

## Great Ming 341

### Chapter 341: The Four Sea Dragon Kings Have All Arrived

Ma Tianzheng's performance could be described as a full act.

Even Li Daoxuan hadn't expected him to have so many steps and was already growing impatient; now that he saw Ma Tianzheng kneeling properly, he felt it was about time to act.

With a clatter, he plugged the connectors of four medical nebulizers into the power strip, added water, and began...

By now, the scene around Yang Village's threshing ground was packed with crowds.

A large number of common people had formed layers upon layers, and those in the center, including Heyang County Magistrate Feng Jun, the county clerk, and the principal, had also grown impatient.

The county clerk couldn't help muttering aloud: "That divine being acts convincingly, but after this act, can he really bring rain? I don't believe it anyway."

Feng Jun whispered: "I don't believe it either, but with him putting on this show, it gives the people hope. We'll spread the word afterward that rain could fall at any moment—so the people keep hoping and won't rebel."

Just as the two finished speaking, they heard the common people clamoring: "Look, look!"

"Quick, look at the sky!"

"That cloud is splitting to both sides..."

"Wow, something's emerging from the clouds."

Hearing the comments, Feng Jun and the others hurriedly looked up.

About seventy zhang directly overhead, there was a strange low cloud; it was spreading apart to the sides, and a huge green dragon head poked out from within the clouds, opening its massive maw to release a misty rain fog.

Feng Jun gasped: "Siss! It really came? That's the... Dragon King!"

The county clerk yelled frantically: "Look, over there... the distant sky!"

Following where the county clerk pointed, everyone spotted another low cloud in the distant sky; as it parted, another dragon head emerged, this time red.

Then came another low cloud revealing a blue dragon head, and soon after, a yellow dragon head followed.

All four dragon heads simultaneously opened their huge mouths in the sky around Yang Village and spat out rain fog together.

Instantly, the overwhelming rain fog fell, covering a two-li area all around Yang Village completely in the rain.

Feng Jun stared wide-mouthed at the sky, momentarily speechless.

The county clerk said: "County Lord, you... have nosebleed..."

Feng Jun wiped at it; the blood dragged downward to the corner of his mouth, then curved upward as if he were grinning broadly.

"They really invited the Dragon King to bring rain!"

"And invited four of them."

“The Four Sea Dragon Kings have all come!”

The common people burst into loud cheers: “Thank you, Lord of Heaven!”

Ma Tianzheng roared in anger: “Wrong, not Lord of Heaven, but Dao Xuan Deity! You thanked the wrong deity—risk Him stopping the rain if you’re not careful.”

The latter part had such a strong impact that the people were terrified and quickly changed their tune: “Thank you, Dao Xuan Deity!”

“Deity bless us!”

“Dao Xuan Deity has such prestige to invite all Four Sea Dragon Kings.”

Ma Tianzheng thought: That wasn’t through prestige—they were grabbed by the neck. How powerful Dao Xuan Deity is, you fools will understand in time.

Now, the whole Yang Village had gone wild!

Earlier, large amounts of grain had been transported in, and now the Deity had sent rain.

The common people started pondering: They could first work jobs to earn wages, use the wages to fill their families’ stomachs, plant the grain when sowing season arrived, and care for their farmland while working.

By harvest season in six months, they’d return to their former lives.

Thinking this, the people couldn’t help dancing and leaping about wildly in the rain fog, yelling and shouting.

Zhang Yuanwai, the militia instructor from Xia Village, also stared stunned at the sky with his mouth agape; he'd contributed a chicken as a sacrificial offering, expecting nothing in return, but it actually rained.

That chicken was damn well worth it!

Just as visions of restoring his family's honor filled his mind, Bai Yuan, draped in flowing white clothing, stood before him.

Zhang Yuanwai asked: "Who are you?"

Bai Yuan smiled: "I am Bai Yuan, the militia instructor of Chengcheng County's large militia."

Zhang Yuanwai said: "Ah! It's you. Instructor Bai, I've long heard of your fame. They say that in Chengcheng County, you defeated Supreme Bright King, Bai Shui Wang Er, Wang Zuogua, Bu Zhan Ni... and the other day, you sniped Fan Shanyue with a firearm from over a hundred paces away. Without you, we in Heyang County couldn't have defeated that great traitor or invited the Deity to bring rain."

Bai Yuan felt flattered inwardly but kept a straight face externally; he took out a folding fan and snapped it open with "Gentleman" written largely on it; covering half his mouth with the fan, he said softly: "Zhang Yuanwai, have you heard? The large bandit leader Wang Jiayin might attack our area any moment."

A look of worry flashed across Zhang Yuanwai's face: "I've heard it mentioned. They say Wang Jiayin commands nearly fifty thousand bandits, creating huge waves—even conquering many northern cities, alas."

Bai Yuan pointed discreetly toward Heyang County Magistrate Feng Jun and the Heyang patrol officers, whispering: "Zhang Yuanwai, do you think those officials can stop Wang Jiayin?"

Zhang Yuanwai shook his head: "Relying on them, they might not even stop salt smugglers."

Bai Yuan nodded: "Great minds think alike! To resist bandits, we must rely on our own militias. I heard your militia is quite impressive, earning great merit in crushing Fan Shanyue's remnants."

Zhang Yuanwai said: "Oh, I just did a trifling thing, nothing grand—comparing to Instructor Bai felling Fan Shanyue at a great distance with one shot."

Bai Yuan said: "I won't spin flowery or useless words, Zhang Yuanwai. Our Chengcheng and Heyang militias must unite to fight the bandits. Otherwise, when large hordes of tens of thousands arrive, and our militias are just a few hundred guarding each village or town, we'll be defeated one by one."

That made perfect sense!

Zhang Yuanwai's militia had only four hundred men—such a small force achieved nothing against Fan Shanyue until he was killed, the bandit army's morale collapsed, and Zhang Yuanwai coordinated with other village militias to finally encircle and defeat Fan Shanyue.

Zhang Yuanwai had long felt powerless.

Hearing Bai Yuan's words now, their ideas coincided naturally.

Bai Yuan continued: "Officials suppress bandits but can't leave their jurisdictions—for example, Chengcheng's patrol officer can't chase bandits into Heyang County. Yet our militias face no such limits. We can cross counties freely, fight battles, and then return home. So, if Heyang County is in trouble, Chengcheng's militia can rush to aid. If Chengcheng has issues, Heyang's militia can assist too—our freedom far surpasses the officials'."

Zhang Yuanwai was overjoyed: "That's how it should be! Our two counties' militias can form a brotherly alliance, watching each other's backs for increased strength. If Instructor Bai doesn't mind, call me Brother Zhang, I'll call you Brother Bai, and from now on, I'll follow you."

Chapter 342: Wang Jiayin is Coming

Bai Yuan had long since discussed the militia matters with Feng Jun.

Feng Jun had also long since agreed that Gaojia Village would fund the militia of Heyang County.

Now that he had also secured Zhang Yuanwai's cooperation, the following steps became much simpler.

"Brother Zhang," Bai Yuan lowered his voice and said, "Once you return, start expanding the militia recruitment right away. As for the food and weapons needed for the militia, our Gaojia Village can provide you with all of that. First, let's build up the troop size, so it will be easier for us to join forces later to deal with those large groups of bandits."

Zhang Yuanwai nodded vigorously. "I'll listen to what Brother Bai says," he said, "I'll start working on this as soon as I return. And my brother, I know many militia instructors from villages and towns across Heyang County. I will bring them all to meet with Brother Bai. From now on, we will act together under Brother Bai's command."

Bai Yuan laughed inwardly, but outwardly remained unmoved. Cupping his hands, he said, "As long as we are united, I am confident that we can block that Wang Jiayin from Fugu County."

Zhang Yuanwai replied, "Then I rely entirely on Brother Bai."

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Wang Jiayin from Fugu County had just hit great misfortune!

As the leader of a peasant uprising army who came from a border army background, Wang Jiayin had a very smooth start in the beginning. He gathered a part of the border army as his core team, then won the support of a large crowd of famine victims, building up strong momentum. He successively recruited two major generals: King of Disruption (Gao Yingxiang) from Ansei, and Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong).

Next, Bai Shui Wang Er came north from the Yulin region and joined forces with Wang Jiayin.

Relying on Wang Er's reputation as the top rebel in this world, a large number of forest heroes came to join, boosting Wang Jiayin's military strength greatly. By the Third Year of Chongzhen, his total troop strength had surpassed fifty thousand.

With fifty thousand troops at his command, Wang Jiayin felt a bit cocky and didn't use an alias; he used his real name Wang Jiayin. That was how brazen he was.

He attacked Fugu County town in one move, opened the granaries to distribute grain, then pushed down the city walls, flattening Fugu County into a wasteland. Next, he breached Huangfuchuan Fort and toppled its fortress wall, turning it into level ground too.

Basically, everywhere he went, he flattened everything into level ground.

Destruction was easier than construction. Cities whose walls he destroyed were hard to rebuild; it would take time, effort, and countless porters, and they couldn't get it done within a few years. In those years, he could return anytime to raid again.

A town with no wall protection was just like open ground.

This trick was something he had learned from the Mongolians during his time as a border army soldier. It worked very well.

All this commotion had been very satisfying.

Winning battle after battle made him forget he was just a roving bandit.

He actually dispatched water forces with great fanfare, crossing the Yellow River to attack Hequ County in Shanxi, carrying out a "cross-river assault" that even regular armies dared not attempt lightly.

This reckless move definitely brought punishment upon him!

The Shanxi troop commander did not indulge him. He had Western cannons mounted on the county town walls and blasted Wang Jiayin's water forces until they cried for their parents and husbands, retreating back to Shaanxi.

Wang Jiayin refused to back down. He began moving south along the Yellow River, intending to enter Huanglong Mountain. Then, using Huanglong Mountain as a base, he could attack Yan'an Prefecture and surrounding counties at will.

His plan sounded good, but to enter Huanglong Mountain, he first had to pass through Yichuan County.

Just as he swaggered proudly at the head of his fifty thousand troops, "passing through Yichuan County," he came across a man: Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor.

If Wang Zuogua had been there, he would have told him to escape upon meeting Hong Chengchou.

Unfortunately, Wang Zuogua was already dead, so no one told Wang Jiayin about this.

Wang Jiayin completely dismissed this Hong Chengchou who had only brought a few hundred retainers and a thousand-strong militia. With a F2A maneuver, he charged with his fifty thousand troops straight at Hong Chengchou.

Then...

Wang Jiayin was now hiding in a small fishing village along the Yellow River, surrounded by a group of ash-faced subordinates, all looking utterly wretched.

His brother-in-law Zhang Liwei, who was married to his sister, had dust all over his face. He took a sip of water just scooped from the Yellow River and spat it out with a "pfft." "Damn it, that tastes awful," he cursed.

Wang Jiayin said, "Don't drink river water straight; it'll cause diarrhea. Boil it before drinking."

Zhang Liwei answered, "No mood for boiling water now. Screw that Hong Chengchou. What kind of monster is he? We charged at him with fifty thousand troops, yet he wasn't scared? Instead, he led two thousand men straight at us and actually beat us. Damn it."

Wang Jiayin's cousin Wang Guozhong spoke up. "Brother, that Hong Chengchou is just a civil official, yet he fought unreasonably fiercely. I'm afraid we can't get through this Yichuan County. There's no way we can enter Huanglong Mountain."

Wang Jiayin nodded. He was a bit puzzled too. Fifty thousand against two thousand! His side still had a core border army team. How did he lose? He really couldn't understand.

The more he didn't understand, the less he dared to provoke them again.

Failure was the mother of success only if one learned from it. But if he didn't even know how he lost, it showed the gap between them was too wide, with nothing to learn from the experience.

Another battle would definitely end in defeat again.

Just at that moment, a fleet of boats drifted into view on the river. Most were small fishing boats, with a few medium-sized merchant vessels mixed in. At the prow of the leading merchant ship stood a sturdy man, none other than Bai Shui Wang Er, whom they hadn't seen for a long time.

Wang Er at this time was worlds apart from the Wang Er who had just started rebelling. His face now bore weathered marks, and he sported a beard with wistful stubble. The only thing unchanged was his gaze, still resolute, still full of passion and boldness.

Wang Er jumped off the boat and ran toward Wang Jiayin. "Brother," he asked, "how is it that you've come back?"

Wang Jiayin looked crestfallen. "Couldn't get past Yichuan County," he answered. "That Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor, blocked us and pushed us back."

Wang Er exclaimed, "Huh? That Hong guy is that tough?"

Wang Jiayin replied, "Extremely tough! I'm afraid we can't get through Yichuan County. We can't enter Huanglong Mountain."

Wang Er said, "Then let's forget about entering. We can still go to Shanxi."

Secretly, he truly didn't want this group to march into Huanglong Mountain. South of Huanglong Mountain lay two places that held special meaning for Wang Er: Bai Shui County, his hometown, and Chengcheng County, where he had joined his relatives to start his rebellion.

He knew Wang Jiayin's subordinates were all a band of roving bandits; killing and plundering were like eating and drinking for them. Once they entered Huanglong Mountain, it would be hard to ensure they didn't devastate Bai Shui County and Chengcheng County.

Zhang Liwei spoke up. "How easy is entering Shanxi?" he said. "That Shanxi troop commander brought out Western cannons even. Back in Shaanxi, the Five Troop Divisions have all entered the capital to serve Wang. Shaanxi is still better to operate in. We should find a way into Huanglong Mountain."

Wang Guozhong chimed in. "I have an idea!"

Wang Jiayin asked, "Oh?"

Wang Guozhong explained, "Take the water route, head south along the Yellow River, land at Qiachuan Port in Heyang County. From there, we go west through Heyang County, pass Chengcheng County, and enter Huanglong Mountain."

Wang Er cursed inwardly: Screw this!

Wang Jiayin declared, "This plan is excellent. Let's do that."

Wang Er quickly spoke up. "Our boats aren't enough for fifty thousand men to move together," he warned. "Brother, how about stationing the main force here for a few days? Let me lead my unit ahead to scout the path first."

Chapter 343: I Shot Him Dead at the Bow of the Boat

Li Daoxuan's vision was rapidly expanding.

After causing a rainfall in Heyang County and transporting large quantities of grain there, which made the common folk feel secure, many light dots rose up, and the Rescue Index soared swiftly.

Just as he had discovered before, saving lives gave few rescue points, but improving people's livelihoods brought in large amounts of rescue points.

The common folk had obtained grain through labor, and after seeing the Four Sea Dragon Kings bring rain, it gave them hope for survival—so of course the Rescue Index had to shoot up.

Soon, Li Daoxuan's northern vision expanded deeper into Huanglong Mountain, while his western vision had already passed Chengcheng County and could see the "Yaotou Kiln" to the west, soon approaching Bai Shui County.

His eastern vision had already encompassed the entire Heyang County and continued expanding eastward toward the Yellow River.

Li Daoxuan pressed the "north, south, east, and west" button on the box all day long, wanting to see the Yellow River as soon as possible, but impatience was useless—just like math problems you cannot solve, the rescue points did not come.

Finally, in his vision, he found a small river called Xiadang River, which could merge into the Yellow River. However, due to years of severe drought, the Xiadang River was almost dried up, with only a little water left at the very bottom of the riverbed.

Li Daoxuan's ship model was too large and could not sail in that paltry amount of water.

Well, the idea of using a small river to reach the Yellow River was dashed; he could only obediently wait for his vision to expand more.

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The sky gradually darkened!

Feng Jun, Bai Yuan, and Zhang Yuanwai stood at Qiachuan Port, watching the turbulent waters of the Yellow River roll past.

Although a great drought plagued the land and smaller rivers had all dried up, the Yellow River remained over two miles wide, with its mighty waters surging eastward in an endless show of power.

Due to the strong current, most upstream sections of the Yellow River were unsuitable for ports, but at Qiachuan Port, there was a small backwater bay resembling a human stomach, where the waters were relatively calm; thus, it had become the famous Qiachuan Port.

In good years, many ships would arrive from downstream, bringing grain and all sorts of luxuries from the prosperous Jiangnan region, benefiting the people of Heyang County.

Feng Jun pointed at the desolate port: "Look, there aren't even two ships at the port now."

Bai Yuan nodded; only a few little fishing boats could be seen at the port, with no merchant vessels in sight at all, making it quite a lonely scene.

Feng Jun gestured at the surrounding terrain, then furrowed his eyebrows: "This bay has gentle currents, making it perfect for the bandit navy to land. If Wang Jiayin's navy arrives, it would be quite troublesome. Instructors, do you have any ingenious plans?"

Zhang Yuanwai shook his head: "This is beyond me, let Brother Bai speak."

Bai Yuan rushed with pride, as the Deity had already given instructions before he came, so he showed no panic. He pointed to an open area above the port: "We can summon plenty of porters to build a small fortress on this open land. Station a militia in the fort, equipped with cannons, firearms, bows and arrows, rolling logs, and throwing stones... place the entire port within the fortress's firing range, and the bandit army won't land so easily."

"Building a fortress on flat ground is easier said than done?" Feng Jun said. "It requires large amounts of stone, just quarrying rocks will take considerable time, and stacking them is skilled work."

Bai Yuan smiled: "Lord Feng is overthinking it. Our Gaojia Village possesses a marvel called cement. You saw it when you visited us last time, didn't you? Cement can be used for road construction or building houses. Our craftsmen in Gaojia Village already have ample experience in cement construction; just transfer a few to guide the porters of Heyang County to start work, and within days we can erect a cement fortress here."

Feng Jun was delighted, but immediately frowned again: "Even if the fortress issue is solved, cannons, firearms, and such are hard to manage. I'm not the Shanxi commander-in-chief and don't possess Western cannons."

Bai Yuan said: "Well... leave that problem for me to find a solution."

Feng Jun thought to himself: Just who are you? How can you handle this too? Oh, I understand—you must have some connection with the new Provincial Governor of Shaanxi, Liu Guangsheng, and can borrow Western cannons from Xi'an Prefecture.

Thinking this reassured Feng Jun somewhat; if Bai Yuan really could borrow cannons from Xi'an, how powerful must be his official connections? With a man like this helping Heyang County, the county would surely be stable.

Bai Yuan said: "In any case, before the fortress is built and the cannons and firearms arrive, we can only protect this port with manpower. Brother Zhang, since Heyang County is your area, we must temporarily rely on your men guarding this place."

Zhang Yuanwai clasped his fists: "Rest easy, Brother Bai. I'll gather my two to four hundred militia to temporarily station here."

Zhang Yuanwai hurried off.

Feng Jun also said: "I'll entrust this matter to you both. I must return to the county town to handle other affairs."

Bai Yuan responded: "Lord Feng, please proceed as you wish."

Feng Jun then departed.

Only Bai Yuan and a group of his personal attendants were left at Qiachuan Port.

He stood by the Yellow River with his hands behind his back, wearing a mysterious smile.

One attendant whispered: "Master, why are you laughing?"

Bai Yuan chuckled: "I was thinking, the Deity clearly intends to save all under heaven, and the Yellow River can lead to half the realm. In the future, Qiachuan Port is definitely our launching point for saving the world."

The attendant said: "Uh, master may be thinking a bit too far ahead."

Just then, an attendant on high lookout urgently shouted: "Master, trouble! A large fleet of ships has appeared on the northern waters!"

This startled Bai Yuan greatly: "Is Wang Jiayin here already? So fast? Damn, we haven't deployed anything yet."

He quickly climbed to high ground and scanned the northern river; indeed, a flotilla of little fishing boats interspersed with a few merchant vessels was sailing toward Qiachuan.

The attendant asked: "What to do now?"

"What else can we do?" Bai Yuan said. "With just our few, we can't stop the bandit landing. Withdraw quickly; go back and fetch our troops."

He had only thirty attendants with him; no match for the bandit force. He hurried west, putting some distance from the water's edge, then suddenly thought of something, heh-chuckling to a stop.

The attendant asked: "Master, why aren't you running?"

Bai Yuan said: "Though we can't fight head-on from a distance, there's still a chance to sneak a shot. I'll aim from the shore at the fleet in the water. Before the bandit chief lands, I'll shoot him dead at the bow of his boat; perhaps they'll get scared and not dare come ashore."

Chapter 344: The Ship Model Was Completed

Bai Yuan returned to the shore again, and a few hundred steps away from the shore, he found a small earth pit and lay down in it.

He pitied the white robe he was wearing; with this lying down, it turned completely yellow.

He took out the flintlock rifle, loaded the bullet, pressed the gunpowder, and only understood how after quite a while.

By the time he was ready, the fleet had already reached Qiachuan Port.

The few fishing boats that were originally on the dock had long since fled, and the bandit army's fleet docked.

Bai Yuan immediately scanned the ships with his eyes, looking for the flagship.

He found it right away: on a medium-sized merchant ship, a tattered large banner was stuck, with the character "Wang" on it, flapping sharply in the river winds.

"Heh, did Wang Jiayin come personally?" Bai Yuan grew excited; if he shot and killed Wang Jiayin here with one firearm blast, the bandit army would certainly fall into chaos, frightening them to tears.

He focused his eyes for a closer look...

His expression instantly turned strange.

The man standing on the ship looked so familiar, as if he had seen him somewhere before? But he definitely hadn't met Wang Jiayin, so it was strange.

At that moment, a servant beside him whispered, "Huh? Isn't that Bai Shui Wang Er? I saw him once during the great chaos in Chengcheng County."

Bai Yuan suddenly remembered, "Right, right, it's Bai Shui Wang Er. I saw him once in Gaojia Village, and I remember it very clearly."

After thinking about it, he put away the firearm in his hand.

The servant asked, "Huh? Master, why are you putting away the firearm? Aren't you going to kill Wang Er?"

Back when Bai Yuan had rushed to reinforce Gaojia Fortress to hold off Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao, he had come to help at Gaojia Village all alone, with none of his servants following. Afterward, Wang Er, to avoid implicating Gaojia Village, had lied that his attack on Gaojia Village had failed and he had been severely injured, so outsiders didn't know about Wang Er's grudge with Gaojia Village; even Bai Yuan's servants were unaware of Wang Er's affairs.

Bai Yuan sighed lightly, "Wang Er is a true brave man. I can't simply shoot him dead without knowing the reason; let's see the situation first."

He saw the bandit fleet dock at the port but didn't come ashore. Wang Er seemed to shout something at them, and the entire fleet obediently waited at shore.

Wang Er only brought a small team, less than ten people, and jumped off the ship.

First, he carefully looked around left and right, then started running rapidly towards the west.

Bai Yuan saw this and vaguely guessed something. He stopped lying in the earth pit, pushed himself up with both hands on the pit edge, and sprang up with a swish.

Wang Er was running rapidly while staying alert to his surroundings. He didn't expect someone to suddenly pop up not far ahead, startling him greatly. He swiftly drew the knife at his waist, but when he clearly saw the person before him, he paused slightly, "Huh? Mr. Bai from Bai Family Fortress?"

Bai Yuan smiled, took out a fan, flicked it open with a swish to reveal the words "gentleman," and said, "Indeed, it is I."

Wang Er paused for a moment before happily saying, "I was just thinking of returning to Gaojia Village, I didn't expect to meet Mr. Bai here—what an unexpected delight."

He hadn't forgotten that when Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao had betrayed him, stabbed him, and locked him in a cave, Bai Yuan led men walking several miles of mountain roads overnight to rescue him and heal his wounds. These past events were still fresh in his mind, causing deep emotion.

Bai Yuan asked, "Brother Wang, back then you chose to leave Gaojia Village and go out to carve your way in the world. Everyone respected your opinion and let you go. Now you're back with Wang Jiayin's men? Why?"

Wang Er replied, "I just wanted to come back to discuss this matter. Meeting you here is really great. Please, Mr. Bai, take me to Gaojia Village."

Bai Yuan said, "Good! Then come with me."

At evening, the doorbell was pressed repeatedly, making a continuous jingling sound.

It was mealtime. Li Daoxuan was holding a bowl of stir-fried instant noodles in his left hand, a pair of chopsticks clenched in his teeth, and opened the door with his right hand.

Unexpectedly, Cai Xinzi stood outside, smiling widely, "Hi! Daoxuan, the ship model you asked me to custom-make for you, the first one is finished. I brought it over specially to deliver it and also to see your new house."

Li Daoxuan laughed, "A shabby standalone villa isn't that impressive."

“Tsk, a three-hundred-square-meter standalone villa, and you say it’s not impressive?” Cai Xinzi looked around everywhere, clicking his tongue in undisguised amazement; he saw every corner of the first floor. But when he tried to go up to the second floor, Li Daoxuan grabbed him by the hand, “You can’t go to the second floor.”

Cai Xinzi’s face showed an “I understand” look, and he whispered softly, “Brought a woman back and don’t want me to see?”

Li Daoxuan rolled his eyes, “That’s right, fifteen naked women are having a topless gathering with me upstairs. If you go up and see parts of them you shouldn’t see, I’ll get jealous and have to gouge your eyes out.”

Cai Xinzi laughed loudly, “Can’t even tell a lie properly. If there really were fifteen women in the house, how could you be eating stir-fried instant noodles? If you opened the door holding a lobster, I’d believe you.”

Li Daoxuan silently stood there.

Cai Xinzi said, “All right, all right, the most important thing between brothers is respecting each other’s privacy; I won’t go to the second floor. Now that I’ve seen the great mansion, come take a look at the ship I made.”

He opened the box he had brought, took out a ship model about fifteen centimeters long from it.

At Li Daoxuan’s request, this ship was made of thick iron sheets, with a very sturdy overall structure—the quality was truly first-class good. Just for sun protection, a layer of composite material was laid over the deck and cabin.

The ship’s appearance imitated an ancient-style river cabin ship; the iron sheets were coated with “wood-grain paint,” making it look very similar to a wooden ship.

It had a cabin three stories high, very old-fashioned with an artistic beauty reminiscent of a Chinese-style lofted ship. The top of the cabin was opened with defensive positions as shooting holes; standing in the cabin, one could shoot arrows or firearms downward, looking very dashing.

The bow had a bow cannon, the stern had a stern cannon, and both sides of the ship had two rows of cannons. But they were all dummies because Cai Xinzi couldn't install real cannons—even if they were micro ones, making them real would be very risky.

Previous ideas of cannons shooting plastic pellets weren't successfully installed since the ship was only fifteen centimeters long, while a pellet-shooting cannon would be eight to nine centimeters, affecting the cabin deck appearance; it was canceled in the end.

Similarly, the idea of using lighters as cannons wasn't implemented either, since it could easily set itself on fire.

Li Daoxuan counted; one side had five cannons, plus the bow cannon and stern cannon, making twelve in total.

The number of cannons wasn't large!

After all, it was just a small ship model fifteen centimeters long.

If placed in the late Ming world, it would be about thirty meters long.

Li Daoxuan calculated silently in his mind: thirty meters is roughly the length of the early "Spanish sailing ship." Later, Spanish sailing ship manufacturing technology improved, and mature versions were commonly over fifty meters.

That meant his ship was not as large as the active Spanish sailing ship.

In the sea, it was a very small ship.

But in the Yellow River, it was already a behemoth.

River ships didn't need to be made any larger; this size was just fine. If there was any flaw to mention, it was that it wasn't painted in the multi-colored "Deity" style.

Chapter 345: Gao Yiyes Idea

The ship's bottom cabin housed the battery compartment, filled with batteries that powered the entire model ship.

Solar panels were installed atop the cabin roof, connected to the batteries below via wiring through a "constant current constant voltage charging circuit" concealed within the cabin walls, allowing the batteries to recharge.

Of course, solar charging was inefficient and slow.

During voyages, the battery drained, and only when stationary could the charge increase.

Even so, it remained remarkably practical.

Cai Xinzi pointed at the "rudder wheel" on the bow and laughed. "Try turning this."

Li Daoxuan gently nudged the "rudder wheel" with his finger, and the stern rudder rotated in response.

"See? Perfect steering control."

Cai Xinzi chuckled. "At this scale, adding such features is child's play! Haha."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but admire it internally. Measuring fifteen centimeters long, this ship's size allowed Cai Xinzi to incorporate intricate details—far surpassing what was possible with the earlier, tiny solar-powered cars.

"This ship is exceptionally well-made." Li Daoxuan patted Cai Xinzi's shoulder. "Hey, Old Cai—I'd like ten more of this caliber."

Cai Xinzi frowned. “For collecting, one is enough. Why would you need ten?”

Li Daoxuan grinned mischievously. “The garden pond in my villa—I plan to deploy these ships into a grand formation and stage a naval battle.”

Cai Xinzi rolled her eyes. “A grown man playing war games like a child? No wonder you’re still single. You’ve yet to mature. Follow my example: forsake childish pursuits, commit to romance. That is what matures a man.”

Li Daoxuan scoffed. “I prefer eternal youth. You? You’ve entered the tomb of matrimony—your time is over.”

As they bickered, a sudden realization struck Li Daoxuan: their squabbling mirrored the dynamic between Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu.

He opened his high school alumni group and typed: “Classmates—for over a decade, one question haunted me: what nicknames did you give me and Cai Xinzi back in high school?”

The class monitor instantly replied: “Big Fool and Second Fool.”

Li Daoxuan thudded face-first onto the floor. Orz.

After Cai Xinzi left, Li Daoxuan returned to the second-floor box—left hand balancing a plate of cold stir-fried instant noodles, right hand clutching the model ship.

Settling by the box, he pondered: The ship is ready, but its guns are dummies. Unacceptable. The Little People must forge real cannons soon to replace these replicas.

He needed an update on Gaojia Village’s “Red Flag Cannons” project.

Time to locate Gao Yiye!

The lookout tower? Absent!

The fabric shop? Not there either!

After circling the village, he finally spotted her inside the Gaojia Business Circle's brothel—joined by Qiu Ju and Dong Xue, leisurely exploring the premises.

Alarmed, he exclaimed: "Yiye! What are you doing in a brothel?!"

"Oh, Deity! You're here!" Gao Yiye looked up brightly. "We're evaluating this building. Surely it can serve a better purpose."

Li Daoxuan replied sternly: "This structure should've been demolished long ago."

Gao Yiye countered: "Qiu Ju and Dong Xue do advocate tearing it down. But I believe a building is just an inanimate shell—like a knife. Used to chop vegetables, it's useful; used to kill, it's evil. The knife itself isn't wrong; the wielder is."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Well now—a budding philosopher!"

Flushing slightly, she protested: "Deity, don't tease me!"

He relented. "Fine. What 'good purpose' do you envision?"

Gao Yiye responded eagerly. "Teaching women practical skills!"

Puzzled, he asked: "But we already have schools?"

"Not literacy, math, or scientific subjects—skills like weaving, embroidery, tailoring, cooking."

He finally understood: She meant vocational schools.

Gao Yiye continued: “Many village women now earn income through their skills, but many more remain untrained. They’re anxious. Several approached me desperate to learn, yet the artisans’ well district offers nothing suitable—their trades cater to men: blacksmithing, carpentry.”

Li Daoxuan connected the dots.

Indeed, Gaojia Village’s women were awakening. They recognized skills meant financial independence and improved status but found no avenue—since the artisans’ well prioritized male-dominated crafts. Departments for textiles, embroidery, or tailoring didn’t exist. Learning required finding peers haphazardly. Hence, Gao Yiye’s proposal: repurpose the brothel into a women’s vocational school.

Li Daoxuan praised warmly. “Yiye, that’s brilliant. However, we shouldn’t use the brothel building—its tainted symbolism may discourage learners. Instead... we’ll erect a dedicated women’s vocational school.”

Gao Yiye’s eyes widened. “A technical school solely for women? Such... significance granted to us?”

The two brothel girls stood stunned. Though aware of the Deity’s compassion in freeing them from suffering, they’d never fathomed a grand school elevating women as men’s equals.

Truthfully, Li Daoxuan envisioned a coeducational vocational school—housing crafts for all genders. But given the era’s restraints on women, segregation initially would ease their participation: an all-female environment mitigated hesitancy, encouraging entry. Graduation meant rebirth.

“Leave the school construction to me,” Li Daoxuan instructed. “No more brothel visits. Head to the artisans’ well instead—I request a report on our Red Flag Cannons’ progress.”

Gao Yiye nodded obediently and strode toward the artisans’ well, trailed by Qiu Ju and Dong Xue.

Shortly, they arrived.

As Gao Yiye entered, every craftsman snapped alert—knowing her presence signaled the Deity’s scrutiny. Slackers scrambled upright, transforming instantly into models of diligence.

Chapter 346: Wang Er Returns

Gao Yiye arrived at the blacksmith’s shop.

The atmosphere within crackled with intense heat; standing outside the door, she could already feel the enormous warmth emanating from within...

She didn’t dare barge in recklessly, afraid of causing trouble. So she stood at the entrance and called inside, “Li Da, Gao Yiyi, are you here?”

Li Da and Gao Yiyi quickly emerged.

“The Deity sent me to ask about the progress on the Red Flag Cannons,” she said.

An awkward expression flitted across Gao Yiyi’s face. “Well... cough...”

Li Daoxuan could tell something was wrong. “What happened?”

Gao Yiyi replied, “The process of making the cannon is too complex. We’ve been at it for many days, and we haven’t managed to complete a single one yet.”

Li Daoxuan: “Oh!”

He understood!

Successfully casting a cannon wasn’t something you could handcraft casually in a couple of tries. Just making the barrel alone required an extremely complex set of steps.

Since iron cannons were prone to bursting, the information provided by Song Yingxing called for a mixed metal of iron and bronze—essentially a kind of “alloy.”

The difficulty of producing such an “alloy” with the era’s capabilities was unimaginable. Craftsmen needed to melt iron and copper together in a specific ratio. The melting process itself alone consumed massive amounts of time.

Then, the blacksmiths had to create a sand mold or clay mold. The mold, made from carefully pounded and thoroughly prepared clay, needed to be dried very slowly in the shade or gradually baked through with charcoal fire. Just the mold-making phase took at least one month, but could stretch to three...

Furthermore, a single clay mold could only be used to cast one cannon.

Hearing about this production cycle was enough to give anyone a headache.

Li Daoxuan thought: If you proceed this slowly, it will take months to produce just one cannon. My one ship alone requires twelve cannons. Meanwhile, Cai Xinzi has already gone to build my ship model. Before long, I’ll need hundreds of cannons.

If we let you work this slowly, it would take forever!

Li Daoxuan pondered further: The blacksmiths really only need to know the technology of making cannons. The monotonous, tedious, and time-consuming step of actually casting the barrels doesn’t necessarily have to be done by them. I could provide the barrels for them.

He knew he certainly couldn’t buy cannon barrels outright on the online shopping site!

So, what could he buy as a substitute?

Li Daoxuan began searching the online shopping site. He hadn’t expected what he’d find. Surprisingly, he discovered something called “capillary steel tubing” available for sale. Made from 304 stainless steel, it could be manufactured in various specifications.

The minimum outer diameter could be as small as 0.2mm, with the minimum wall thickness down to 0.08mm. They could basically customize tubes larger than that at will. Of course, the tubes couldn’t be

made too large. Ones exceeding a certain diameter might be considered suitable for “manufacturing gun barrels,” which would cross legal boundaries. Both the seller and the buyer would end up working with sewing machines.

Ordering only very fine capillary tubing, however, was permissible.

Li Daoxuan quickly messaged the store owner privately: “I’d like to order some capillary steel tubing. You have stock, right?”

The owner replied: “Dear, of course I have stock. We fulfill both ready-made and custom orders.”

Li Daoxuan: “Heh, great. First batch: lengths of 15mm, inner diameter 0.6mm capillary steel tubes. One end open, the other end sealed, with a small opening made in the sealed end... Hmm! This description might be a bit abstract. Simply put, I want the structure similar to an ancient cannon barrel. Look up a picture of a Red Flag Cannon online and model the capillary tube after that shape. It only needs the structure to resemble it, not necessarily the outer appearance.”

The owner was bewildered: “Make capillary steel tubes modeled after an ancient cannon’s structure? What’s the reasoning? Dear, your request is a bit odd. What is this for? I can’t make sense of it.”

Li Daoxuan: “I’ll pay extra! Double!”

The owner: “Dear! Sir, there’s nothing odd about you at all—you’re brilliant! I understand the design you want perfectly now. I guarantee completion of the task!”

The next day at noon...

Artisans’ well!

Gao Yiye arrived at the artisans’ well again with her two secretaries.

Yesterday when she had come, the blacksmiths hadn't made satisfactory progress on the Deity's task. Now they were anxious, fearing Gao Yiye was here to rush them.

But unexpectedly, Gao Yiye smiled and said: "The Deity decrees you stop working on the cannon barrels for now. He will grant you a batch of immortal-realm cannons."

"Cannons from the immortal realm?" The blacksmiths were puzzled. "Do immortals even use cannons when they fight?"

Li Daoxuan thought: "..."

Gao Yiye froze briefly, then burst out laughing: "Immortals fight with immortal arts, of course! But besides them, heaven has celestial soldiers and generals too. Those soldiers need their own weapons."

The blacksmiths suddenly understood: "Ah, celestial soldiers must fight as well."

Gao Yiye looked up: "Everyone, watch closely!"

Li Daoxuan grabbed a handful of woolen steel pipes the courier had just delivered and slowly lowered them.

This batch of pipes were each only 15mm long with a 0.6mm inner bore—exactly matching the size of Red Flag Cannons.

He placed them into the artisans' well, and the craftsmen stared dumbfounded.

"So... so smooth?"

"So bright! Even brighter than a bronze mirror!"

"What beautiful cannon barrels."

“Truly worthy of immortal cannons.”

“Hurry, hurry! Push this stuff into the artisans’ well! With these, we can finish the artillery pieces immediately.”

The blacksmiths growled with excitement. Seeing a pile like a small mountain of immortal cannons lowered by the Deity, how many cannons could this churning produce? Awesome! Awesome! Awesome!

Li Daoxuan thought: Now my big ship will soon bristle with cannons, won’t it?

Just as he pondered this, he spotted a group of people hastily entering Gaojia Village.

Bai Yuan led them, trailed by servants and over a dozen ragged men in straw hats, heads bowed. Viewing from above, Li Daoxuan couldn’t see their faces.

He activated his “focus” ability. Now his perspective lost its top-down limit—he could rotate 360 degrees for a close view. That revealed two familiar faces: Bai Shui Wang Er and Wang Er’s trusted follower White Cat. The rest, unknown, were likely those from Wangjia Village who’d left with Wang Er years ago.

Li Daoxuan wondered: Huh? Wang Er’s back? Oh! Got it! Wang Jiayin must be coming!

At that moment, Bai Yuan’s group strode urgently toward the main fortress. Behind them, Wang Er’s men gaped like curious babies, scanning the long-missed Gaojia Village.

It was like Alice in Wonderland or Granny Liu at Grand View Garden. Unfamiliar marvels stunned Wang Er’s band—they never imagined returning to Chengcheng County after over two years to find it transformed.

Wang Er sighed heavily: “How in the world was this achieved?”

Bai Yuan replied: "Plenty more things will astonish you, but this isn't the time for sightseeing. Let's head to the main fortress to meet Thirty-Two and the Saint Lady."

Li Daoxuan also called down to the artisans' well: "Yiye, hurry to the discussion hall. Bring Thirty-Two. We need to discuss major matters now."

Chapter 347: Five Sparrows and Six Sparrows

Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, Bai Yuan, Wang Er, and White Cat gathered around the table and took their seats.

The five of them exchanged glances, each feeling a tinge of nostalgia.

Wang Er spoke up, "Back then, I received much care from all of you. Over these years, moving from place to place, I always worried how everyone was doing. Never imagined that Gaojia Village had grown to such a scale. Truly astonishing."

Thirty-Two said, "We, on the other hand, often heard tales of Brother Wang's exploits. We heard that after you left Chengcheng County, you first stormed Yijun County, then went north and soundly defeated the patrol officer in Luochuan. After traversing Luochuan, you reached the Yulin region. There, you merged forces with Wang Jiayin, King of Disruption, Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong), and others. Across Northern Shaanxi and Yansui, you won every battle you ever fought."

Wang Er shook his head with a bitter smile. "Causing trouble all over the land can hardly be called impressive. When I first rebelled, it was merely to help the villagers vent their anger. Later, filled with lofty ambitions, I wanted to go out and save more common folk. But alas... these years of moving from place to place, I ended up harming many without truly saving anyone. I feel... sigh..."

Everyone fell silent.

A faint smile touched the corner of Li Daoxuan's lips: So you've realized? Hm, recognizing it is good!

Wang Er was a heroic man with ideals, or rather, dreams. But his perspective was limited. Back then, he believed that with sheer passion, roaring out to kill the corrupt officials, smashing the imperial court into pieces, slaughtering the heartless wealthy, and distributing their riches to the poor would somehow save the people...

That's why Gaojia Village couldn't hold him back then!

However, after more than two years of these experiences, he had seen things with his own eyes and learned through his struggles.

He shouldn't be quite so naive anymore!

Li Daoxuan began, "What did you come to realize? Tell us."

As he spoke these words, they emerged through Gao Yiye. She opened her innocent, untouched eyes, looked at Wang Er, and repeated Li Daoxuan's question verbatim. Yet, filtered through her, the tone completely changed.

Li Daoxuan had used an "inductive," probing tone. But when Gao Yiye relayed it, it became a simple tone of "inquiry" because her own experience and perspective remained narrow – the farthest she'd ever been was the county town.

She genuinely wanted to know what Wang Er had witnessed outside.

Wang Er glanced at Gao Yiye's clear, unsullied eyes and sighed deeply. "Rebelling the way I did... it doesn't seem to save people, only harm them. Moreover, those forest heroes I joined up with... well, many weren't so heroic after all..."

"They killed without less mercy than the officials! Their plundering was even more savage than the government's tax collection! When people say the government 'eats you alive', it's a metaphor... but what they did... is a simple statement of fact..."

Wang Er's expression became troubled as he spoke this part.

Li Daoxuan sighed inwardly: So you finally saw?

Wang Er continued, "Lately, I've often questioned what I did back then. Until this time, returning to Gaojia Village, seeing its bustling prosperity and the common folk living and working in peace. That

confirmed it even more deeply... I was wrong. Had the folks in Wangjia Village stayed here instead of heading north with me... they'd probably be living very happily now."

By the end, his voice carried a hint of depression.

White Cat spoke up quickly beside him, "Big brother, don't say that! Whatever choices you made, we'd follow you. Only by your side do we find our true happiness. That is what everyone firmly believes."

Wang Er: "But look here... the people from Zhuangjia Village and Zhengjia Village are living in abundance now, so much better off than us. I saw Zhong Gaoliang outside the village earlier. Remember how destitute he looked when he followed Zheng Guangdao and joined our cause? Now he's dressed neatly and is in high spirits. Not a trace of hardship remains! Have you ever seen anyone living like that under Wang Jiayin, King of Disruption, or Zijin Liang?"

White Cat: "..."

Li Daoxuan spoke: "Turning back now isn't too late! Wang Er, since you've returned, stay. Don't leave. Gaojia Village is no longer what it was. When you decided to leave back then, many villagers actually wanted you gone because they feared being implicated by you. They were terrified the authorities would launch bandit suppression and drag Gaojia Village into chaos. But now... nobody fears that anymore."

As soon as Gao Yiye finished conveying these words, Bai Yuan followed with a laugh: "Exactly right! Back then, when the issue of your staying or going came up, I, too, wanted no part in it. Frightened of getting involved with rebels and muddying my own standing. But that concern has vanished completely. Our Gaojia Village has already taken in quite a few rebels, hehehe... the so-called rebel band in Guyuan, salt smugglers, bandits... chaotic equipment, all sorts of characters. And we fear none of them."

Hearing them speak like this, Wang Er was slightly startled: "Huh?"

He swept his gaze over the people seated at the table, his eyes finally settling on Thirty-Two: "Third Lady... your village dares to harbor the rebel band in Guyuan now too? Tell me, who's the rebel here? Me, or you lot?"

Thirty-Two spread his hands: “That’s what you call ‘Wu Que Liu Yan’ (Five Sparrows and Six Sparrows).”

Wang Er couldn’t help but be confused: “What does that term mean?”

Gao Yiye was also puzzled: “Yeah, what does it mean?”

Li Daoxuan was equally baffled internally: Hell, my illiteracy strikes again?

Bai Yuan swished as he flicked open his folding fan, revealing the words “Gentleman” painted on the leaf, and cleared his throat: “Thirty-Two, you’re misusing idioms again! ‘Wu Que Liu Yan’ (Five Sparrows and Six Sparrows) comes from ‘Nine Chapters of Mathematical Problems: Equations’. It describes things where the quantity adds up right, or things roughly equivalent in weight. It’s a mathematical term, not appropriate here. Luckily, I place high importance on the art of ‘numbers’ (‘shu’ – mathematics). Otherwise, I might have been fooled!”

Thirty-Two was also bewildered: “That phrase comes from Nine Chapters of Mathematical Problems? Oh dear, I had no idea.”

The group: “...”

Thirty-Two chuckled sheepishly: “Well, irrelevant! Focus on the key point. Brother Wang and us? We’re all rebels. So, doesn’t that make us equivalent... roughly the same weight?”

The whole table burst into laughter.

Wang Er said, “No wonder you dared to shelter me back then. Turns out even then, you already had no respect for the authorities.”

Thirty-Two stated, “Brother Wang, our operations have expanded greatly now. It’s not just Gaojia Village that’s part of our territory; practically all of Chengcheng County is under our control. We’re currently setting our sights on Heyang County – that’s why you encountered Mr. Bai at Qiachuan Port. Moreover, we’re making plans for Huanglong Mountain, intending to establish a base in the mountains. Now that you’re back... the Huanglong Mountain area would be just the place for you to station your men.”

Wang Er's heart began to pound upon hearing this.

Gaojia Village's situation seemed vastly superior to that of Wang Jiayin, King of Disruption, Zijin Liang, and their cohorts.

White Cat urged, "Big brother, let's just stay then!"

Wang Er nodded: "Alright. We stay."

His words brought joy to everyone present.

However, Wang Er swiftly turned serious: "But I can't just stay directly like this. Doing so would be tantamount to betrayal towards brothers Wang Jiayin, King of Disruption, and Zijin Liang. I must return to see them once. I'll urge them to come join us as well. If they refuse to come... then I must bid them a proper farewell. I'll entrust those brothers among my men still willing to follow them... to their care."

Chapter 348: The Spirit of Chivalry Must Not Be Lost

Upon Wang Er's words, everyone's hearts couldn't help but tremble slightly.

White Cat said: "Big Brother, this is too dangerous. Have you forgotten about Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu? If we want to leave the group, we can just go straight away. Going back to tell them would not be good."

Wang Er said: "Just because others don't follow the rules, must I do the same? The incident with Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu was painful. But the rules of being a person and the spirit of chivalry—I must still uphold them firmly. If I left Wang Jiayin and others without a word of farewell, that would mean I had abandoned brotherly devotion, and there would be no real difference between me and Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao."

Everyone was silent.

Aren't you stupid?

Several people almost blurted this out.

But Li Daoxuan did not mock him; instead, he was quite moved.

Chivalry really wasn't wrong!

The ones who were wrong were probably those who thought chivalry was wrong, right?

When did the word chivalry start being mocked?

He couldn't remember!

He only knew that everyone was becoming more and more selfish, putting their own interests first. Yet they had forgotten many basic truths of being human, forgotten the spirit of pushing forward even against thousands of adversaries, forgotten that there are some things worth practicing even at the cost of one's life.

Li Daoxuan spoke up: "Let him go, but tell him to ensure his safety and not let something like Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu ambushing him happen again."

After Gao Yiye conveyed his words, Thirty-Two and Bai Yuan said nothing more. The two nodded together: "Alright, Brother Wang, you should go!"

Wang Er clasped his fists: "Thank you for your support, brothers."

After saying this, he hardened his expression and said seriously: "Wang Jiayin's current goal is to enter Huanglong Mountain and use it as a base. But when he passed through Yichuan County, he faced Hong Chengchou, and an army of fifty thousand couldn't even defeat Hong Chengchou's militia of less than two thousand men. After that lesson, he no longer dared to enter Huanglong Mountain through Yichuan County. So he must inevitably attack Qiachuan Port to land, then enter Huanglong Mountain via the route through Heyang County and Chengcheng County..."

Bai Yuan chimed in: “That means, whether you leave Wang Jiayin’s forces or not, he will definitely strike Qiachuan Port and enter Heyang County and Chengcheng County?”

Wang Er nodded: “Yes! I’m telling you this early. If I can persuade Wang Jiayin to surrender and join Gaojia Village, that’s naturally best. But if I go and don’t return, you must prepare for battle to counter Wang Jiayin’s assault—his force of fifty thousand men shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Bai Yuan nodded: “Then I wish Brother Wang a safe return.”

Wang Er clasped his fists, left Gaojia Village, swiftly passed through Heyang County, and reached Qiachuan Port. The fleet was still waiting for him at the dock. He left the villagers from Wangjia Village who were most loyal to him on the shore, boarded the fleet, and planned to head back north to see Wang Jiayin.

White Cat also leaped onto the boat.

Wang Er turned his head and shouted: “White Cat, you and the Wangjia Village people stay. I’ll go back alone.”

White Cat said: “How could that work? I want to be with Big Brother.”

Wang Er said: “If you slow me down, I won’t be able to flee even when I have to.”

White Cat paused slightly, understood, clasped his fists, and no longer followed. He returned to shore, took the less than one hundred Old Villagers from Wangjia, and stayed at the port.

Wang Er took a group of subordinates who had joined him later, and they started paddling upstream.

Wang Er paddled double oars, the small boat pushing through the waves, swaying gently as it went. It passed Hancheng, then Yichuan, continued north, and arrived at Qingshui Bay in Yanchuan. On the shore, a ramshackle fishing village appeared, filled with many listless rebels lying or sitting in defeat.

He had found Wang Jiayin...

Wang Er jumped off the boat and walked into the small fishing village.

Inside, the scene was one of bleak decay.

In recent years, everywhere Wang Er had been, all places looked this bleak and decayed. It had made him believe the entire world was this way. But this time, when he visited Gaojia Village, he learned that in Shaanxi, there was still a place where common folk could live and work in peace and contentment.

This world was not entirely bleak!

There was still hope in this world!

Wandering and plundering everywhere could not create a good life—at least, nothing like the happiness found in Gaojia Village.

We could no longer remain roving bandits, for that would save no one.

Wang Er strode with resolute steps, one after another, into Wang Jiayin's tent.

The tent was quite crowded!

Besides Wang Jiayin, several other leaders were present. Wang Jiayin's brother-in-law Zhang Liwei, fellow villager Wang Guozhong, Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong), the King of Disruption, and others had all gathered inside the tent, seemingly discussing some crucial matter.

With a casual glance, Wang Er spotted two unfamiliar faces in the tent.

They looked fierce and menacing—clearly not ones to be trifled with.

Upon seeing Wang Er, the pair dared not act disrespectfully. Both bowed, with one saying, "I am Nan Ying Eighth Great King. Greetings, Brother Wang Er."

The other added, "I am Xi Ying Eighth Great King. I have long admired Bai Shui Wang Er's reputation. Now that I finally meet you, your imposing presence truly lives up to your legend."

Wang Er noted that while Nan Ying Eighth Great King referred to himself as "I," Xi Ying Eighth Great King used the humble "in my humble self." This subtle difference in address spoke volumes—Nan Ying Eighth Great King seemed a typical brutish bandit, while Xi Ying Eighth Great King appeared marginally more cultured.

Wang Jiayin smiled as he introduced them. "Brother Wang, you've returned just in time. These two Eighth Great King have recently risen in rebellion and come to join our ranks—heroes of valor indeed."

Wang Er returned the salute with clasped hands.

His gaze swept first over Nan Ying Eighth Great King. The latter lowered his eyes immediately upon meeting Wang Er's stare, unable to confront it.

Next, Wang Er glanced at Xi Ying Eighth Great King, who showed not a trace of timidity. Instead, he smiled back, holding Wang Er's gaze steadfastly.

This man is someone to watch, Wang Er thought.

Meanwhile, Xi Ying Eighth Great King pondered: So this is Bai Shui Wang Er, whose fame stretches far and wide. He truly is a formidable man. If I could win him over, he'd be an unrivaled warrior on the battlefield—a man fiercely loyal to the jianghu code, who would never betray his master.

Wang Jiayin inquired, "How were your gains this time, Brother Wang Er, as you followed the Yellow River south?"

Wang Er answered, "In fact, I wished to discuss this very matter with you, Brother."

Being one who favored forthrightness over secrecy, he spoke openly amidst the gathered crowd in the tent: “In Chengcheng County, where I rose in rebellion, there exists a band of heroes—rebels, possibly from Guyuan. They now hold several villages, most of the county seat, and even parts of Huanglong Mountain. From what I saw, they governed excellently, and the people under them lived happily...”

He deliberately avoided naming Gaojia Village, keeping his descriptions vague.

This was something Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao had taught him!

One should never intend harm, yet one must always guard against it. Naming Gaojia Village carelessly might invite disaster upon it—but attributing it to the Guyuan rebel band posed no such threat.

Wang Er recounted his travels, describing how well the Guyuan rebels had flourished and how content the civilians were. He concluded: “Brother Wang, I suggest we join them instead. Far better than this life of burning, killing, plundering, and scattering without purpose.”

...

That Xi Ying Eighth Great King was Zhang Xianzhong.

He first took the title “Eighth Great King” when he rebelled, only to discover another had adopted the same name. Their overlapping identities proved awkward.

To avoid confusion, the other renamed himself “Nan Ying Eighth Great King,” while Zhang Xianzhong adopted “Xi Ying Eighth Great King.” Thus, their titles no longer clashed. How cute and endearing!

The eunuch yet again couldn’t resist a complaint—Good heavens, these men really lack creativity in naming things.

Chapter 349: Prepared in Advance

After Wang Er finished speaking, the tent fell into silence.

The atmosphere was eerie!

But this situation wasn't beyond Wang Er's expectations. He knew those words, once spoken, would have this kind of effect. Wang Jiayin needed to think it over, and the deliberation wouldn't be short.

Wang Er cupped his hands in respect. "My words are finished. I will go back and rest first. Brothers, perhaps you should carefully consider this matter."

With that, he withdrew from the tent, returned among his own battalion, found a corner to lean against his clothes, lay down, and rested.

Quite some time after Wang Er left, Wang Jiayin finally spoke. "Brothers, come, let's discuss. What are your thoughts?"

The King of Disruption and Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong) exchanged a look; neither spoke up first.

Zhang Liwei, Wang Jiayin's brother-in-law, spoke. "Wang Er has already grown distant from us."

His clansman Wang Guozhong also spoke. "We sent him south to open the path from Qiachuan Port to Huanglong Mountain. But he just circled around and came back without opening the road. Instead, he went off to find some... 'rebel band in Guyuan'... Hmph! His meaning is that we aren't as capable as the rebel band in Guyuan, that we should listen to them, is that it?"

Wang Jiayin's face darkened.

Zhang Liwei said, "I say we should kill him. Otherwise, his poisonous words will deceive the masses and disturb our army's morale. Or, if he just defects to that rebel band in Guyuan, many who joined us because of him will follow."

Wang Guozhong said, "I agree with that."

Wang Jiayin, his face black with anger, turned to the King of Disruption and Zijin Liang. "You two, what do you think?"

The two had been planning to stay silent; suddenly questioned, the King of Disruption spoke. "I think those aiming for great achievements need to have a bit of magnanimity. If Wang Er feels the rebel band in Guyuan is better, just let him go there. There's no real need for us to kill him. An act like that sounds bad, harms the 'loyalty in jianghu'."

Zijin Liang also spoke up. "I agree with Brother King of Disruption. Although we've gathered here to act together, we aren't a solid block, a 'Piece of Iron'. Each brings his own battalion; no one commands another. If we kill Wang Er just because he wants to leave, what will the other leaders think? Full Sky Star, Sky Dragon, Old Tiger Wang, Lone Wolf, Hao Lin'an, Liu Liu... if they see Wang Er killed, they too will become distant."

Hearing this speech, Wang Jiayin's expression grew even more grave.

Zijin Liang spoke sense!

Although everyone paid respect to Wang Jiayin as the Big Brother, every righteous army leader had arrived bringing his own band of fellows and kin from home. Each commanded his own battalion; who didn't have some core followers?

Once they killed Wang Er, what if every leader started thinking: If I want to break away later, will Big Brother kill me too?

An uproar like that could tear the whole force apart.

Better to be generous, let Wang Er walk away. Let him have the vast sea and open skies. Meeting again later in the jianghu, they might still be brothers.

Wang Jiayin finally spoke. "Alright! That settles it. If Wang Er wants to defect to the rebel band in Guyuan, let him. We won't hinder him. We preserve the brotherly bond of loyalty. That way, word won't spread that we lack the capacity to tolerate others."

Zhang Liwei was terribly anxious. "My sister's husband! You cannot have the unreasonable softness of a woman!"

Wang Guozhong also said, "Killing him is better. Cut off future trouble. Make an example of him."

Wang Jiayin declared, "Say no more. My mind is made up. All of you, leave."

Zhang Liwei and Wang Guozhong walked out resentfully.

Once outside, Zhang Liwei muttered quietly, "Brother Wang, you also think Wang Er ought to be killed, right? Letting that man go, he'll surely fight us for territory later."

Wang Guozhong nodded. "We should just disobey Big Brother. Slit Wang Er's throat swiftly. Afterwards, when Big Brother asks, the man is already dead. He won't have any choice; he can't feud with the living over a dead man. You're his wife's brother, I'm from the same clan; he certainly won't dare do anything to us."

Zhang Liwei chuckled darkly. "I'll bring along a few trusted men. Each a fierce warrior."

Wang Guozhong said, "I'll also bring a few trusted men. We'll act together."

They hastily went back to gather manpower. To avoid drawing attention, each brought only three or five men, totaling less than ten. Pretending to patrol the camps, they approached Wang Er's camp area.

They saw Wang Er wrapped in clothes, lying on his side in a corner by a broken wall.

The two gave each other a signal, and their trusted subordinates all pounced on Wang Er together...

Several waist knives simultaneously struck at Wang Er.

But as they struck down, they heard the "ding ding ding" sound of blades hitting stone. Looking closely, what was lying on the ground was not Wang Er at all, but Wang Er's clothes wrapped around several large stones.

Wang Er himself had long since vanished without a trace.

Zhang Liwei: "Damn it!"

Wang Guozhong: "This guy was actually prepared all along."

From behind a distant tree, half of Xi Ying Eighth Great King's face appeared. It turned out he had been following the two, secretly watching the commotion. Seeing them fooled by Wang Er, he couldn't help but chuckle softly: "Two fools, good for nothing and always messing things up. With these two troublemakers under Wang Jiayin, they'll get him killed sooner or later."

He had originally planned to join Wang Jiayin's army to act together. But after this incident, he felt there was no need to stay here—it was better to make his own way alone.

Xi Ying Eighth Great King quietly slipped out of Wang Jiayin's camp and headed north with his own men.

...

Led by Zhang Yuanwai, the Heyang County militia arrived at Qiachuan Port.

They saw Bai Yuan standing by the port with a group of people dressed shabbily.

This group was naturally White Cat and the Wangjia Villagers.

They had waited there for a day without seeing Wang Er return. They knew in their hearts that Wang Er had run into trouble. But Wang Er had taken all the boats and forbidden them to follow, so White Cat, aside from waiting, had no other option.

The whole group was extremely anxious, waiting restlessly, scratching their heads in frustration.

Zhang Yuanwai saw this group looking strange and not like good people, and he muttered to himself with doubt. He approached and said, “Brother Bai, who are these people?”

Bai Yuan turned around: “Brother Zhang, you’re here? No worries, these people are common folk from Wangjia Village in my Chengcheng County. They’ve been wandering outside for over two years and only just returned a couple of days ago.”

Zhang Yuanwai, hearing this, was utterly confused: Wandering outside for over two years? How did they wander? Could it be... cough...

Bai Yuan: “Brother Zhang, don’t worry too much. They’re all good people. Since your men have come, let’s quickly build a temporary fort by the port. We’ll first put up a wooden fort. When the porters arrive, we’ll have them use cement to build a fortress—that way, Qiachuan Port will be foolproof.”

This task, of course, had to be done immediately!

Zhang Yuanwai quickly ordered the militia to chop trees and logs, first setting up a wooden fort by the port. A wooden wall could at least provide some defense.

White Cat, seeing this, quickly said to the hundred Wangjia Villagers: “Everyone, get moving and help the Heyang County folks construct the fort together.”

...

The early history of Zhang Xianzhong was poorly recorded, with many historical sources contradicting each other and few reliable ones. The exact time of his uprising wasn’t clearly noted.

Generally, people believe he rose up in response to Wang Jiayin’s uprising. But he didn’t follow Wang Jiayin’s movements; most of the time, he operated alone with his own army and seldom merged with other rebels for joint actions.

It might have been because he was well-educated, had some insight, and could even write poems—he simply didn’t fit with those uneducated bandits.

What's more, he acted with great brutality and slaughtered people mercilessly. Other rebel leaders, seeing his fierce aura, would probably get scared and keep their distance.

Zhang Xianzhong started out with only about three hundred men. Later, he gathered more and more followers, and his power grew stronger. He eventually became an enormous force that could rival Li Zicheng.

#### Chapter 350: Three Ponds Knife-Shaved Noodles

Over the past two years, the villagers of Wangjia Village had followed Wang Er wandering north and south. Under Wang Er's discipline, they hadn't engaged in murder, arson, rape, or plunder. But they had seen plenty.

Wherever the bandit army went, it left only chaos—destruction without construction.

They knocked down village fences, burned local gentry fortresses to the ground, and toppled county walls, destroying all defenses to ease their next raiding expedition.

So now, hearing about this construction project, the hundred-odd men were momentarily stunned.

White Cat shouted, "What's the daze for? Big Brother Wang Er means for us to reform from now on, become decent people again. Everyone works! Since when do good folks sit idle?"

The group snapped out of it, murmuring a half-hearted assent before beginning work.

Lacking logging tools, they left tree-felling to Zhang Yuanwai's men. They took on odd jobs—lifting timber, carrying rocks—managing to lend a hand nonetheless.

Seeing them toil, Bai Yuan felt a flicker of relief. The Wangjia Village folk stayed with Wang Er, learning some rules. Much better than other 'returning bandits'.

He recalled Fan Shanyue's former rebels—it'd taken ages just to restore their sanity.

After working awhile,

a Wangjia Villager carrying a log suddenly staggered, nearly collapsing. He strained to set down the heavy wood, touched his stomach, looking sheepish. "Brother Cat, I'm hungry. No strength left."

"Me too."

"Can barely stand..."

Life on the run meant sparse meals for Wangjia Villagers.

Though they plundered wealthy oppressors and even seized grain from several county treasuries, it never lasted.

Wang Jiayin's army had fifty thousand mouths. Raiding one rich manor couldn't feed them all for two days. Only stealing the county treasury allowed them to eat a few days more.

But county grain wasn't conjured—it came from taxed peasants. Those peasants had already been stripped bare by the bandits. Who was left to pay taxes?

So, the county treasury could be raided only once; returning yielded nothing.

They couldn't linger. Forced to keep moving.

Only when plundering Yansui yielded nothing—"not even a whisker"—did they flow south along the Yellow River.

Observing their pitiful state, Bai Yuan shook his head inwardly. He checked the sky, gauged the time. "Don't worry. Food's coming soon."

And sure enough, as he spoke it arrived.

Heyang County Magistrate Feng Jun led a group personally: over a thousand men, mostly laborers hired from the county town. Feng Jun had adopted Gaojia Village's method—paying three jin of flour daily for work instead of relief. He'd gathered these porters to build a cement fortress at Qiachuan Port.

With such pay, response was overwhelming. A thousand men assembled instantly. High-quality flour and cement then arrived, transported from Gaojia Village. Feng Jun personally escorted the crew, pushing carts of grain and materials to the port.

Bai Yuan and Feng Jun huddled, whispering updates on the situation.

Feng Jun waved an arm. "Eat first. Work after filling bellies."

The cooking teams sprang into action!

Setting clay stoves, fetching water from the Yellow River. The water was brownish, but no matter—in these times, having water was blessing enough. Boil it, it's clean.

Flour came from the grain carts, kneaded into dough. Then knives flashed!

This was Heyang County's specialty: Three Ponds Knife-Shaved Noodles. Skilled hands wielded flat blades, shaving dough into long, consistently thin strands—a high-caliber craft.

Only natives of Three Ponds Village could manage this. Now, their cooks stood facing rows of cauldrons. Each gripped dough in one hand; with a flick of the knife, shaved noodles leapt directly into the pot. A splendid sight.

The Wangjia Villagers gaped. "This is the great disaster? You've enough flour—even the mood—for knife-shaved noodles?"

A Three Ponds cook grinned, turning. "Not long ago, we starved too. We're only like this thanks to Chengcheng County's Gaojia Village."

“Exactly!” another cook glanced over. “I hadn’t practiced this skill for three years! Then Gaojia Village came, transporting piles of flour. These last few days? I’ve shaved noodles daily! Forgotten craft, brought back to life!”

He chatted while shaving—yet each strand remained even, perfect. Pure muscle memory; the skill truly was bone-deep.

Shock rippled through Wangjia Village folk. Suddenly, they remembered: over two years ago, the night before rebellion, Wang Er led them to Gaojia Village for Water Theft. After scooping one bucket, they turned—and there stood a small mountain of flour.

Had Gaojia Village lacked nothing since that moment?

If we hadn’t left—if we’d stayed in Gaojia Village—perhaps happiness came sooner? No wonder Big Brother Wang Er had us stay, quit following Wang Jiayin. He saw... the right path.

Ah, may Big Brother Wang Er return safely.

Just then, the first bowl of noodles was ready. Feng Jun gave a look; the cook passed it to Bai Yuan. But Bai Yuan chuckled, handing it straight to White Cat. White Cat plucked just one noodle strand, slipped it into his mouth... then passed the bowl to another Wangjia Villager...

One strand per person.

Each chewed deeply...

The noodle tasted fragrant, delicious. A hundred emotions, myriad feelings, all carried in that bite.

“Time to eat!”

“Everyone! Eat!”

Bowl after bowl of Three Ponds knife-shaved noodles emerged. Bowls passed from hand to hand among the Wangjia villagers till all hundred had their share. Only then did porters from Heyang County start receiving theirs.

At the port construction site, over a thousand men now held steaming bowls, greedily slurping the noodles. Each face glowed with contentment, happiness.

“Finish up! More work after eating!”

“All of you! Work harder!”

“Yeah! Work harder! If we don’t build that fortress here—if bandits cross ashore—our belly warmth? Gone again.”