

Great Ming 351

Chapter 351: The Coal Mine of Heyang

Upon hearing the laborers from Heyang County speak, the villagers of Wangjia Village finally understood just how disliked the term “bandits” was among the common citizens.

Permitting bandits to land here would mean destroying the peaceful life they had only just attained.

So, this is what we’ve been doing all along?

White Cat gritted his teeth and shouted loudly, “People of Wangjia Village! Work harder! We must outdo them!”

The crowd responded, “Yes!”

Fed and energized, they were ready to work.

Just as the group roared with vigorous shouts, preparing to start, a man wearing a blue hat emerged from the crowd. This was a “skilled worker” dispatched from Gaojia Village, solely responsible for teaching new workers “how to use cement.”

He pushed forward a cart filled with helmet-like hats woven from rattan and dyed yellow, handing them to the Wangjia Villagers. “Put these yellow hats on.”

Wangjia Villager: “???”

The skilled worker explained with a smile, “Ordinary workers wear yellow hats, skilled workers wear blue hats. Master Bai Yuan and Lord Feng wear white hats. This is the Deity’s order, a rule of the construction site. Follow it well.”

The Wangjia Villagers looked utterly confused, but since it was a rule, they complied. Each put on a yellow rattan hat. Hmm, it was surprisingly sturdy, feeling just like a helmet, offering considerable protection.

The blue-hatted worker loudly called out, “Yellow hats, gather round! I’ll teach you how to mix cement... Go, dig up some sand by the river and fetch a few buckets of water...”

“Add cement, river sand... Stir... Yes... Stir hard...”

The entire worksite immediately came alive with intense activity.

The team building the cement fortress and the crew constructing the wooden palisade worked simultaneously. The long wooden wall extended along the edge of Qiachuan Port, first enclosing the entire port area. Behind this wooden wall, the cement fortress began to rise steadily from the ground up.

...

Early in the morning, just risen, Li Daoxuan picked up the pineapple bun the delivery guy had just brought with his left hand. With his right hand, he tapped on the box, selecting the characters for “Heyang County.” His perspective shifted instantly to a point high above the county town, scrutinizing the details of Heyang County, a place he hadn’t surveyed for long.

Heyang County was distinctly different from Chengcheng County.

Here, shops far outnumbered those in Chengcheng. Though most were shuttered now, they had clearly prospered in the past. Once ship traffic at Qiachuan Port resumed, these shops were bound to flourish again.

Numerous restaurants dotted the town, and snack stalls were commonplace, suggesting the people here were fond of good food.

Li Daoxuan reached his right hand to his computer, typed in “Heyang County,” and did a quick search. Then he understood: this small county town was nicknamed “China’s Yellow River Eco-Gastronomy Capital.”

Tsk tsk tsk, I like this kind of town!

The Delivery Deity suddenly found the pineapple bun in his hand far less appealing.

Within the town stood a small noodle shop, its signboard hanging crookedly: “Three Ponds Knife-Shaved Noodles.” It looked long closed. However, as Li Daoxuan’s focus shifted there, he saw the owner sweeping up, clearly preparing to reopen.

Ah! With flour back, the noodle shop is getting ready for business.

After tidying up, the owner set up a large furnace outside the shop. He placed a big pot atop the furnace, stuffed in some coal, and started boiling water.

A detail caught Li Daoxuan’s attention: the owner added lumps of coal without the slightest hesitation, seemingly as if coal were dirt cheap. He just kept shoveling it in.

This place must be a coal-producing area! Only people at the source could afford to burn coal so lavishly.

He quickly opened Baidu and searched. The results were surprising. It turned out Heyang County had been a coal producer since ancient times. Not only was the coal here of excellent quality, but its deposits were shallow, easily extractable even with ancient technology.

Moreover, the coal mines were less than ten li from the county town, located specifically at Jinshuigou and Wang Village to the west. Both locations were already within Li Daoxuan’s viewing range, but he hadn’t paid attention to them and hadn’t noticed the mine shafts.

Now aware, he naturally moved his point of view for a closer look.

His perspective shifted to Jinshuigou...

It was very close to Heyang County, nestled in a ravine northwest of the town. A winding official path led into this gully. There were no villages or settlements inside, just makeshift shacks housing a group of people covered in black soot.

Their lives were visibly hard; they were the poorest of society's underclass. Intriguingly, the severe drought hadn't impacted them as drastically as it did others in different occupations.

The coal they mined would always find buyers, draught or not! Although during the drought years, the coal fetched less grain.

Outside the ravine, farmers endured four years of drought, many driven to rebellion, but these coal miners persisted in their same state – perpetually underfed yet never quite starved to death.

Li Daoxuan secretly delighted, Coal mines! Excellent!

This place deserves serious development. Poor coal miners, prepare to get rich!

His perspective switched back to Gaojia Village...

As soon as it returned, he saw billowing black smoke rising above the "Gaojia Village School," shrouding the entire roof.

This genuinely startled Li Daoxuan: Damn, the school's on fire? Don't tell me I started it?! I did always want to burn down Thirty-Two Middle School...

No, no, I didn't do it! I'm a proper citizen with sound morals and social insurance, I wouldn't actually commit arson!

Besides, this scale model of Thirty-Two Middle was custom-made with fireproof materials. It couldn't catch fire.

Li Daoxuan waved his hand sharply, instantly summoning a gust of wind within the box. Whoosh! The black smoke blanketing the school was instantly blown away.

Before he could even focus on what was happening, he heard cheers erupt from the tiny figures below: “The Deity is here! The Deity used magic to blow the smoke away!”

Li Daoxuan activated his “focus” function. He saw a large group of figures standing on the school rooftop. One was covered in soot, resembling smoked cured meat. Present among them were Gao Yiye, Song Yingxing, Young Master Bai, Third Miss, and a large crowd of male and female students. The girls’ rosy cheeks were smudged black.

Li Daoxuan was both exasperated and amused. “What are you all doing up there?”

Gao Yiye replied, “We report to the Deity! Master Song and Young Master Bai were accompanying the students, experimenting with using steam engine power to hoist large stones. He connected gears and a pulley system to the steam engine’s flywheel, attached iron chains to them, and then wrapped the chains around a large stone on the ground floor. When they turned on the steam engine, it powered all those wheels and hauled the huge stone up to the fifth-floor rooftop!”

Li Daoxuan looked down and saw, indeed, a massive boulder had been successfully hauled up to the fifth-floor terrace.

He had previously given Song Yingxing a “micro steam engine” for research. This engine sat on the rooftop, hence the location of the experiment.

“Hmm, I see. But if you were merely playing with the steam engine, why did you produce so much black smoke?”

Chapter 352: Ways to Use the Steam Engine

Li Daoxuan’s question made the little people lower their heads awkwardly.

Young Master Bai explained, “Deity, this ‘steam engine’ you bestowed upon us is too big. To get it burning requires an enormous amount of fuel. During our experiment earlier, we ran out of fuel. Everyone threw in everything we could find that was flammable... And so we ended up with black smoke billowing into the sky.”

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan understood.

He had initially provided them with an “alcohol beaker” filled mostly with alcohol, thinking it would last a long time.

But he had underestimated the research frenzy of Song Yingxing and Young Master Bai. These two had burned through the alcohol in just a few days. How could they continue experimenting?

Song Yingxing didn't have the bad habit of constantly begging the Deity for everything. So he prepared his own fuel—wood, coal, dry grass... all sorts of chaotic equipment for ignition.

What seemed like a miniature steam engine to Li Daoxuan was a terrifying, colossal machine to the little folk. Getting such a massive contraption burning demanded an immense amount of fuel.

Naturally, once they were short on fuel, they started burning whatever they could find! It was no wonder they ended up with soot blackening the sky.

Scientists had always loved creating troublemakers since ancient times. This was unavoidable.

Without their making trouble, the world wouldn't make progress.

Understanding this, Li Daoxuan couldn't help but laugh heartily. “As long as there's no fire, it's fine. So, is the steam engine fun?”

Song Yingxing replied excitedly, “More than fun! It's simply miraculous! Just using the power of boiling water can move enormous rocks. The sheer force of this thing can topple the whole world!”

“Hmm!” Li Daoxuan said. “I see you've basically figured it out. By using a gear assembly to redirect the force, you can transform the power from boiling water into various types of force to drive all kinds of machinery. So, what was the first thing you thought of using it for?”

Song Yingxing pondered carefully for a moment. “I thought about moving heavy things. It could be used to draw water from wells, turn millstones, aid in smelting and weaving... any place requiring mechanical motion could use a steam engine.”

Li Daoxuan nodded. Excellent.

He then turned to Young Master Bai. “Young Master Bai, what did you think of?”

Young Master Bai grinned and pointed towards the distant electric small train. “That strange giant train was conjured by the Deity’s divine power, running on batteries. I always wondered why, even without burning fuel, you called it ‘fire train’ until I saw the steam engine. This steam engine is the perfect solution to power the train. Mount one inside the engine, burn fuel to generate power, haul those enormous train cars along... So, you deliberately named the celestial car ‘fire train’! The word ‘fire’ was a hint for me, guiding my research in that direction.”

Li Daoxuan thought: You’re brilliant! That’s how you explain it? Your brain fills in the blanks like a pro!

Young Master Bai laughed excitedly. “We are mortals. We can’t conjure strange powers like the Deity to operate such giant vehicles. But this steam engine is the marvelous tool bestowed upon us mortals to achieve heaven-defying strength. Used properly, even parting mountains and draining seas becomes possible for us.”

“Very good!” Li Daoxuan praised. “An excellent direction. Proceed with that research. With your brilliance, scaling down this massive steam engine until it fits inside a train shouldn’t be difficult. Then, feel free to unleash your creativity.”

After speaking, Li Daoxuan secretly admired Young Master Bai. Song Yingxing was brilliant, but his age perhaps limited his wildly innovative ideas. Young Master Bai, however, was young, daring enough to dream big. He thought of adapting the steam engine to the train before Song Yingxing did.

This was probably the advantage of youth!

“Young Master Bai, your imagination and creativity are truly excellent. Keep that up!”

“Wow! The Deity praised my son for having great imagination and creativity!” Madam Bai suddenly popped up from somewhere, overjoyed. She grabbed the person next to her and started shaking them vigorously. “The Deity praised my son! The Deity praised my son again! Hahaha...”

Later, Madam Bai bragged to everyone she met that the Deity had praised her son's wonderful imagination and creativity, repeating it proudly for her entire life.

Young Master Bai thanked the Deity but soon looked awkward again. "However... to power a steam train, we'd need vast amounts of fuel. Just one trip might consume an enormous quantity of coal. This is a major headache. Without the fuel bestowed by the Deity, we'd have to rely on things like coal and wood. Wood burns poorly, and while coal is better, Gaojia Village doesn't have much."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "What a coincidence! Coal is precisely what I wanted to discuss with you. Yiye, set off immediately. Find Thirty-Two and head to Heyang County. We're going there for coal."

Gao Yiye obediently answered, turned, and ran downstairs.

Qiu Ju and Dong Xue followed close behind, urgently calling out, "Saint Lady! You haven't washed your face! You're still smudged!"

Gao Yiye: "Eh? Is my face dirty?"

Qiu Ju: "Look at me!"

Gao Yiye turned to look and burst out laughing. "Qiu Ju! Your face is covered in black soot!"

Qiu Ju: "Saint Lady, yours is exactly the same!"

"Ah? Mine too?" Gao Yiye felt a little flustered. "Oh no! That means the Deity just saw me looking terrible, didn't he?"

Dong Xue nodded. "He saw you."

Gao Yiye went "thump" and collapsed face-down onto the floor. orz.

“Hurry and wash up! Don’t lie here like that!”

The two young ladies, Qiu Ju and Dong Xue, dragged Gao Yiye up and dashed off. In the blink of an eye, they disappeared into the watchtower...

At this point, Li Daoxuan felt it was inappropriate to continue “noticing” her and quickly shifted his “notice” elsewhere. He would look back again a little later.

Gao Yiye emerged from the watchtower, freshly bathed and changed. She was dressed in dignified, formal attire, exuding the aura worthy of the Li Family’s master’s wife.

Three years serving as the Saint Lady, coupled with learning reading and writing, acquiring knowledge, reading novels, listening to storytelling operas, and experiencing various events...

Knowledge refines one’s bearing, purifying one from within.

Dressed finely and carrying herself regally, she now truly resembled a wealthy lady, no longer the awkward girl who could only sit silently without speaking.

Her preparations to depart meant the Gaojia Village Militia had to mobilize immediately.

The Saint Lady’s safety was no joke.

The escort team also immediately followed suit. Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi assembled a hundred-man team to surround Gao Yiye. Gao Yiye and the two girls, Qiu and Dong, got into a carriage. Thirty-Two mounted a tall horse. The escort team flanked them. The entire group set off towards Heyang County.

Chapter 353: We Came to Mine Coal

Departing from Gaojia Village, they first traveled along a cement road to Zhengjia Village. After that, only the S-shaped earthen mountain road scraped out by Li Daoxuan with a metal scraper remained. Following this path down the mountain, they entered the territory of Heyang County.

Continuing east along the dirt road led to Yang Village in Heyang County.

A large number of porters were already busy with road construction in Yang Village, paid wages by Gaojia Village, creating a scene bustling with activity.

Gao Yiye, seeing this, felt quite pleased: “The common people of Heyang County now have work and food, just like our folk in Chengcheng County. Wherever the Deity reaches, everyone can live a good life.”

Qiu Ju remarked, “Isn’t that so? The Deity is truly a good man—ah, no, a good god.”

Dong Xue added, “Without the Deity’s help, we’d still be living those hard lives in the brothel. Thinking back now, it feels like a lifetime ago.”

Gao Yiye reached out and clasped the hands of the two girls, Qiu and Dong: “Rest assured, that time has passed.”

Both girls nodded.

Their procession was actually quite conspicuous. Over a hundred fully armed militiamen provided escort, flanking a large cart in the center. The cart’s curtain was slightly lifted, revealing a beauty gazing out the window.

The Heyang County laborers working on the road couldn’t help but whisper amongst themselves.

“Whose wealthy lord’s family is that?”

“Shh, you don’t know? That’s the Saint Lady of the Dao Xuan Deity.”

“What? What ‘Dao Xuan Deity’?”

“Did you forget? Who did Daoist Priest Ma Tianzheng beseech for rain last time?”

“Ah! I remember now! The great deity who invited the Four Sea Dragon Kings to bring the rain!”

“Now you’ve got it. When drinking water, don’t forget who dug the well. The fact that we received rain here is all thanks to the Dao Xuan Deity inviting the Four Sea Dragon Kings.”

“Our daily jobs paying three jin of flour also depend entirely on the Dao Xuan Deity.”

“Show respect to the Saint Lady!”

The laborers’ whispers quickly spread the news. Soon, wherever Gao Yiye’s cart passed, all the laborers on both sides of the road knelt in reverence. They had no direct way to thank the god, so seeing the Saint Lady representing him approach, they naturally expressed their gratitude.

Qiu Ju glanced out the cart window and turned back: “Saint Lady, the common people are all bowing toward our cart.”

Gao Yiye smiled faintly: “Just how benevolent the Deity is, they’ve now experienced it for themselves. I truly wish all the common people under heaven could have such a day too.”

Beyond Yang Village, the group turned southeast, crossing the flattest farmland area in Heyang County. Li Daoxuan had taken turns bringing rain to this whole region. Farmers were busily at work in their fields.

It was already the spring of the Third Year of Chongzhen, the season for spring ploughing.

The Deity’s timely rain brought everyone immense joy. Farmers desperately tilled their land and planted their crops. Signs of flourishing vitality filled the entire plain.

The distance from Yang Village to Heyang County was over twenty li. The terrain was flat, so the procession took only a little over one shichen (roughly two hours). They hadn’t sent any messengers ahead, so Heyang County Magistrate Feng Jun had no idea they were coming and was completely unprepared to receive them.

The two old soldiers guarding the city gate were startled by the sudden appearance of a large troop armed to the teeth and almost sounded the alarm gong.

Fortunately, local folk who had gotten the news rushed in first, hollering at the gate guards: "That's the Saint Lady of the Dao Xuan Deity! The Dao Xuan Deity who sent us the rain!"

Only then did the veteran soldiers lower the mallet they were about to strike the gong with, flung the city gates wide open, and extended a warm welcome.

Yamen runners swiftly ran to inform Feng Jun. He hurriedly put on his official garments, straightened his official hat, and came out to greet them.

Seeing Gao Yiye, Feng Jun paused in surprise. He had met this young lady before – last time, she had claimed to be Madam Li, the master's wife. Now she arrived as the Dao Xuan Deity's Saint Lady?

But he wasn't stupid. His mind raced. The Dao Xuan Deity's true name was Li Daoxuan. And a "Saint Lady" was essentially positioning herself as the god's woman. So calling herself "Madam Li" still made some sense.

In any case, this person represented Gaojia Village and must be treated with importance. Saint Lady or not, thinking of her simply as the Gaojia Village Chief wouldn't be wrong.

Feng Jun performed a formal salute: "Madam Li, Steward Thirty-Two, what brings such esteemed guests here? What guidance do you offer?"

Gao Yiye no longer needed Thirty-Two to relay words when speaking to the Magistrate. An air of the master's wife was evident now: "We came to Heyang County this time to mine coal."

"Oh? Mining?"

This request genuinely surprised Feng Jun.

“Yes, mining,” Gao Yiye replied with a smile. “We want to contract the coal mine at Jinshuigou.”

Feng Jun’s expression instantly turned awkward.

Since its founding, the Ming Dynasty strictly forbade private mining. There had even been several revolts by miners and clashes with officials due to illicit mining operations.

However, by the mid-Ming period, the imperial court’s control over private mines had relaxed significantly. By the Chongzhen era, maintaining control became nearly impossible. Private miners began operating in various areas – near the capital, the Jiangnan Region, Shanxi, etc. Private owners would develop a mine shaft and hand over a quarter of the proceeds to the court as mining tax. The court, content to collect the money, essentially outsourced coal mine operations to private bosses. This was one aspect of the early stages of capitalism emerging in late Ming.

Of course, the “quarter” claimed was seldom the actual amount collected. There was no reliable way to audit how much coal a private pit actually produced. How could local officials possibly know?

Therefore, the final amount of tax paid depended entirely on negotiations between the mining pit boss and the supervising official. If the coal boss had powerful backing, the tax could be very low, even waived entirely.

Within this context, wealthy merchants in the Jiangnan Region colluded with officials, evading nearly all mining taxes, depriving the central treasury of revenue.

This situation persisted until one formidable figure emerged: Wei Zhongxian.

Though this “Nine Thousand Years Old” eunuch made many questionable decisions, he implemented one brilliant strategy: taxing the coal mines operated by officials in the Jiangnan Region. He forbade them from further skimming profits or padding their own coffers, forcing them to cough up the quarter share for the imperial treasury.

This single move essentially offended all civil officials in the Jiangnan Region...

Thinking of this, Feng Jun's nose blood started pouring out!

Gao Yiye was startled: "Lord Feng, your nose is bleeding!"

"Huh?" Feng Jun wiped his nose roughly with his hand. The streak of blood on his face formed a wavy line, betraying how violently his hand trembled as he wiped.

He spoke in a stiff voice: "Madam Li intends to contract the Jinshuigou coal mine in our Heyang County? This matter... I fear... This official may speak frankly. Since the death of Wei Zhongxian, the new policies the court issued regarding mine taxes are somewhat... cough... this mine business might be... tricky to handle."

Chapter 354: How Long Can You Hold Out?

Just by his tone, Li Daoxuan understood.

Wei Zhongxian had already been overthrown!

Those policies left by Wei Zhongxian now had to be revoked one by one—especially those affecting the interests of the civil ministerial group.

The mining tax was one such policy.

The Jiangnan civil officials, unwilling to pay this tax and eager to pocket the money for themselves, inevitably invoked the ancient decree that scholar-officials were tax-exempt.

By doing this, the coal mines they had previously contracted instantly became their private property, entirely tax-free.

This was classic "private encroachment on state resources." Anyone with the slightest foresight, or the faintest sense of justice, knew this wasn't right. Continuing like this would lead to a swarm of vermin completely emptying the nation.

Feng Jun seemed to be one of those with “some foresight and a flicker of justice.” He didn’t want “state resources encroached upon.” He feared that after Gaojia Village occupied the Jinshuigou coal mine, they would “under-guise” it under an official’s name, then devour the entire mine outright.

He couldn’t bring himself to do this!

Li Daoxuan smiled; this Feng Jun was quite interesting.

He didn’t blame Feng Jun for being wary of Gaojia Village. In fact, in his position, such caution made him a good official. Had he handed over the coal mine to Gaojia Village without a second thought, glowing joyfully, that would’ve marked him as a foolish official. Then Li Daoxuan couldn’t have kept him anyway, lest one rotten apple spoil the whole barrel.

The more Feng Jun sought to protect the coal mine and avoid surrendering it to Gaojia Village, the more Li Daoxuan respected him and wished to recruit him under his wing. That he fiercely guarded the “old Ming court’s” state resources today meant tomorrow he would fiercely protect those of a “new nation.”

Li Daoxuan spoke: “Lord Feng worries our Gaojia Village might seize Heyang County’s coal mine?”

Hearing “Madam Li” ask this, Feng Jun’s expression turned solemn: “Madam Li, Gaojia Village has shown kindness to my Heyang County, something this official is well aware of. But coal mines... cannot be casually entrusted to private hands. The intricacies involved are far too many...”

Li Daoxuan smiled gently. “Very well. Let’s make a gentleman’s agreement. We in Gaojia Village will mine Jinshuigou for a day, then unconditionally provide food aid to Heyang County’s common folk for that same day. What say you?”

Upon hearing this, Feng Jun’s heart jolted again.

Gaojia Village had struck!

Dig coal for a day, give grain for a day. Conversely, if mining stopped, grain aid to Heyang County would cease.

Heavens above!

The classic offer one couldn't refuse—bread or the knife. Take it or leave it?

Feng Jun's brows knitted deeply together...

Heyang County could not afford an interruption in grain supply right now. One break and all its people would go hungry. Not a bite of Three Ponds Knife-Shaved Noodles would be seen again—bah! Why think of noodles now? Stay focused!

Once commoners had nothing to eat, a second Fan Shanyue, a third Fan Shanyue would inevitably rise. The hard-won peace the people of Heyang had gained would be shattered anew.

Thinking like this, trading a little coal from Jinshuigou for the entire county's sustenance wasn't a loss.

Gaojia Village might profit greatly from this move, but the commoners of Heyang County most certainly wouldn't suffer.

Though there was a risk of state resources being diverted, shouldn't state resources exist to ensure the people's welfare in the first place?

Damned right it should!

Feng Jun's face grew earnest and severe. Stern and unsmiling, he spoke formally: "Very well. This official shall establish a gentleman's agreement with you all. For each day you aid Heyang County with grain, you may mine coal at Jinshuigou for that same day. No matter how forceful the pressure from the imperial court, this official will withstand it."

Li Daoxuan smiled. A sound fellow it is. Then so be it.

Truthfully, whether Feng Jun yielded the mine or not, Li Daoxuan would rescue Heyang County's people. From another perspective, whether Feng Jun agreed or not, Li Daoxuan would go ahead and mine the coal.

A minor official like Feng Jun lacked the power to halt Li Daoxuan, this "vast Deity."

He had merely teased her playfully for a bit, that's all.

The outcome of teasing turned out quite well!

It had not disappointed him.

Li Daoxuan smiled and said: "Since we have agreed, we need to go manage the coal mines in Jinshuigou. Lord Feng, will you go with us or provide a handwritten order to show the coal mining workers at the official kiln?"

Feng Jun said: "This official will go with you!"

He truly wanted to see how the people of Gaojia Village would handle his official coal.

Therefore, Gao Yiye's group began heading toward Jinshuigou.

Feng Jun also mounted his horse and set off with the clerk and the yamen runners.

Gao Yiye entered the large carriage, so it wasn't convenient for her to talk to Feng Jun, who was riding on horseback.

But Thirty-Two was also riding a horse and walked alongside Feng Jun, where the two were well-suited for conversation.

Thirty-Two smiled and said: "Lord Feng is truly honest and upright."

Feng Jun said: "You flatter me. This official has little skill. In recent years, the whole county was ravaged by a Fan Shanyue, and I feel ashamed before all the elders and fellow villagers."

Thirty-Two asked curiously: "How many common people remain in Heyang County now?"

Feng Jun said: "When Fan Shanyue caused great havoc, this official truly didn't know the population count. However, just in the past few days, as people from Gaojia Village came to distribute food, many who were hiding emerged to work. That made it convenient for me to tally them up. Currently, this official has registered 83,232 people, and an estimated 10,000 or so are hiding in remote places, not counted by this official."

Thirty-Two silently praised in his heart: This person did have some capability; in just a few days, he had made such a clear count of the population.

Feng Jun continued: "My sole worry now is this county's over 80,000 registered people. At a minimum, they consume forty to fifty thousand jin of grain daily. If they wish to eat more substantially, it requires eighty thousand jin. Plus, your village lets them work and pays each worker three jin of grain per day as wages. If thirty thousand people come out to work, that would mean an extra ninety thousand jin of grain dispersed daily..."

Feng Jun said: "In total, at least one hundred thirty thousand jin of grain are consumed per day. That amount isn't small at all."

He looked into Thirty-Two's eyes and asked earnestly: "I wonder how many days your village can actually hold out?"

Upon hearing this, Thirty-Two found it amusing. He thought to himself: The Deity could simply grab a fistful of flour at will and overfill all eighty thousand of your people.

But he could not speak that way.

He pretended to put on an awkward expression, frowning and showing a worried look: "One hundred thirty thousand jin daily? Let me calculate carefully."

He deliberately moved his fingers back and forth as if counting.

Feng Jun saw him calculating seriously with a slightly troubled expression, making Feng Jun feel concerned too. He thought to himself: Why does Thirty-Two's look seem so grave? Is it because he felt pressured after hearing Heyang County's population? Oh heavens! Please don't say it won't last long. Who knows how many days this severe drought will continue? Gaojia Village absolutely must hold on.

Just as he thought this, Thirty-Two held out three fingers and said: "We can only hold out for this long."

Feng Jun was astounded and said: "Three days?"

Chapter 355: Coal Miners

Seeing Feng Jun's wide-eyed, flustered look, Thirty-Two chuckled to himself inwardly. That magistrate still didn't know how vast the power of the Dao Xuan Deity was, and truly understood nothing of our Gaojia Village's strength. Oh well, might as well play around with him a bit.

He shook his head at Feng Jun's three extended fingers: "Of course it can't be just three days. You're really underestimating us."

Feng Jun said: "Then... thirty days?"

Thirty-Two shook his head again: "More, more!"

Feng Jun asked: "Three months?"

Thirty-Two laughed: "Lord Feng, why do you always think so small? Can't you be a bit bolder and aim higher?"

Feng Jun took a deep breath and tentatively inquired: "Could it be... three years?"

Thirty-Two roared with laughter: "[Three lifetimes and three generations]."

Feng Jun said: “!!!”

To be honest, he didn't quite believe it.

Thirty-Two knew he wouldn't buy it and smiled slightly: “Lord Feng, you really don't need to worry so much. Heyang County already has the Four Sea Dragon Kings bringing rain now, and it's just the right season for spring planting. The crops are already sown, so it definitely won't take those three lifetimes and three generations. In just half a year, the food produced by Heyang County will support the common folk for survival. At that point, why would we from Gaojia Village need to keep giving you aid?”

Feng Jun nodded—this did make sense.

As they spoke, they arrived at Jinshuigou.

This place was truly close to the county town. With a bit of chatting and walking, they exited the town, climbed some small slopes, ducked into a little ravine, and were there in a short while.

As they approached the coal mine, the whole ravine turned black. The slopes on both sides were covered in black ore, and the official path beneath their feet, once yellow earth, had become darkly stained. This was likely coal dust from long-term coal transport along the path blackening it.

Up ahead appeared a cluster of straw huts, those crude shelters made of branches and dry grass. Beside them lay a huge open-pit coal mine, with a large group of coal-black men toiling inside.

The environment here wasn't great, and Feng Jun glanced worriedly at the cart carrying Gao Yiye. He wondered: Would this master's wife mind getting dirty?

Just as he thought this, he saw the cart's curtain flip open. Gao Yiye sprang out all at once, not showing any hint of aversion but instead brimming with excitement as she ran toward the group of coal miners: “Wow? Is this what a coal mine looks like?”

To one of the soot-covered coal miners, she asked: “Uncle, how is coal made? Do you dig the black rocks out and then use some special craft on them?”

The coal miner, startled by a “wealthy woman” questioning him, didn’t know who she was but dared not offend her. He quickly replied respectfully: “Inform master’s wife, coal is coal once it’s dug from the ground—no special craft needed.”

“Ah? So simple? Then I can dig it too?”

She crouched down, picked up a big fist-sized piece of coal from the ground, played with it in her hands, and soon turned both palms black, staining her sleeves as well: “When I was little, I thought this stuff was so expensive, couldn’t afford it at all. Never imagined you could just dig it out and use it. Ha ha, I’ll dig a couple to take home for fun.”

The coal miner broke into a sweat: “Master’s wife... that piece you’re holding is one I dug out.”

“Got it, won’t steal yours.” Gao Yiye handed the coal back to him, glanced around, spotted an iron pickaxe lying unused to the side, and dashed over to grab it: “Whose is this? I’ll borrow it first.”

The pickaxe belonged to a resting coal miner. He didn’t dare refuse a wealthy person’s demand and just weakly replied: “Master’s wife, use it as you wish.”

Gao Yiye hopped into the pit with the pickaxe, swung hard at a large black stone, and heard a “ding.” The pickaxe bounced away, sending tremors up her arms. She landed on her buttocks with a plop, completely blackening her dress.

Rubbing her numb, tingling hands, she said: “Wow, digging this isn’t so easy after all.”

The coal miner grimaced: “Master’s wife, you just struck at something that wasn’t coal—it was a very hard black rock. Coal isn’t that tough.”

Gao Yiye said: “...”

The two secretaries, Qiu Ju and Dong Xue, rushed over instantly, helped Gao Yiye up, and dragged her toward the cart: “Master’s wife, you’ve gotten dirty—all dirtied! Hurry back to the cart so we can tidy you up.”

The three women vanished back into the cart in a flash.

Feng Jun gaped in amazement. What was going on? He’d never imagined this Li Family’s master’s wife, this Saint Lady, could be such a mischievous soul.

Thirty-Two coughed: “Lord Feng, no need to mind it. Our master’s wife is still just a young girl after all.”

Feng Jun coughed: “Indeed! A bit of energy in a young girl is quite nice too.”

Rushing with pride, he focused today’s purpose. He stepped forward to stand before the pit and boomed to all the coal miners: “Everyone, listen up! I hereby announce that from today on, the Jinshuigou Coal Mine will no longer be managed by the government but leased to the Li Family of Gaojia Village. That young lady just now was the Li Family’s master’s wife, and this man beside me is the Li Family’s manager Thirty-Two—not third in rank, but his surname is Three. From now on, obey their orders. Understood?”

The coal miners bowed in unison, their movements stiff and numb.

To them, it made no difference whether they mined coal for the government or some wealthy lord—they’d always be wretched. Who did the working matter? They’d suffer just the same.

Feng Jun said: “Right then, let Thirty-Two give you a few words.”

He stepped aside to yield the center position.

Thirty-Two grinned as he took Feng Jun’s former spot. Scanning the miners’ lifeless faces, he didn’t mind at all—years as an advisor had taught him precisely what mattered most in dealing with the common laboring folk.

Time to play the ultimate trump card!

Thirty-Two declared: “Working for my Li Family from now on makes you a part of the Li Family. We never mistreat workers, so I announce: from this month onward, your monthly wages will increase to three taels of silver.”

The moment those words left his mouth, all the coal miners froze simultaneously—as if struck instantly on pressure points, they couldn’t move.

Actually, not just them—even Feng Jun beside them froze. Three taels of silver? Was the Li Family mad? These coal miners were society’s lowest slaves, descendants of defeated soldiers forced into this labor from birth, stuck in hereditary low status. How could they suddenly earn a monthly wage matching that of commoners in rich southern counties?

Who’d have thought that wasn’t all?

Thirty-Two added: “Oh right, not just wages—we’ll cover your food too.”

It was then that the coal miners cried out: “Aaaaah!”

Chapter 356: This Man Must Not Be Arrested

The coal miners had never heard of such generosity in their entire lives—not just free meals but three extra taels of silver! Damn, were they even coal miners anymore? They might as well be oil merchants from the county town.

Is this new boss trying to trick us?

A bolder coal miner stepped forward. “Steward Thirty-Two, sir... Is what you just said... true? We... we’re not ones for being fooled.”

Thirty-Two replied, “If even half my word is false, may the next son I bear be born without an anus!”

The coal miners brightened immediately. “Such a vicious oath must be real!”

Yet Li Daoxuan frowned incredulously. This man can't possibly father another son, can he? That oath sounds earnest but rings hollow.

But no one apart from Li Daoxuan and Third Lady knew Thirty-Two was already a eunuch. The miners took his pledge to heart. Cheers erupted: "Incredible! What a generous new Dong Weng!"

"The new Dong Weng comes from a kind-hearted family!"

Feng Jun quietly sighed nearby: So this is the power of money. By throwing silver around, he's already lifted these miners from apathy to spirited joy! If the Li Family fulfills its promises, their loyalty will be absolute. If I ever try reclaiming this mine for the crown, they'll revolt.

The thought unsettled him, though another followed: Since the Li Family treats penniless miners so well, they'll surely not balk at taxes... As long as duties are paid, the empire loses nothing letting them operate.

Reassured, he calmed down.

Suddenly, Gao Yiye emerged from the carriage. Her grimy hands had been wiped clean by Qiu Ju; her sooty sleeves were meticulously folded inward by Dong Xue. The soiled hem of her skirt, however, remained hopelessly stained.

She stepped out and gestured toward the narrow, coal-black highway linking the county to Jinshuigou. "Lord Feng, the Deity wishes to widen this path into a smooth cement road. Please issue a notice to hire more porters. Complete this cement road swiftly. It's barely five miles to the county—couldn't it be built in days?"

Feng Jun answered, "With generous wages, porters will flock here."

Gao Yiye turned toward the miners' shanty settlement. "The Deity says these shacks can't withstand wind or rain! Imagine how workers suffer when sick? Assign men to build them a dormitory—clean, orderly cement houses."

Feng Jun smiled patiently, “With wages secured...”

Gao Yiye faced the miners. “Work safely from now on! The Deity will arrange helmets, safety garments, cotton gloves, better tools... and cool refreshments in summer.”

As she rattled off benefits, the coal miners gaped in disbelief. Are we still society’s dregs?

Gao Yiye declared, “Don’t call yourselves coal miners anymore. From now on, you are coal miners.

Come, sing with me:

We miners are dauntless, hey! We miners are strong...”

Surprisingly, Qiu Ju and Dong Xue pulled small hand drums from the carriage and beat a rhythm while Gao Yiye sang:

Working daily without rest,

Raising tall mansions, digging mines true,

Changing the world—making it new... A-hey!

Feng Jun muttered, “That tune... Why am I tempted to sing? I’m no miner!”

Thirty-Two laughed and clapped Lord Feng’s shoulder. “Let’s leave the fun behind, Lord Feng. Join me in the county for drinks? I’ve a jar of fine Wuliangye.”

Feng Jun’s eyes gleamed. “Wuliangye? I’ve never heard of it!”

Thirty-Two winked mysteriously. “Smells divine. One sip and you’ll understand!”

Feng Jun beamed. “Then I must oblige!”

—

Imperial Study, Capital

The young Emperor Chongzhen Zhu Youjian sat as usual, reviewing decrees.

Three years into his reign, he already moved like a monarch exhausted by thirty—his once-sharp spirit crushed beneath unseen weights.

He picked up a dispatch from Shaanxi:

Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor, triumphs in Hancheng and Yichuan!

Successively defeats bandit leaders—

Wang Zuogua! Zhang Shusheng! Ji San'er! Wang Hu! Little Honglang! Yizhangqing! Luedihu!
Hunjianglong! Wang Jiayin!...

Zhu Youjian's eyes snapped open, rushing with pride like strapped to an aircraft.

“Who is this Hong Chengchou? How is he so formidable?”

The high-ranking eunuch Cao Huachun leaned in. “A scholar from the 44th year of Wanli's reign. Began as clerk in Jiangxi's criminal bureau, rose through ranks over six years. Promoted to Education Inspector of Zhejiang in Year Two of Tianqi—renowned for spotting genius. Imperial court prized his selections. Made Councillor of Zhejiang's civil administration two years later. By Year Seven of Tianqi, Shaanxi tasked him with grain supervision.”

Zhu Youjian marveled, “Such rapid rise?”

Cao Huachun nodded. “He’s truly gifted.”

Reading Hong’s victories anew, Zhu Youjian privately applauded. Shaanxi drowns in chaos, yet he wins battle after battle—brilliant tactician, scholar and warrior merged!

He pondered fitting rewards.

Sudden commotion broke his thoughts.

A young eunuch scurried in, panic-stricken. “Your Majesty! Dire news! Provincial Governor Zhang Mengjing of Yansui... has perished!”

Zhu Youjian stiffened. “How? His health was sound!”

The eunuch’s expression twisted. “Angry—to death, Your Majesty. Months ago, when Five Troop Divisions marched toward the capital to Serve Wang, General Wu Zimian of Yansui’s division hoarded soldiers’ rations. He extorted silver from those unwilling to serve, sold military horses secretly. Governor Zhang learned this and died overwhelmed by grief and rage.”

Zhu Youjian slammed the desk, his mood plummeting like riding a tower-drop machine.

“Outrageous! Such insolence! Arrest and execute him at once!”

Cao Huachun murmured urgently, “Don’t, Your Majesty! Among those forces marching to Serve Wang, two units have already mutinied. Order Wu Zimian arrested now and he, knowing death awaits him, will inevitably rebel—making mutiny number three! The consequences would be disastrous...”

Zhu Youjian clutched his chest, breathless—almost following Zhang Mengjing to heaven with fury.

Half a minute passed before he recovered. Voice hollow with exhaustion, he commanded,

“Appoint Hong Chengchou as Provincial Governor of Yansui, replacing Zhang Mengjing. As for Wu Zimian... once the Jurchens retreat... deal with him.”

Chapter 357: War Is Coming to Qiachuan Port

Li Daoxuan’s perspective followed Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, and Feng Jun as they entered Heyang County. Feng Jun hosted a banquet for them. Just as the three were enjoying the meal, a swift horse galloped into the county office. The rider, draped in white robes, was none other than Bai Yuan.

Finding no sign of Feng Jun in the front hall, Bai Yuan rushed straight to the courtyard and dashed up to the banquet table: “Lord Feng, disaster is imminent! I’ve received reliable intelligence—Wang Jiayin’s fleet will soon attack Qiachuan Port.”

Clatter! Feng Jun’s chopsticks fell to the ground. Blood immediately gushed from his nose.

“Regardless, please muster militias from every village and town, Lord Feng, and send them to Qiachuan Port,” urged Bai Yuan. “I’ll also rally Chengcheng County’s militia to reinforce us.”

Feng Jun swept his official robes aside and sprinted out, his voice trailing behind him: “Agreed! I’ll mobilize the militia immediately. Chengcheng’s forces are in your hands, Mr. Bai!”

Spotting Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two, Bai Yuan looked genuinely startled: “Oh? You happen to be here in Heyang County too?”

Gao Yiye smiled. “Yes, the Deity is with us.”

Bai Yuan turned his face skyward, overjoyed: “Deity, Bai Shui Wang Er has returned safely! He’s at Qiachuan Port now.”

Upon hearing this, Li Daoxuan felt a surge of relief. Excellent. Wang Er was practically one of his own people—his safety mattered most.

Bai Yuan spoke rapidly: "But his return wasn't effortless. He failed to persuade Wang Jiayin to join Gaojia Village. Zhang Liwei and Wang Guozhong plotted to kill him. Thankfully, Wang Er prepared in advance. By employing a 'golden cicada shedding its shell' stratagem, he stole a small boat and escaped at top speed. He reached Qiachuan Port just an hour ago."

Li Daoxuan murmured, "Since Wang Er's appeal failed, Wang Jiayin will proceed with his original plan: attacking Qiachuan Port. That means Wang Jiayin's naval forces will sail downstream toward us soon."

"Exactly!" replied Bai Yuan. "Therefore, I intend to return to Gaojia Village immediately to summon Instructor He for support."

"No need to return," Li Daoxuan interjected. "Roundtrip travel wastes precious time. I'll call Instructor He over."

Bai Yuan clasped his fists. "Gratitude, Deity!"

Li Daoxuan pondered: Qiachuan Port still lies beyond my vision. Another battle unfolds where I can't intervene to protect my people. If even one is lost, it'll haunt me.

They require more reliable means of self-defense.

His thoughts drifted to how Wang Jiayin's fleet had previously assaulted Hequ County in Shanxi, only to be repelled by Western cannons under the provincial commander. Coastal artillery turrets proved devastating against ships.

Not long ago, I supplied capillary steel tubing to the artisans at "Artisans' Well." Did they manage to build cannons in such a short timeframe? This feels rushed.

Li Daoxuan tapped the label "Gaojia Village." Instantly, his perspective snapped back—landing first near the military camp. With his field of vision now stretching 1,000 meters long and 600 meters wide, he simultaneously observed the regular barracks, firearms bureau, and cavalry camp.

Without preamble, he printed a sheet of paper and held it aloft in the sky: All Units: Advance to Reinforce Qiachuan Port.

The three camps mobilized at once.

Leading were Zao Ying's troops. Cavalry reacted fastest. Within moments, a core group of 120 elite riders—her former bandit company—sped out. Newer recruits scrambled after them, saddling frantically, uncertain if they could keep pace.

Next came Cheng Xu's infantry. They packed hastily, collected ammunition from the firearms bureau, and marched out. As foot soldiers, their speed paled against the cavalry; they'd need a full day to reach Qiachuan Port. Li Daoxuan sighed inwardly: We must complete that cement road soon. At least then we could transport troops using sun chariots.

Once both divisions marched, Li Daoxuan switched his focus to Artisans' Well.

There, resting on the ground, stood two "stainless steel cannons." Astonishingly, the craftsmen had forged them within mere days. Then it struck him: the core challenge of cannon-making was the barrel. By providing pre-made capillary steel tubing—custom-blocked on one end with firing mechanisms preinstalled—he'd given them functional barrels straightaway.

All the artisans had done was add details: mounting wheels, attaching flash-pan covers, building handles, crafting compatible rounds, and preparing pre-measured bombs... Simple tasks for Gaojia Village's current productivity.

But here lay the problem: these weapons were freshly completed. No artillery unit had trained to use them.

Doesn't matter. Take them now!

Wishing not to alarm the tiny figures, Li Daoxuan slipped on an "Infinity Glove" over one hand—extending its shimmering golden form toward Artisans' Well—while leaving his other hand bare for delicate control.

Artisans cheered at the sight of the "Deity's hand": "The Deity is reaching down! What will he take?"

Li Daoxuan gently plucked a cannon with his ungloved hand, nestling it onto his golden palm. To the small figures, the cannon seemed to levitate independently before landing across his vast hand—proof of the Deity’s boundless divine power. He then lifted a crate of cannonballs onto his palm.

His enormous hand swept horizontally, halting at the firearms bureau entrance. Without instruction, bureau chief Xu Dafu led his gunpowder makers outside. They piled bundles of pre-measured bomb packs onto the waiting palm.

No words passed. Li Daoxuan withdrew his hand beyond the box. The small figures watched the golden-skinned giant hand vanish into the clouds, cradling two cannons and ammunition stores.

He then tapped the tag above Heyang County. His perspective shifted back to the county seat.

As Bai Yuan readied to return to Qiachuan Port, Gao Yiye addressed him: “Mr. Bai, one hundred militia guards are protecting me. Since the situation is urgent, take them. They’re elite fighters—far superior to Heyang County’s militia—and include skilled warriors like Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi. Though honestly... If you excluded those two, the unit’s combat effectiveness would actually improve...”

Bai Yuan replied sternly, “Impossible! Should Qiachuan Port fall, we withdraw to the county seat—a minor setback. But protecting the Saint Lady takes precedence. I won’t divert her guards.”

Chapter 358: A Cannon Is Just a Large-Sized Firearm

Gao Yiye: “I had the Deity watching over me, so how could it not be safe?”

Bai Yuan: “The Deity himself was very busy.”

Just as the two were talking, Li Daoxuan spoke: “Yiye, tell Bai Yuan that the reinforcements from Gaojia Village were already on their way. Also, the artisans’ well had produced two cannons, and I brought them over to hand over to him.”

Gao Yiye was overjoyed: “Mr. Bai, the Deity has come...”

After hearing this, Bai Yuan was delighted: “It was good that the reinforcements were coming. As for the cannons, they could not be given to me directly here. The people of Heyang County did not yet know the detailed deeds of the Deity. If a giant hand descended directly from the sky, it would scare all the people in the county town senseless.”

Li Daoxuan: “Yes, we should not frighten them. So, you needed to go out of the city, to an uninhabited place outside, and then I would put the cannons down.”

Bai Yuan: “Okay!”

He and Gao Yiye quickly ran out of the city with a militia of over a hundred people. Thirty-Two, who had no combat ability, also came along to spectate. The group arrived at a faraway place outside the city. They looked left and right: no one was there. Here, they should not frighten the civilians.

Only then did Li Daoxuan put down the two stainless steel cannons.

The two cannons were very heavy. Moreover, a large basket of cannonballs was also extremely heavy, along with several packs of bombs. Handing this over to the militia was indeed a troublesome matter.

All over a hundred members of the militia sprang into action. Dozens of them pushed and pulled the cannons. Several held the cannonballs. Several cautiously carried the bomb packs. They returned to the county town.

Just as everyone reached the city gates, they saw County Magistrate Feng Jun also running back. He was followed by family servants, government runners, and a large militia force. He had organized the militias from all the villages and towns of Heyang County at the fastest speed.

The two sides met at the city gates. From afar, Feng Jun saw the two cannons being pushed and pulled by the militia in one glance, and he could not help but be startled: “Oh my, Mr. Bai, where did you get these cannons?”

Bai Yuan chuckled: “Didn’t I say last time? The matter of the cannons could be left to me to find a way.”

Feng Jun thought carefully: indeed, there seemed to be such a thing. At that time, he was surprised to hear Bai Yuan say he could get cannons. He did not expect this guy to actually be able to get these

things. Very impressive! He did not know how strong his backing was; perhaps even the Provincial Governor gave him face.

But... the color of these cannons was a bit odd.

The Western cannons Feng Jun had seen before were all pitch black, or that green-black mixed color of copper and iron. How come the cannons before him were shining silver? What strange material were they made of?

Bai Yuan: "Lord Feng, now was not the time to circle around the cannons. We needed to quickly take the cannons and the militia and head to Qiachuan Port. That was the important matter."

Feng Jun was rushing with pride: "That's right! Let us hurry up and depart."

His militia force here was numerous. Moreover, they had oxen, horses, mules, and such. With a few oxen, they could pull the two cannons forward. The cannonballs and bomb packs could all be placed on carts pulled by horses or oxen. It saved quite a bit of manpower.

A large crowd prepared to head southeast.

Bai Yuan turned around and said to Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two: "The two of you should stay here in Heyang County. There was no need to personally run to the battlefield and face danger."

The two also knew they were useless in the fighting and did not argue about it. Gao Yiye said: "Please bring along the hundred-member militia guarding me. This was also the Deity's meaning."

Hearing it was the Deity's meaning, Bai Yuan could not oppose it any longer: "Then, Saint Lady, be very careful."

Bai Yuan and a hundred Gaojia Village Militia members, plus the 1,500 member Heyang Militia brought by Feng Jun, marched grandly toward Qiachuan Port.

The straight-line distance from the county town to Qiachuan Port was over thirty li. It still took half a day to get there.

Feng Jun felt a bit uneasy in his heart. He was not very confident in the militia under his command. Wang Jiayin had fifty thousand subordinates. How could they fight this battle? He had no idea at all.

Bai Yuan said with a laugh: "Lord Feng, there was no need for nervousness. Look, we had two cannons. Following the example of the Shanxi Provincial Governor, they could set up the cannons at the port and fire randomly at Wang Jiayin's fleet. They could sink a few of his ships, and those villains would retreat by themselves."

Hearing this, Feng Jun relaxed slightly: "What Mr. Bai said was right; we had two cannons."

Then he suddenly felt something was not right.

"Mr. Bai, it seemed to me that these people around you were the guards from the Saint Lady's side. Among these people, was there anyone who knew how to operate cannons?"

Bai Yuan: "Um!"

Feng Jun: "You got the cannons, but didn't borrow any artillerymen?"

Bai Yuan: "Well..."

Seeing his expression, Feng Jun knew it was bad: "Mr. Bai, with only the cannons and no artillerymen, what use were they? Finished, finished! Now it was all over."

Bai Yuan waved his hand: "Do not panic! A cannon was merely a large-sized firearm. Its usage method could not differ much from a firearm's. I am proficient with firearms; at a distance of a hundred paces, I could shoot Fan Shanyue with a firearm. How could I not know how to handle a cannon?"

Feng Jun said nothing, only silently shedding two streams of nosebleed.

Bai Yuan: "Lord Feng, why were you suddenly having a nosebleed? Didn't you only get one when your emotions fluctuated?"

Feng Jun: "My emotions now were fluctuating greatly! Who could hear what you just said and not have their emotions fluctuate? Was there anyone? Was there? Was there?"

Bai Yuan: "..."

The two marched while awkwardly chatting. Half a day flashed by, and Qiachuan Port arrived.

At that time, at the port side, the cement fortress had just started being built. It was still far from completion.

But a long wooden wall had already been constructed. It was made of whole tree trunks, deeply inserted side by side into the ground. There was no time to build space atop the wall for the defending soldiers to walk on; it was just a single-layer wall. It was formed into a semicircle to enclose the waterside area of the port.

It resembled the modern Huanghe Hukou Falls, where a long wall surrounds the entire water outlet part to prevent visitors from seeing it.

Zhang Yuanwai from Xia Zhuang was stationed behind the wall with four hundred militia members.

Additionally, Bai Shui Wang Er, White Cat, and one hundred Wangjia Villagers were stationed nearby.

Moreover, there was a large group of laborers, numbering in the thousands. Some were responsible for road construction; others were responsible for building the cement fortress. The whole area near the port presented a noisy and bustling scene.

When Feng Jun and Bai Yuan's people arrived, nearly four thousand people jostled at the port side. The scale was quite large; at the small port shore, heads were densely packed like ants.

Chapter 359: Don't Call This Rabbit a Ragtag Mob

Seeing so many people gathered by the dock, Bai Yuan chuckled. "Lord Feng, look—we've got over three thousand here! Quite a sizable number."

Feng Jun: "But what we have is a mob of three thousand, and Wang Jiayin's got fifty thousand!"

"Wow, calling who a ragtag mob!?" Ground Rabbit tailing behind Bai Yuan felt offended. Originally assigned to guard Gao Yiye, he'd been handed over to Bai Yuan and quietly followed to Qiachuan Port. He'd stayed low-key till now, causing no trouble, but hearing Feng Jun call them a ragtag mob—how could he endure that?

Stepping forward, Ground Rabbit huffed, "Lord Feng, though you're a high official, don't underestimate the Gaojia Village Militia! I, the top fighter of the militia, known throughout jianghu as Ground Rabbit, am unmatched in martial prowess—'One Sword Shines Coldly Across Forty States'! Calling me ragtag—wouldn't that be disrespectful?"

His utterly confident stance, cocky tone, and puffed-up posture made Feng Jun pause and scrutinize Ground Rabbit head to toe. Perhaps... he really is skilled?

Feng Jun clasped his fists respectfully. "My apologies for the earlier thoughtless words. Might Hero Rabbit share his thoughts on the present situation?"

Hearing this, Bai Yuan sighed inwardly: Oh no, the rabbit's about to reveal his true feathers.

Feeling proud that even a county magistrate would "seek his wisdom," Ground Rabbit tilted his nose skyward. "Lord Feng, you've counted the enemy forces wrong. Wang Jiayin doesn't have fifty thousand men."

Feng Jun: "This figure comes from official military intelligence. How could it be wrong?"

Ground Rabbit reasoned, "He might field fifty thousand on land, but attacking our port along the Yellow River? Impossible. How many come depends entirely on how many boats he has."

Feng Jun paused, then lit up. “Brilliant point, Hero Rabbit! Hahaha! How could Wang Jiayin have so many ships? Boats are scarce on these tricky river currents! Even plundering along the way, he’d never gather vessels for fifty thousand. At best, he sends a vanguard.”

Ground Rabbit swelled with pride. “Exactly! He won’t send more than ten thousand. With over three thousand of us defending the wooden palisade by the shore, he’d need five times our number—at least fifteen thousand—to breach landings. How could we possibly lose!?”

Feng Jun thought: This self-styled Ground Rabbit... actually makes sense. Calculated and reasoned, not empty bluster.

“Hahaha!” Feng Jun laughed heartily. “This puts my worries to rest!”

The moment his laugh ended, noise erupted among the thousand-odd porters building the cement road and cement fortress. Someone shouted, “War’s coming!?”

“They brought so many militia—must mean battle!”

“Is it those rogue bandits!?”

“Yikes!”

“Well, I’m outta here!”

“Me too! I didn’t sign up to fight!”

Amid the clamor, over a thousand porters suddenly stampeded chaotically northwest, vanishing entirely in moments.

Only the Heyang County militia’s thousand-plus remained, alongside Wang Er’s hundred and Bai Yuan’s hundred—barely two thousand total.

Feng Jun wiped his brow. “We’ve got two thousand left. Hero Rabbit, you said they’d need five times our strength to take us... so, ten thousand makes five times exactly, no?”

Sweat poured down Ground Rabbit’s forehead.

Bai Yuan couldn’t help but laugh. At it again, that rabbit!

“Enough messing around—deploy the cannons!” Bai Yuan commanded. “Set up our two cannons, aimed at the Yellow River.”

The militia sprang into action.

At that moment, distant hoofbeats drummed the ground—Three Hundred Cavalry Troops charged from the northwest. Leading them rode a woman built like an ox, resembling a mounted gorilla: Zao Ying herself. From afar, she bellowed, “Mr. Bai! Is all well at the port? By the Deity’s order, I’ve brought reinforcements! Instructor He’s infantry troops will trail hours behind.”

Bai Yuan turned and beamed. “Commander Zao! You came right in time—Wang Jiayin’s fleet hasn’t arrived!”

Surveying the unexpected cavalry, Feng Jun gaped. Highgarden’s got cavalry too!? Just how formidable are they?

Zao Ying declared, “My troops aren’t suited for dock defense! I’ll scout north along the Yellow River’s west bank!”

Bai Yuan nodded. “Scouting it is! We entrust that to you, Commander Zao!”

Zao Ying saluted from her saddle, yanked the reins, and galloped north along the river. Her three hundred trailed like the wind, vanishing swiftly.

Feng Jun couldn’t hold back. “You even have a cavalry unit!? And who was that heroine?”

Bai Yuan smiled lightly. “That’s Commander Zao of our village—in charge of cavalry training. Fine riding skills, wouldn’t you say?”

Feng Jun pressed, “Chengcheng County isn’t horse country. Where’d you get that many warhorses?”

Bai Yuan chuckled conspiratorially. “Bought ’em.”

Feng Jun: “Hundreds of warhorses... that’s an immense fortune.”

With practiced flair, Bai Yuan snapped open his fan, partially veiling his face to reveal the characters 君子 (“noble man”) as he replied loftily, “The Li Family has ample assets.”

Feng Jun: “...”

Ample? This is national-treasury level wealth!

Somehow, his confidence surged. With backing like this... maybe we really can stop Wang Jiayin. Fine—if soldiers come, we’ll block; if floodwaters rise, we’ll build dams! Enough fearing phantoms.

Feng Jun hurriedly directed militia to build scaffolding against the palisade—platforms where archers could ascend and fire. Without them, the flimsy wooden wall offered little beyond visual concealment.

Several militia instructors dashed about, shouting assignments.

Meanwhile, Bai Yuan approached Bai Shui Wang Er. “Your men... should likely avoid this fight. Freshly split from Wang Jiayin and now battling him head-on? It might breach loyalty in jianghu.”

Wang Er shook his head grimly. “I showed him loyalty. But when his brother-in-law Zhang Liwei and clansman Wang Guozhong tried to kill me, the disloyal one became him—not me. My men fight freely.

Chengcheng County shelters Wangjia Village, our home ground. Defending one's hometown? That justification stands anywhere."

Chapter 360: Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale Part Five

Bai Yuan whispered: "That's not the only issue. If Wang Jiayin's men recognize you during the battle and angrily shout 'Wang Er, why are you standing with the enemy?', many on our side would hear your name. That might be problematic."

Wang Er jolted awake to the realization. He was the world's greatest rebel, a prime target for government crackdowns wherever he went. If he was to join Gaojia Village in the future, he needed a new identity to avoid bringing trouble to the village.

If these thousand-plus people from Heyang County heard his name, the news could easily leak. Future headaches would multiply.

Wang Er grabbed a piece of cloth and covered his face. He stretched out his hand: "Give me a yellow hat."

Bai Yuan: "Seems like you should wear a white hat."

Wang Er: "White hats are for learned men, blue hats are for skilled men. Someone like me only needs a yellow hat."

Bai Yuan considered this carefully and found it reasonable. Wang Er would just have to make do with a yellow hat.

He put on the yellow hat and covered his face, then instructed his hundred-plus men from Wangjia Village to do the same—all wearing yellow hats and covering their faces. They now looked like ordinary laborers shielding themselves from dust during work.

Meanwhile, Zhang Yuanwai was organizing the Heyang County militia. Their equipment was far worse than the Gaojia Village Militia—no armor, and their weapons were a chaotic mess of random gear. They happened to notice the yellow hats left behind by the more than a thousand laborers who had just fled.

These hats were quite sturdy; they'd make decent makeshift helmets. So the entire Heyang County militia picked up yellow hats to wear. These men weren't wearing armor either, just various chaotic mismatched clothes. With the yellow hats on, they blended perfectly with Wang Er's group. Indistinguishable.

Wang Er finally breathed easy. There was no way he'd be recognized now.

...

Li Daoxuan's view couldn't reach Qiachuan Port, so he focused it above Heyang County town.

Inside Heyang County town, slight chaos reigned.

Hearing that bandits were approaching, the common folk panicked without even knowing who these incoming bandits were. The streets filled with people scattering everywhere.

"Heard? The County Lord took the militia to Qiachuan Port."

"Heard a large bandit force is landing there."

"Know who?"

"No clue. Surname Wang, they say. But heard they're fiercer than Fan Shanyue."

"Goodness! Terrible!"

"Why block them at Qiachuan Port? The County Lord should defend the town!"

"Nonsense! Just defend the town? Abandon the outside? If they hold Qiachuan, they hold the whole Heyang County!"

People on the street started arguing quite fiercely.

After a brief exchange of information via insults invoking each other's ancestors, they all rushed to the southeast corner of the county town, straining to look towards Qiachuan.

This gazing was absolutely useless. Qiachuan Port was over thirty li away. How could they possibly see anything? They could only stare foolishly into the void.

Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, Qiu Ju, and Dong Xue moved through the chaotic crowd. With no combat skills among the four, navigating the disorder felt risky. However, the Sharp Knife Troop of low cloud floating above their heads gave them considerable peace of mind.

Gao Yiye remarked: "People here don't yet know the Deity protects them from above. They panic merely hearing of bandits. It wouldn't be like this back in our Gaojia Village."

Thirty-Two responded: "Therefore, we must quickly bring over our comic books, Dao Emotion plays, and such. It's time for the Deity's name to spread through Heyang County."

Mentioning this made Thirty-Two recall something: "Saint Lady, how far along is your comic Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale?"

Gao Yiye chuckled: "Working on Part Five right now!"

Thirty-Two couldn't help but become curious: "What was this episode about?"

Gao Yiye: "This episode told how Immortal Chang'e fell in love with the Deity, but Marshal Tianpeng became jealous, so he went to flirt with Immortal Chang'e, angering the Deity who defeated Marshal Tianpeng, captured him, and handed him over to the Jade Emperor, who then demoted Marshal Tianpeng to the mortal realm, turning him into Zhu Bajie..."

"Pfft!" Thirty-Two nearly spat out a mouthful of tea.

Outside the box, Li Daoxuan was happily eating an old-fashioned fluffy cake; hearing this, he was a bit startled—a twisted version of Journey to the West? Inserting strange plots into Journey to the West? What frightening fan fiction was this? Without realizing it, he clenched his hand, crushing the cake entirely, and the crumbled bits fell from the sky...

“Oh no!” Li Daoxuan swiftly reached out to catch the cake crumbs, but he wasn’t really a deity, just moving at a mortal’s pace; how could he catch the falling crumbs? He only grabbed the larger pieces, but the powder-like crumbs still fell into the box.

A resident of Heyang County was rushing chaotically down the street when suddenly he felt something “bonk” his head—it seemed like a fluffy object had struck him.

“Who’s throwing things at me?” He looked up and saw many strange round objects in the sky, big and small, falling like rain, covering everything.

“What happened?”

“Weird things are falling from the sky.”

“Watch your heads!”

Some covered their heads and ducked into houses.

But others were hit, discovered it didn’t hurt, and didn’t hide at all, just gaped foolishly upward.

The items falling from the sky were very fluffy; they landed on people’s heads without causing harm and on roofs without breaking tiles; their size was clearly not proportional to their weight, and some even felt a bit bouncy.

They drifted down, blanketing everything, and instantly coated the whole city.

The city’s entire populace was collectively dumbfounded.

Only Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, and the others felt no surprise; the four gazed upward and said, “The Deity is casting a spell.”

The common people had never seen cake before, but this was Heyang County!

China’s Yellow River Eco-Gourmet Capital!

The residents here excelled most at eating!

In just a flash, they linked these strange falling things with the word “eating.”

Someone remarked, “It looks like it’s made of flour!”

“I smell a strong sweet fragrance.”

“And there’s an egg scent inside.”

“Why overthink it? Just taste it and find out.”

One bold individual, uncaring if it was poisonous, snagged a piece and stuffed it into his mouth; instantly, his expression shifted, and with a tiger-like pounce, he collapsed to the ground with a thud, shielding several cake crumbs beneath him, with a face that screamed “I’ll kill anyone who takes this.”

In many spots around the city, such brave tasters appeared; after one bite, without a word, they crouched and began scooping up crumbs fiercely.

This behavior was highly contagious, and soon, nearly everyone in the county seat was collecting cake crumbs.