your grandmother.”

The muscles on Cheng Xu’s face twitched rapidly, and he waved his hand, saying: “Shi Jian, take a scout team and go scout the left mountain peak. Ground Rabbit, take a scout team and go scout the right mountain peak. The rest, set camp here and resume marching tomorrow.”

Shi Jian saluted and hurried off.

Ground Rabbit muttered discontentedly: “This invincible Mr. Rabbit gets sent off as a scout—what a waste of talent.”

Cheng Xu snapped irritably: “Scouting is a job only for elite troops.”

Ground Rabbit beamed happily: “Instructor He, you finally admit I’m elite? Hahaha! Hand over this glorious, tough, elite-only mission to me! I won’t let anyone down—let me be the one to save all humanity.”

He took two scouts and dashed toward the right mountain peak.

The ten commanders of the hundred-man teams behind Cheng Xu were all sweating nervously and awkwardly asked: “Instructor He, is it really safe to entrust such a critical scouting task to this guy?”

Cheng Xu said: “Don’t worry. He’s full of flaws, but when it comes to real work, he’s not unreliable... um... maybe... perhaps...”

Everyone sweated: So you’re uncertain too?

Meanwhile...

On the right mountain peak, a troop had just hidden themselves well.

The leader was none other than Big Honglang.

Wang Zuogua's army had been stationed in Huanglong Mountain for a long time, so they knew the terrain like the back of their hand. Compared to Cheng Xu, who was new here, they were far more familiar—they could identify every hill, every ditch, and every forest patch with their eyes closed.

Big Honglang believed that ambushing from this peak would likely trap the Bai Family Fortress army passing through the valley; by shoving rubble down from the mountaintop, the Bai Family Fortress soldiers would meet a dreadful end.

Just as they had hidden, one of her scouts reported: "Fourth Boss, the Bai Family Fortress army halted two li south of here—they didn't enter the gorge and seem to be waiting for something."

Big Honglang frowned and immediately understood: "They've sent out scouts, aiming to scout the area before entering. If their spies see us, our ambush will fail... Our scouts? Move out at once and ambush their scouts midway."

From Big Honglang's troop, she detached a small squad of elite soldiers; they crouched, slipped into the woods, and crept in Cheng Xu's camping direction.

The mountains were steep and the forest dense, but Huanglong Mountain wasn't short of water—the woods here grew lush and verdant, with thick foliage that blotted out the sky and sun.

Ground Rabbit and his nine comrades, grouped in pairs into five squads, scattered across a broad area, cautiously probing forward.

The man paired with Ground Rabbit was Zheng Gouzi.

They could be considered old friends.

Zheng Gouzi whispered quietly: "Mr. Rabbit, do you have any experience as a scout?"

Ground Rabbit said: "Hey! That's definitely... no."

Zheng Gouzi had thought he was going to say yes, and instantly looked awkward.

Ground Rabbit said: "But I specially studied military texts, hmph. Listen to me: Since ancient times, before two armies clash, the scouts fight first! Both sides strive to suppress the enemy's scouting range, hunting down or even capturing enemy scouts to gain intel. To tell which army is stronger, just see whose scouts are better."

Zheng Gouzi glanced at Ground Rabbit in worry: "Then our side is clearly the weaker one."

Ground Rabbit: "What do you mean?"

Zheng Gouzi: "Ah, I didn't mean anything."

The two of them had just reached this point when Ground Rabbit suddenly threw himself down and also pulled Zheng Gouzi along.

Zheng Gouzi: "?"

Ground Rabbit lowered his voice to just barely audible and said, "Someone's coming up ahead."

Zheng Gouzi: "Why didn't I hear anything?"

Ground Rabbit said proudly, "You're a human with small ears. I am Mr. Rabbit with long ears. Sounds I can hear, you can't."

Zheng Gouzi: "..."

Originally, Ground Rabbit had intended to follow in Wang Er's footsteps to rebel and start an uprising. But he didn't catch up with Wang Er. Instead, after beating up an official, he ended up drifting the world. Surviving by stealing food from landlords, he barely lived for half a year. During that time, he did all kinds of sneaky deeds, often slipping into the backyards of rich households late at night to steal food while avoiding patrols by guards. This guy really understood such matters better than ordinary people.

He pricked up his ears and listened: "Someone's coming from the left front."

Zheng Gouzi didn't dare make a sound and only asked with his eyes: "What do we do?"

Ground Rabbit made a "listen to me" gesture and crouched down low.

Before long, indeed two people slowly crept over from the left front.

Scouts from Big Honglang's side had arrived.

They were also in a pair of two.

Cautiously and lightly, they moved toward the direction of Cheng Xu's army.

The two of them stretched their ears long and carefully listened to every rustle around them, not daring to slack off at all. Unfortunately, they didn't know that a rabbit with long ears and unusually powerful hearing had heard them earlier and was already lying in ambush.

The two of them circumvented a large tree, crossed a ditch, and were about to step over a clump of grass. Suddenly, a figure leaped out from the grass, swinging a gleaming silver sword straight toward one's crotch. With a "thud", it hit true and severed.

Cut off!

The man screamed and fell backward.

Hitting the ground before he could let out a second cry, Ground Rabbit raised his longsword and with a “thud” chopped into the man’s neck. This time, no cry came out; he was finished instantly.

The other person turned back in shock. Before he could react, Zheng Gouzi jumped up and used a locking technique from the Ghost God Fist Technique. He grabbed and pinned the man’s arms, rendering him immobile.

Only then did Ground Rabbit say triumphantly: “How about that? The Celestial Rabbit Sword—if it doesn’t strike, fine, but once it does, something has to be cut off.”

Zheng Gouzi: “Was the place you cut off a little too cruel?”

Ground Rabbit: “I, your grandpa, am here for revenge! How could I not be fierce?”

Only then did Zheng Gouzi suddenly recall that in that assassination attempt, Ground Rabbit had also been a victim.

Chapter 320: Night Raid

The scout battle in the mountains and forests was incredibly dangerous.

Cheng Xu was a bit worried about the ten scouts he had sent out.

Among those ten scouts, only Shi Jian had learned from salt smugglers for a while and had some basic experience; he had also brought out two or three brothers. As for the others, they were all first-time scouts, and he truly feared they might get into trouble.

Especially Ground Rabbit—he hoped that guy wouldn’t mess around in such a crucial operation.

But just as he was worrying, he saw four scouts returning, escorting two prisoners with proud faces.

Cheng Xu said, “Huh? Seems like the rookies have gained the upper hand.”

The four scouts approached Cheng Xu and said, “Instructor He, we brought back two enemy scouts, hehe.”

Cheng Xu caught the key phrase “brought back”; usually, if they wanted to brag for credit, they’d say “We caught two enemies,” not “brought back” two of them.

Cheng Xu, who often padded report letters for merit in the past, understood the finer points perfectly.

He whispered, “Did Shi Jian catch them?”

“No!” The four shook their heads. “Ground Rabbit captured them. He’s still ahead and asked us to bring the captives back first.”

“What?” Cheng Xu was shocked. “It was Ground Rabbit?”

The four chuckled, “Ground Rabbit’s ears are sharp. That guy can hear enemy movements from far away in these woods.”

Cheng Xu went silent: Was that guy really a rabbit?

But never mind—now wasn’t the time to fuss over that. With two captives before them, they clearly had to interrogate them properly.

After some harsh treatment with whips and clubs, the two prisoners revealed the situation on the mountain. Big Honglang led Wang Zuogua’s four teams, about fifteen hundred men, lying in ambush on the hill to the right front. They were waiting for the Gaojia Village Militia to enter the valley so they could rain stones down.

Cheng Xu gave a strange laugh. "Get ready, the whole army. We'll night raid Big Honglang, that bastard."

Ancient people often had poor nutrition leading to night blindness, so few attempted night raids.

But the Gaojia Village Militia did not have night blindness!

Li Daoxuan insisted on a balanced diet for the militia, feeding them well and ensuring nutrition. Occasionally, he even crushed vitamin pills into powder and gave it to the cooking teams to mix into the rice for the militia.

Few of these soldiers now suffered from night blindness.

Plus, they had seized the initiative in the scout battle; it would be a waste of the situation not to night raid Big Honglang.

After it turned completely dark, Cheng Xu quietly led the army forward.

A bright moon hung high in the sky, but dense woods blocked the moonlight; the Gaojia Village Militia moved gently through the trees unnoticed by Big Honglang's sentinels atop the mountain.

Crawling ahead for a stretch, Cheng Xu met Shi Jian on the mountaintop midway.

Cheng Xu whispered and asked, "What's the situation ahead?"

Shi Jian said, "We killed many enemy scouts; they were scared stiff and retreated to camp, not daring to come out."

Cheng Xu chuckled under his breath, "So, that means the outer area is all ours now?"

Shi Jian nodded.

Cheng Xu asked, "Where's Ground Rabbit?"

Shi Jian pointed upwards and said, "He's still farther ahead. That guy's hearing is unmatched—in complex terrain like this, ears beat eyes, and enemy scouts couldn't approach him at all."

After saying that, he wore a peculiar expression. "Could he be a rabbit monster?"

Cheng Xu laughed and scolded, "If he really were a rabbit monster, wouldn't Deity have dealt with him long ago? How could any monster deceive Deity's all-seeing eyes?"

Shi Jian answered, "That's true."

Cheng Xu continued leading the soldiers up the slope. Before long, the "encampment" of Big Honglang's army came into view ahead.

It couldn't be called an encampment at all—it was merely "a chaotic gathering of bandits huddling together for the night."

Big Honglang clearly possessed no knowledge of marching, warfare, or setting up camp.

A typical unruly bandit force. Just over a thousand people were scattered haphazardly within a patch of forest, with a few teams patrolling the perimeter while others lay or sat in disarray among the trees.

Some who looked like "forest heroes" sat leaning against large trees, clutching swords to their chests, with bamboo hats upon their heads. Were a time-traveler to see this scene, they'd surely remark, "A lone shadow on cold rivers, past travelers on life's journey; meeting now, need we have been once acquainted?"

Cheng Xu found the bandit army's disorder laughable.

He raised his hand, signaling the militia behind him to crouch.

The thousand men settled silently, not a single sound escaping them.

In terms of training and discipline, the militia outmatched the bandits a hundredfold.

Cheng Xu summoned the captains of the ten hundred-man teams, gave them low-voiced instructions, then grinned and waved. "Prepare for action."

Meanwhile, Big Honglang sat beneath a large tree, her face dark with displeasure. Losing the scout battle meant the "Bai Family Fortress Militia" had discovered them. There would be no chance now to ambush them foolishly marching through the valley, crushed by falling rocks.

Big Honglang cursed irritably. "Our scouts are forest heroes who've walked the jianghu for years! How could they lose to the Bai Family Fortress's hired hands in the woods? Have you all wasted your years in the jianghu? We're blind to what's outside our camp now—can't even scout what the Bai Family Army is doing! How useless are you?"

The circle of small captains around her took the scolding meekly, humiliation burning their faces.

Usually, their poor performance in battle could be excused—they were just forest ruffians, not soldiers, so losing head-on engagements was understandable. But failing at the very underhanded tactics they excelled in? That was inexcusable.

One captain muttered quietly, "At daybreak tomorrow, we'll forget stealth. We'll storm the Bai Family Fortress Militia head on."

Big Honglang rolled her eyes. "Storm them? We're only fifteen hundred strong. They've nearly a thousand men. It's no sure victory. We must wait for Big Brother, Second Brother, and Third Brother to encircle them from other directions. Attack on all sides—that's the only way to guarantee success."

Hardly had she finished speaking when a whistling sound cut through the night woods. A dark object flew through the forest and landed among their group with a thump. It resembled a small club, complete with a smoldering fuse.

The captains nearby stared curiously. “What’s this?”

Big Honglang didn’t hesitate. She rolled instantly into the grass beside her.

BA-BOOM!

The hand grenade exploded!

Iron balls and shrapnel sprayed violently in all directions. The captains, minds still processing, took several hits and slumped limply to the ground.

Simultaneously, dozens of hand grenade explosions tore through the woods—boom-boom-BOOM!—blasts erupting everywhere at once.