

Great Ming 381

Chapter 381: Jinshuigou Coal Mine

Liu You sold all three carts of flour to a grain merchant in the city, receiving a large sum of silver in return.

He then hired a horse-drawn carriage, letting his wife and children ride inside.

One horse-drawn carriage and three ox carts departed Heyang County together, slowly making their way to Jinshuigou Coal Mine.

By the time he arrived, Li Daoxuan was peeling spicy shrimp while watching the construction progress at the coal mine.

After Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two visited Jinshuigou Coal Mine last time and settled the “privatization” issue with Feng Jun, this coal mine had become Li Daoxuan’s focal point.

After all, coal mining was the “father” of the Industrial Revolution; without the father, there could be no children, meaning the Industrial Revolution couldn’t flourish.

The Industrial Revolution was, in turn, the father of modern society. Without it, the ideology of an agricultural society could hardly undergo fundamental change.

As the Great Teacher once said, “Content must match form.”

An advanced political system needed matching advanced productive forces to thrive.

If productive forces lagged, the system couldn’t develop.

If the system became a hindrance, productive forces would also stagnate.

Li Daoxuan could currently stabilize “new ideologies” in Gaojia Village by using his “golden hand” to cheat.

But if anything unexpected happened to him—or when he died of old age—the support of productive forces would vanish.

All these new ideas would collapse.

Raising the productivity of his followers themselves was an urgent matter.

Three engineering teams bustled within the coal mine.

The first team consisted entirely of people from Heyang County, tasked with the simplest road construction work.

The second team also came from Heyang County but included several blue hat technical workers from Gaojia Village.

They guided the yellow hat workers in building concrete dormitories for the coal miners.

Construction had only just begun a few days prior, yet the vast scale and imposing grandeur of the structure were already evident.

The third engineering team was impressive—all wore blue hats and hailed from Gaojia Village.

Mixed among them was a young lord sporting a white hat.

Clad in white robes, this was none other than Young Master Bai.

Almost seventeen now, Young Master Bai was handsome and poised, an age considered capable of standing on one's own in this era.

He sketched and wrote on a blueprint, occasionally glancing up at the coal pit before reverting to his annotations.

His blueprint depicted a small track extending from outside the coal pit into its depths.

Above the track sat a small cart connected to iron chains, stretching outward to a system of pulleys.

Finishing the sketch, he held the drawing aloft toward the sky.

“Honorable Deity, please take a look. Is this feasible?”

Tap-tap-tap.

Li Daoxuan typed a few characters, and the printer whirred to life.

Moments later, he displayed a paper:

“Don’t ask me whether it’s feasible.

Test it.

Perform experiments.

Practice yields genuine insights.”

Young Master Bai hastily bowed deeply.

“The Deity’s teaching is profoundly correct.”

He then slapped the blueprint into the hands of a nearby blue hat.

“Commence work immediately! Build this coal transport cart according to this design!

Once completed, I will personally test its viability.

If successful, miners won’t need to exhaust their strength hauling coal up from the pit bottom!”

A group of blue hats briefly studied the blueprint before directing the yellow hats into action.

The entire coal pit buzzed with fervent activity.

Amid this hive of productivity, Liu You arrived.

Parking his carriage and oxcarts beside the mine, Liu You peeked at the bustling construction site and felt a wave of apprehension.

Was this really the Jinshuigou Coal Mine he remembered?

What had happened to it?

A soot-covered coal miner approached him.

“Good Sir, how may we help you?”

Being addressed as “Sir” momentarily flustered Liu You.

Then he understood—traveling with oxcarts and a carriage, dressed in clean clothes, he now appeared a wealthy gentleman in the eyes of the poor.

He straightened up, rushing with pride.

“I’m here to buy coal.

With everything this busy, is coal still being sold?”

“Sold? Absolutely!”

The miner exclaimed excitedly.

Turning, he shouted:

“Leader! Leader! We have a buyer!”

Soon the head of Jinshuigou Coal Mine arrived.

This man wasn’t a newly appointed leader from Gaojia Village.

He was the original overseer of Jinshuigou, formerly a minor official retained by Heyang County’s authorities to manage the mines.

Though technically employed by the county, pay was nonexistent—even the border army went unpaid; how could coal miners expect wages?

For a long time, Jinshuigou’s workers secretly sold coal to earn what their government wages should have provided.

Feng Jun knew but couldn’t intervene; funding was unavailable.

He simply turned a blind eye, permitting the miners to survive independently.

Now that Gaojia Village had taken over, Thirty-Two arranged for proper wages.

Trepidation about losing their jobs overshadowed any temptation toward illicit sales.

Proceeds from documented coal sales were submitted to Gaojia Village, which granted the workers commission-based silver payments.

This greatly boosted their motivation—more sales meant higher commissions!

The overseer stood face-to-face with Liu You.

“Here to purchase coal?”

Liu You nodded.

“Three carts full.”

Delighted, the overseer beamed—a three-cart purchase meant significant commission!

Liu You probed:

“As for the price...”

The overseer answered quickly.

“Unchanged.

Usual rate.

But since you're purchasing three carts at once... I can offer a slight discount."

It was Liu You's turn to rejoice.

"Excellent!

Fill them! Load all three!"

The coal miners sprang into action.

Carrying baskets, they swiftly hauled enormous quantities of coal, packing Liu You's carts to the brim.

Liu You felt joy bubbling inside him.

He'd haul this coal back to Gaojia Village to boil water for Fresh Water Hele—countless bowls awaited!

Distributing costs per bowl again would further reduce expenditure.

Life was about to become truly beautiful indeed...

Daydreaming, he suddenly spotted an enormous transport team arriving.

Thirty-Two had dispatched dozens of carts.

Stretching over a hundred zhang, the caravan overflowed the mountain path completely.

His wife leaned out from the carriage to ask:

“A-you, are all these carts really loading coal for Gaojia Village?

What kind of village consumes so much?”

Liu You chuckled.

“You’ll understand once we arrive.

It’s no small village—‘Gaojia City’ wouldn’t be an exaggeration.

Artisans’ wells burn day and night, spewing dark smoke.

Schools overflow with students; our own children may study there.

And the Gaojia Business Circle!

Lights blaze brightly—it’s the most magnificent place I have ever seen.”

Chapter 382: Seeking the Teachers Guidance

Liu You arrived at Gaojia Village with his wife and son, along with three carts of coal.

Had his shop been small, it truly wouldn’t have fit three carts of coal inside. Fortunately, his shop was a spacious building—a brothel, to be exact. He piled all three carts of coal into the private rooms, thoroughly blackening those once fine, elegant spaces.

Just as he was transporting the coal.

Mrs. Liu walked with their son around this new “village.”

She discovered her husband hadn't been exaggerating; this place wasn't just a village in size but could rightly be called a town, even several times more bustling and prosperous than Heyang County.

Walking down the street, she was dazzled by the overwhelming variety of goods.

By the roadside, an old woman sold radishes for eight wen per jin. She figured that since her husband now made money more easily, buying some radishes shouldn't be a big deal. She quickly purchased one jin and had her son carry it.

After walking a few steps, another old woman by the roadside sold cabbages for ten wen per jin. After three years of drought, she couldn't recall how long it had been since she'd eaten cabbage, so she hastily bought another jin and made her son carry that as well.

A bit further ahead, she saw a fabric shop selling cotton-padded coats. A thick padded coat with a floral pattern cost five taels of silver—which wasn't actually expensive but the normal price for something only the young masters and mistresses of wealthy families could afford, while ordinary folk shivered through winter wrapped in rough hemp clothes.

Moreover, in this time of great disaster, no one grew cotton, so the cotton cloth price had shot up uncontrollably. Yet, at Gaojia Village, a thick padded coat was still available for five taels.

She thought it cheap in her mind but didn't dare buy one, pondering that only once her husband earned more could they afford it; he probably needn't bother, she decided, maybe just for their son.

Just then, a group of children walked down the street.

They were all around ten years old or younger, playing and reciting poems among themselves. One said: "I learned a new poem today, by Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty: 'Before my bed, a pool of light bright, I wonder if it's frost aground? Ah? What comes next?'"

Another nearby laughed: "Hahaha! I learned 'At noon we hoe the weeds, sweat drips on the soil...'"

Mrs. Liu watched these children, about her son's age, each reciting poetry, and felt a pang of envy. Ah, her child hadn't started reading and writing yet; now that they had money, it was time to send him to a private school.

Thinking this, she hurriedly asked an old woman selling vegetables by the roadside: “Excuse me, is there a private school in Gaojia Village?”

The old woman grinned, exposing her few remaining teeth: “We don’t have private schools at Gaojia Village, but we do have Gaojia Village School, and all children study free there.”

“Free schooling?” Mrs. Liu gasped in shock. “No tuition fees?” “None!”

Mrs. Liu couldn’t stay put. After hearing where the school was, she grasped her son’s hand and dashed toward it.

The school security guard napped by the entrance when Mrs. Liu rushed over, urgently demanding: “I heard school here costs nothing?”

The guard awakened, then grinned broadly. Since Gaojia Village School’s founding, he’d seen many like Mrs. Liu; whenever a new family moved in, if they had children, this exact scene played out.

So the guard handled it like clockwork, rattling off instructions rapid-fire: “Go to Principal Wang’s office on the fifth floor of the teaching tower. He’ll sign you up and place the child in the right grade and class based on his learning. Then, fetch textbooks from the library on the fifth floor. Finally, report to the assigned classroom...”

Finishing the whirlwind of words, he gestured impatiently: “Off you go!”

Women were odd creatures; if asked about other matters, they’d fumble and confuse even left from right at a street corner. But mention their children, and it sparked some fierce energy—they transformed into unstoppable forces, locking down every detail flawlessly.

Mrs. Liu caught each lightning-fast word without missing a beat. Seizing her son’s hand, she stormed off. Five floors flew by in seconds. She swept like a gust into Principal Wang’s office, babbling incessantly until enrollment finished. Then she charged past walls straight into the neighboring library—her running frenzy gusted into Song Xingxing’s research materials, scattering papers everywhere.

Song Yingxing yelled in panic: "Who's darting around like mad here?"

But as he spoke, Mrs. Liu grabbed the books. She teleported straight to First Grade Class Five, thrust her son toward the teacher, and pleaded humbly: "Sir, my son is slow and dull. I trust you'll discipline him soundly for any defiance."

The child stood baffled, holding a jin of radishes in his left hand and cabbage in his right.

Instantly, Mrs. Liu swapped the veggies for Elementary Math and Elementary Chinese books and booted him into the classroom.

Teacher: "..."
Mrs. Liu: "I'm begging you, sir!"
Teacher: "..."
Mrs. Liu: "During the new year or festivals, I'll visit with presents."
Teacher: "..."
Mrs. Liu: "Child, you must study hard to become a great official someday."
Teacher: "..."
Mrs. Liu: "My foolishness offends; this ignorant woman leaves now."

She made to slip away, yet the teacher suddenly spoke: "Madam, hold on."
Mrs. Liu: "?"
Teacher sighed gently: "What follows comes from the Decree of the Deity; heed it well."
Mrs. Liu: "???"
Teacher said: "Ever wonder why children avoid chatting openly with adults about their views?"

Mrs. Liu's expression stiffened slightly. "No, please enlighten me."
Teacher continued: "When kids say, 'This roast duck's great,' parents drone, 'Study hard to afford it grown up.' If they admire a lovely dress, parents echo, 'Study to buy nice clothes someday.' Should they note how imposing officials seem, parents chant, 'Study now to rise high later...'"

He paused and smiled. "Understand?"
Mrs. Liu's jaw slackened as she sweat profusely.
Teacher added: "The Deity commands: Learning matters, but not so much you warp the colorful world around it. Treat this wondrous life with richer respect."

"I vow to teach your boy well as a good teacher," the teacher stated. "But you must mother him well too."
Mrs. Liu bowed respectfully deep and low, then walked out of the school grounds.

Chapter 383: Crossing into Shanxi

Mrs. Liu walked out of the school feeling slightly dazed.

The words the headmaster had just spoken still echoed in her ears, and she couldn't help but reflect: Had she been too intense about sending her child to school? Well, she probably had been, which was why the headmaster had said those things to her.

She would have to be more careful when speaking with her son from now on.

Lost in her swirling thoughts, Mrs. Liu walked aimlessly, completely unaware of which direction she was heading. Only when she suddenly heard women's laughter close by did she snap back to awareness.

That was when she realized she was standing inside another school-like building.

Its layout resembled the one she'd just seen at Gaojia Village School, but it was slightly smaller, with fewer classrooms and buildings.

Most strangely, this building had no men, boys, or any male creatures at all—even a mosquito that had just flown past her was female, confirmed when it bit Mrs. Liu and stole her blood.

Mrs. Liu was bewildered: What kind of place was this?

Two middle-aged women walked by, chatting animatedly about weaving cloth: "Have you heard? Mr. Song invented something called the Small Steam Engine. Connect it to the spinning machine, and the steam engine keeps cranking the machine! It's frightening."

"Huh? Then what's the point of us learning weaving? Isn't it all wasted effort?"

"Not at all. Though the machine turns the wheels, it only saves us from manually cranking the machine. Tasks like threading and taking up yarn still rely on us. Learning weaving remains valuable."

"Oh, I see... That scared me for a moment."

Mrs. Liu, utterly confused, quickly stopped the two women. "Sisters, what is this place for?"

The women immediately recognized her as a newcomer from her question and chuckled, “This is the Women’s Vocational School—built exclusively for teaching women practical skills.”

Mrs. Liu blinked. “Exclusively for women?”

The women laughed kindly. “Yes. It’s an excellent place! Here they teach us weaving cloth, tailoring garments, cooking, embroidery... With these skills, we too can earn big money.”

“Really?” Mrs. Liu gasped quietly. “Can... Can I join too? I’ve been desperate to learn how to take measurements and tailor garments properly. I want to make better clothes for my son.”

The women laughed again. “Broaden your horizons! Don’t just think of clothes for your son. If you master tailoring, you can earn dozens of copper coins per commission—making custom clothes for others!”

“Eh?”

The words “dozens of copper coins” instantly hooked Mrs. Liu.

With firm but friendly hands, the women pulled her toward the tailoring classroom. They arrived just as class began. Standing at the lectern, clearly experienced and authoritative, was the instructor—Gao San Niang, a tailoring master and one of Gaojia Village’s Forty-Two Elders.

She held up a garment for demonstration, gesturing to the students: “Watch carefully—right here, you must leave half an inch of space. Under no circumstances should you sew this section tight. If you do, as soon as someone puts it on... Rip!... the seams will burst.”

Her students—whose ages ranged widely, from girls barely entering their teens to women well over fifty—dutifully took notes with serious expressions.

Mrs. Liu watched with sparkling eyes, longing to join them yet feeling shy. The two women who had escorted her gently—yet undeniably—pushed Mrs. Liu forward, seated her firmly on a bench, gave each other a satisfied nod, and quietly left.

Mrs. Liu flustered briefly, but when she saw Gao San Niang send her a slight approving nod—radiating nothing but warm welcome with no hint of dismissal—her anxiety instantly dissolved.

Taking a deep breath, Mrs. Liu leaned forward and began listening with rapt attention.

...

Fugu County...

Every inch of Fugu County's former walls had been demolished. The county seat now resembled an unshelled egg trembling in the icy wind.

A massive bandit army roamed its abandoned streets and alleyways, dark figures swaying restlessly throughout the husks of buildings.

A group of bandit troops knocked on the door of a house.

An old man lived in this house, and he silently threw out all his family's possessions out the door.

The bandit troops picked up the property, and a slight smile curled at the corner of their lips.

The old man thought he had escaped calamity.

But he did not expect that just as he turned around, the bandit troops cut him on the back with a knife.

Before he died, the old man heard a burst of arrogant laughter: "Old worthless one, can't stand looking at him."

"Ha ha ha, me too."

Wang Jiayin was sitting in the government office at the center of Fugu County.

The corpse of the county magistrate lay at his feet.

But there was no smile on his face.

His naval force attacked Qiachuan Port but failed.

Wang Er was also nowhere to be found.

His plan to lead the troops south and occupy Huanglong Mountain collapsed.

All he could do was double back and storm into Fugu County again.

But the officials followed them there.

Song Tongyin, Provincial Governor of Shanxi, personally led troops and stationed at Baode County on the opposite side of the Yellow River.

This cut off his route to advance into Shanxi.

General Du Wenhuan under Yang He, Three Boundary Governor, was stationed outside Fugu County with his troops and ready to charge in at any moment to take his head.

Du Wenhuan had few troops.

He had only two thousand men.

But these two thousand defeated Wang Jiayin badly in the battle at Mountain God Hall.

He fled in panic and disorder.

It turned out that among these two thousand were several hundred monsters.

These were Hong Chengchou's hired guards.

After Hong Chengchou became the Provincial Governor of Yansui, he gained the authority to mobilize officials and troops.

He encountered Du Wenhuan clamoring to avenge his clansmen and wipe out all bandits.

Hong Chengchou used his hired guards as the core and combined them with over a thousand garrison troops.

He handed them over to Du Wenhuan and ordered him to lead troops to deal with Wang Jiayin.

After Du Wenhuan's clansmen all died, he had been in a very angry state.

He pursued bandit suppression everywhere doggedly, making life miserable for Wang Jiayin.

Now Du Wenhuan chased him to Fugu County.

Wang Jiayin felt great pressure.

"Let's feign surrender!" Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong) stepped forward and advised.

"Yang He, Three Boundary Governor, is actively promoting appeasement."

“Our army of fifty thousand strong is sizable, and the court doesn’t want a direct clash with us.”

“As long as we submit to appeasement, Yang He will surely accept.”

“Then we can pretend to be appeased and fool the officials.”

“We cross the Yellow River in one swoop and attack Shanxi.”

Wang Jiayin thought it over carefully.

“Fine, that’s what we’ll do.”

Thus, a letter of surrender was sent to Song Tongyin, Provincial Governor of Shanxi.

It was then forwarded to Yang He.

Yang He was immediately overjoyed.

He sent out orders: “Wang Jiayin is willing to turn over a new leaf and reform.”

“We should give him a chance.”

Du Wenhuan was furious: “The bandits killed my clansmen, I won’t accept it.”

Yang He said: “Consider the big picture!”

They were still arguing through letters.

Suddenly came news.

Wang Jiayin seized the opportunity when Yang He delayed Du Wenhuan.

He suddenly forced a crossing of the Yellow River and attacked Hequ County in Shanxi.

Wang Kegui, an insider in the county, helped open the city gates.

Wang Da Liang, Shanxi's General, set up Western cannons again to blast Wang Jiayin back.

But unexpectedly, the Western cannons suddenly exploded and blew his own artillery positions to rubble.

Hequ County fell.

Then armies of righteousness responded and crossed the river one after another.

In the Third Year of Chongzhen, the eastern route rebellion armies of Wang Jiayin, Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong), King of Disruption, Luo Rucai (Cao Cao), Xi Ying Eighth Great King (Zhang Xianzhong), Old Nan Feng (Ma Shouying), Bu Zhan Ni, the Disrupting General (Li Zicheng), Scorpion Block, and others led their forces across the river and entered Shanxi.

Chapter 384: The Right Job For Him

Autumn, Third Year of Chongzhen.

Li Daoxuan munched on sticky rice duck as he debated whether to add autumn pants. Suddenly, he spotted a swift horse racing toward the county capital within his box.

The box's viewpoint remained fixed on Chengcheng County. He was observing its post-harvest prosperity...

Just then, a galloping horse charged into Chengcheng County, delivering the court's appointment documents to Liang Shixian.

Curiously, there were two documents.

One praised Liang Shixian for governing effectively and earning the people's love. The local gentry and commoners had jointly petitioned for him to remain in office. Thus, the court abandoned plans to promote him three ranks and instead reappointed him as Chengcheng County Magistrate.

The other condemned him: in three years, he'd failed to collect even one liang of silver in taxes—a disgrace to the Ming Dynasty. No magistrate's record compared so poorly. He was on the brink of making Ming history. With such "prowess" in tax collection, he could abandon dreams of promotion. They cursed him to rot in his current post.

Both documents lay before Liang Shixian, leaving him torn between laughter and tears.

Li Daoxuan felt equally torn. Ming Dynasty bureaucracy... really... sigh!

"Brother Feng has done me a great service, preserving my position." Liang Shixian sighed to Fang Wushang beside him. "These documents show my work could earn either a three-rank promotion or banishment to commoner status. Had the Eunuch Party still held power, I'd be finished. But just when the Donglin Academy allies spoke in court... sigh..."

Fang Wushang snorted contemptuously. "This is why I despise scholar-officials. Actions speak—not words. When credit and blame shift by speech alone, what justice remains?"

Liang Shixian offered a bitter smile. "Indeed. But hypothetically, General Fang: were you in charge, how would you decide?"

Fang Wushang pondered seriously. "Reward merit. Punish failure. Cancel one against the other. No promotion. No demotion. Remain magistrate."

Liang Shixian: "..."

Cough cough! Li Daoxuan nearly choked on sticky rice duck. His unspoken protest raged: “What’s the difference from before?”

Alas, Gao Yiye wasn’t there to voice criticism.

Liang Shixian’s worry melted away, rushing with pride. “Since I remain magistrate... I’ll keep building Chengcheng’s future. General Fang, let’s discuss something.”

“Speak freely,” invited Fang Wushang.

Liang Shixian explained, “County Magistrate Feng Jun of Heyang visited lately... He raised an alarming matter...”

He recounted Feng Jun’s private warnings.

“The Deity is a god. Gods don’t scheme rebellions. But the weapons He bestows... fall into human hands.” Liang Shixian’s face darkened. “Humans harbour ambitions. As Gaojia Village grows stronger, those holding power might... entertain dark motives. The consequences could be unthinkable.”

Fang Wushang’s eyes widened with alarm. “That makes sense.”

Liang Shixian pressed, “Glad you agree. Had I transferred elsewhere, this wouldn’t concern me. But since I govern here, I must address it.”

General Fang’s brows knitted. “Why tell me? What role should I play?”

“You’re fearless—you defy any might. I recall you thrusting your spear toward the Deity’s giant hand. If anyone dares uphold justice against all authority... it’s you.”

Fang Wushang: “!!!”

Liang Shixian urged, "I need you to watch Gaojia Village's key figures. If they engage in illegal activities... suppress them!"

Fang Wushang inhaled sharply. Though brave, he wasn't reckless. This task... felt crushing.

Could he survive hundreds of firearms from Instructor He?

Evade Bai Yuan's sniping?

If Thirty-Two marked him for death, all Gaojia Village would turn enemy!

An overwhelming sense of pressure swallowed him.

Lost in thought, he finally jolted upright. "Magistrate Liang, no assignment is necessary. As Chengcheng Patrol Officer, my duty already includes arresting outlaws and protecting this county. Should wrongdoers emerge in Gaojia Village... confronting them is my obligation. I'll patrol the village regularly to deter illegal acts."

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan grinned faintly.

His dilemma resurfaced—when the Gaojia Village Militia entered Heyang County and their figures potentially oppressed wild figures, could he mete justice against his own allies? He'd searched desperately for an impartial enforcer.

Now he'd found one!

Fang Wushang was ideal—stubbornly righteous beyond reason.

One friction remained: Fang Wushang still identified as a Ming court patrol officer, not a "Gaojia Village member." His approach to "illegal activities" would favour Ming law over local interests. A subtle distinction... with colossal consequences.

Time to redefine his allegiance.

Li Daoxuan tapped Gaojia Village's viewing option.

His sight instantly shifted directly above the village, where Gao Yiye hunched over her desk, sketching Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale's fifth issue. The revised storyline now depicted the Deity aiding Heyang civilians through rain-summoning magic. Defiant Four Sea Dragon Kings provoked a celestial smackdown...

Smiling, Li Daoxuan called, "Yiye! Yiye! Fang Wushang will visit Gaojia Village soon. When he arrives... I'll assign him unique duties."

Gao Yiye answered, "Just command us, Deity."

Li Daoxuan declared, "Upon his arrival... summon him for conversation."

Chapter 385: Fang Wushang Arrives

Fang Wushang rarely came to Gaojia Village.

He was a very busy man, spending his days rushing all over Chengcheng County capturing bandits.

Of course, ever since the Deity manifested in the county town, the common folks had food to eat and clothes to wear. Why would anyone still become a bandit? Only a fool would act as a bandit under the watchful eyes of a god. Who wants to get smacked?

Thus, Fang Wushang's job became somewhat idle.

Recently, he spent more time patrolling the borders of the county. For instance, when Fan Shanyue accepted the appeasement and the bandits returned to their villages, Fang Wushang was stationed at Quangou Village. Later, hearing that Wang Jiayin's water forces attacked Jiachuan, he stationed himself at Quangou Village once more.

Not long ago, upon learning that various bandit groups had crossed the Yellow River eastward into Shanxi, and Bu Zhan Ni might lead his troops through Chengcheng County, Fang Wushang rushed to Fengyuan Town, the northwesternmost part of the county, and stationed himself there to guard against Bu Zhan Ni's arrival.

He kept rotating like this, going from place to place, without a single day of rest.

It wasn't until the nearby bandits all went off to Shanxi, bringing temporary safety to the Shaanxi region, that he finally had a bit of free time.

The weather today was nice. Clear skies, with a gentle breeze...

Fang Wushang rode his horse to Gaojia Village to make an inspection. Liang Shixian's words echoed in his mind, and he decided he would come to Gaojia Village more often from now on, keeping an eye on these villagers armed with the weapons, equipment, and supplies bestowed by the Deity to ensure they didn't engage in unlawful activities.

Fang Wushang had just entered the village when he encountered Xing Honglang. She was leading a merchant caravan back to Gaojia Village, after just raking in profits from the wealthy nobles in Xi'an. She was almost at the village entrance.

Fang Wushang caught up from behind and rode past Xing Honglang on his horse.

Xing Honglang called out, "Hey? Isn't this the Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, General Fang Wushang?"

Hearing the call, Fang Wushang tugged the reins and stopped his horse. He turned to look at Xing Honglang. She looked vaguely familiar. After thinking hard, he remarked, "Huh? I've seen you before. You're that woman who looks exactly like a salt smuggler but sells sugar."

Xing Honglang chuckled inwardly: After all this time, he still thinks I sell sugar? This guy's amusing.

She laughed a couple of times. "I don't just sell sugar anymore. Look, I sell embroidery, blades and swords, those amazing seasonings the Deity gave us, fine liquor... and I brought all sorts of strange and wonderful goods back from Xi'an. General Fang, want to take a look at this Japanese samurai blade? Top quality, only five taels of silver."

This truly caught Fang Wushang's interest.

Though Japanese blades weren't perfectly suited for Ming battlefields, their exquisite craftsmanship made them excellent ornaments. During the Ming Dynasty, many wealthy people collected Japanese blades. Many scholars even hung one at their waists when going out – obviously not for hacking people, just for decorative flair to barely maintain a semblance of refinement in life...

Fang Wushang dismounted and stood before Xing Honglang. "Let me see that Japanese blade. If it's genuinely good, I'll buy it."

As he dismounted, his hundred soldiers finally caught up behind him, panting heavily. "General Fang... Wait for us..."

Turns out this guy rode ahead alone on his horse again, never having had the good habit of waiting for his subordinates to travel together.

Xing Honglang took a Japanese samurai blade from her goods rack and handed it to Fang Wushang. He examined the blade but kept walking forward. "Don't stop. Let's talk as we walk."

Xing Honglang thought: This guy truly has a restless personality. She couldn't resist teasing him. "General Fang, you seem quite idle. Stopped chasing salt smugglers everywhere?"

Fang Wushang sighed lightly. "With the chaos of war these days, where are there even salt smugglers active? Grain transport into Shaanxi from Shanxi has been banned. If grain can't get in anymore, what's the use of salt getting in? I've heard the biggest and most famous salt smuggler in Shanxi disappeared from Shanxi's trade routes years ago... Now I wouldn't even know where to find a salt smuggler to arrest."

Xing Honglang decided to tease him further and chuckled. "Let me tell you, there's a huge smuggled salt dealer in Gaojia Village. You could arrest him."

Fang Wushang's expression turned fierce. "Who?"

Xing Honglang pointed towards the low cloud floating in the sky. “See, here He comes. It’s the Deity himself! He gave salt to everyone in Chengcheng County. Isn’t that the biggest smuggled salt dealer of all?”

Fang Wushang was taken aback. “You...”

This...

Logically... that actually holds a bizarre sort of water, doesn’t it?

Fang Wushang was instantly overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness – “Ah, I ought to arrest Him... but I absolutely can’t defeat Him!” But he was obstinate, not stupid. After a moment of wrestling with the absurdity, suddenly a counterpoint occurred to him. “Your reasoning is flawed! The Deity bestows salt upon mortals. He doesn’t take payment from us mortals. This is an act of grace, a gift! It’s not trade! How can you call him a smuggled salt dealer? That’s not right! Not right at all!”

Li Daoxuan happened to have his viewpoint shifted over just then and overheard this. He almost laughed out loud. This guy is interesting.

Xing Honglang, intent on messing with him, wasn’t going to let him off that easily. She continued, “But after the Deity bestowed the divine salt, the villagers sell it. Look, there’s a village-operated salt shop in the Gaojia Business Circle selling exactly the salt bestowed by the Deity. Here I suggest you arrest Thirty-Two.”

Fang Wushang froze again. “You...”

This...

Logically... that actually holds a bizarre sort of water again, doesn’t it?

Fang Wushang started agonizing over it once more. Should I arrest him or shouldn’t I?

He wrestled with it for quite some time before finally saying, "He deserves arrest. That's correct. I ought to arrest Thirty-Two."

He had barely formulated that course of action when Xing Honglang dropped another bombshell. "Oh, and also, the official salt shop under the Chengcheng county government ran out of salt long ago. Lord Liang had the government salt storehouse come to Gaojia Village to get their stock. So... Lord Liang Liang Shixian has also become part of the smuggled salt trade. You ought to arrest Lord Liang too."

Fang Wushang was utterly stunned. "You!"

That's true!

Lord Liang's actions were improper. He deserves arrest.

But...

How can the revered Magistrate of a county be a smuggled salt dealer?

His mind instantly overloaded, thoughts tangling into a complete mess. His brain felt like the Sharp Knife Troop had chopped it up into mince.

Xing Honglang succeeded in her teasing and couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Li Daoxuan was also greatly amused. "Yiye, Fang Wushang's here. Go call him up to the watchtower for a chat."

Fang Wushang stood there, his mind filled solely with confusion over the dilemma of Lord Liang selling smuggled salt. He drifted along, lost and dazedly. He'd entirely forgotten about appreciating the Japanese blade. When Xing Honglang casually asked him, "Do you want it?" Fang Wushang, in his daze, instinctively pulled out five taels of silver and paid.

He didn't even consciously register buying the blade.

He only snapped back partially to reality when he walked further into Gaojia Village and stood near the entrance, hearing Gao Yiye call out, "General Fang, got time for a chat?"

Fang Wushang jolted as if waking up. "Huh? Where's that sugar merchant? Her Japanese blade is still with me. I haven't paid her yet!"

The deputy inspector hurried over. "General, you paid."

Fang Wushang reacted with confusion. "Eh? When did I pay?" Wasn't I just contemplating the metaphysics and legality of divinely distributed salt?

Gao Yiye gave a small smile. "General Fang, this way please."

Fang Wushang immediately lapsed back into a dazed state of preoccupation and followed her.

His soldiers, seeing their boss was clearly not paying them any mind, cheered instantly. "Come on! Let's go check out the Gaojia Business Circle! It's even more exciting than the county seat!"

Chapter 386: Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village

Fang Wushang followed Gao Yiye and walked into Gaojia Fortress.

The Gaojia Fortress had been placed there for several years; it was no longer as brand new as when it was first set up.

On the fortress wall, traces of age had started to appear, and in some places, the composite material board began to wear and deform.

On the walls, stains and children's graffiti could be seen everywhere.

There was also a math problem written on the wall by Gao Sanwa: $3+2=32$.

In some corners of the fortress, flowers, plants, and moss even grew, though only a small patch of mud was on the ground.

But this aged look didn't make Gaojia Fortress seem run-down; instead, it showed a sense of majesty.

A feel of timelessness and weight, born only from the accumulation of time.

Gao Yiye led Fang Wushang into the watchtower.

When passing the ancestral hall on the first floor, Fang Wushang couldn't help but bow to the statue of Dao Xuan Deity and say "Forgive me" before daring to pass by its side; then he went up to the third floor and reached the balcony.

Qiu Ju and Dong Xue served him fragrant tea.

Fang Wushang saw Gao Yiye sit upright and proper across the table, shifting from her usual lively and innocent girl self to a dignified noblewoman appearance; he knew that serious talk was coming.

He quickly threw aside his Japanese sword, placed his hands on his knees, and sat up straight: "What are your instructions, Saint Lady?"

Gao Yiye smiled: "It is not I who have words for you, but the Deity who has words for you."

This sentence startled Fang Wushang, and he hurriedly glanced up at the sky.

Above, about sixty or seventy zhang high, a low cloud hovered; as Fang Wushang looked up, the low cloud gently swayed, as if greeting him.

Fang Wushang hurriedly bowed again.

Gao Yiye said: "The Deity is an immortal; there is nothing in the mortal world he does not know, only things he chooses not to know, or cannot be bothered to know."

Fang Wushang said: "Ahem, that is natural."

Gao Yiye changed the topic: "So, what you and Master Liang discussed that day, the Deity actually knew about."

This sentence startled Fang Wushang immensely, and he almost jumped up from his seat.

Gao Yiye said: "Do not fear, the Deity does not mean to blame you."

"Phew!" Only then did Fang Wushang sigh in relief again.

Gao Yiye said: "The Deity wasn't angry—he even praised you all, thinking what you considered made much sense."

Fang Wushang was overjoyed: "Truly?"

Gao Yiye said: "The Deity is an immortal; of course he would not fight for the rights of this mundane world. Just like ants fighting in a colony—who becomes the ant king doesn't matter at all to a person, not a thing."

Fang Wushang said: "That reasoning is most sound."

Gao Yiye smiled: "But the Deity also feels that if some troublemakers among mortals deceive, swindle, scheme against others, or use unjust, illegal, even unconscionable methods to ruin the whole world's peace, that is something he does not wish to see."

Fang Wushang's expression grew serious; he knew the main point was coming now.

Gao Yiye said: "Currently, Gaojia Village lacks an upright law enforcer."

Fang Wushang said: "Eh?"

Gao Yiye said: "The Deity says power without restraint inevitably leads to corruption—for example, if I walk downstairs now to the village treasury on the second floor and take whatever I want without anyone stopping me, it is because I possess the 'absolute power' the Deity granted me. This would slowly make me lose myself, become reckless, do anything I desired, and not care whether it broke laws."

Fang Wushang was inwardly startled—the Saint Lady was first taking herself as an example?

Gao Yiye said: "Besides me, many others in Gaojia Village enjoy such power, like Thirty-Two, Bai Yuan, Instructor He... they all hold absolute power in the small groups they lead. It is still early, they are all good people now, but if this continues, their power grows—what they become in the end cannot be said."

Fang Wushang thought to himself: This is the matter I discussed with Master Liang—these people possess the food and firearms bestowed by the Deity; if they turned evil, it would be truly terrifying.

Gao Yiye said: "If they do wrong, the Deity can punish them, but the Deity is too busy to watch mortals daily—so he had me summon you to give you an honorable and challenging task."

Fang Wushang understood at once—he was meant to be the law enforcer.

He said earnestly: "Rest assured, Deity! Even without this talk, I, Fang Wushang, as Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, have a duty to uphold. I will surely manage all of Chengcheng County well; whoever engages in illegal activities will be dealt with strictly."

Gao Yiye smiled: "Just being Patrol Officer of Chengcheng isn't enough."

Fang Wushang said: "Not enough?"

Gao Yiye said: “You also need to take on the role of Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village; otherwise, you truly cannot manage this group.”

Upon hearing this, Fang Wushang’s eyes flashed sharply: “Since there is already a Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, why add a Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village? Could Gaojia Village not belong to Chengcheng? Are you raising a banner of revolt and becoming your own nation?”

As he spoke, his aura suddenly surged, as if poised to rise and fight at any instant.

Qiu Ju and Dong Xue beside him were startled.

But Gao Yiye was not flustered; with the Deity overhead constantly speaking and guiding her, she had no fear.

Gao Yiye said lightly: “General Fang, do not misunderstand—Gaojia Village has not become its own nation.”

Fang Wushang said: “Then why speak of a Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village?”

Gao Yiye said: “A few days ago, Gaojia Village sent out the militia to Heyang County to support the Heyang County militia in battling the rebel Wang Jiayin—surely you heard of this, General Fang?”

Fang Wushang nodded: “Yes! I heard of it.”

Gao Yiye said: “Then let me pose a hypothesis, just a hypothesis: if the Gaojia Village Militia, on their way to reinforce Heyang, robbed a Heyang County village and killed its villagers, could you, General Fang, manage it?”

Fang Wushang was about to say “Of course I could,” but the words faltered on his lips, and he swallowed them—Heyang matters did not fall under his authority.

He recalled holding off Fan Shanyue's attack near Zhengjia Village long ago but being unable to pursue, for as Patrol Officer of Chengcheng alone, not Patrol Officer of Heyang, he had no right to enter Heyang County for arrests.

Thinking of this, he felt awkward.

Gao Yiye said: "Our Gaojia Village is a civil group; as such, it has great freedom, moving freely about. Last time it went to Heyang County; next time it may go to Yichuan County, or Xi'an, or Shanxi, or anywhere under heaven. But your position as Patrol Officer of Chengcheng manages Chengcheng only—is it not entirely unable to keep pace? So you must have a post in our village—Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village."

Chapter 387: The Yellow River Comes into View

Fang Wushang was feeling a bit dizzy from being talked around.

But after dizzily pondering for a while, it seemed that what Gao Yiye said made sense.

Indeed, as long as the people of Gaojia Village had travel permits, they could legally roam everywhere under the heavens, while he, as the Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, could only manage affairs within Chengcheng, barely keeping up with their pace.

If incidents occurred outside the county and were left to local officials to handle, they might not be able to manage; for instance, County Magistrate Feng Jun of Heyang County couldn't deal with, and dared not confront, an army wielding hundreds of firearms, which was why he had gone to Chengcheng County to seek advice from Liang Shixian.

Seeing him lost in thought, Gao Yiye laughed: "Fang Wushang, are you only planning to handle matters within Chengcheng County? If something happens outside the county, won't you care at all, no matter how big it is?"

Fang Wushang quickly replied: "Not at all! I'm not the type who only sweeps in front of my own door. Last time, I really wanted to pursue Fan Shanyue, but I couldn't enter Heyang County, so I had to drop it, sigh... If I were the General of Shaanxi, I would have led my troops straight into Heyang, cut off Fan Shanyue's dog head."

Gao Yiye said: "Isn't that right? If you become the Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village, you'll have the authority to apprehend them even if they leave Chengcheng County and commit misdeeds elsewhere. Aren't you worried they might do illegal things with the weapons bestowed by the Deity? Now is your best chance to uphold righteousness in this world."

Fang Wushang gritted his teeth: "Fine, I'll take this on."

That fellow had ultimately fallen for it.

Li Daoxuan smiled: The military man's mind was still a bit simple; he was single-mindedly focused on upholding righteousness and hadn't realized he was boarding a pirate ship.

If Gaojia Village truly rebelled later, Fang Wushang would become a "high-ranking official among rebels," which hadn't even occurred to him.

If it were Liang Shixian or Feng Jun, they would have instantly caught on.

For no apparent reason, Fang Wushang accepted the post as "Patrol Officer of Gaojia Village," and for no apparent reason, it was "announced village-wide." Then, mysteriously, the Deity "manifested in person," granting him a "divine sword" before everyone, the kind that could behead foolish kings above and treacherous ministers below, publicly declaring his duties to the whole village.

In a daze, Fang Wushang took on this role. On his way home, with the "divine sword" hanging on his right hip and a newly bought Japanese samurai blade on his left, he couldn't quite grasp his bearings.

Walking along, he suddenly thought of something: "I wonder how sharp this divine sword really is."

He removed the Japanese samurai blade with his left hand, took the divine sword in his right, and clashed them fiercely.

With a sharp crack, the Japanese samurai blade snapped in half.

"Ah! My five liang of silver!"

Toward the end of autumn, a huge piece of good news came from Heyang County.

Heyang County had a bumper harvest!

However, upon hearing about their so-called bumper harvest, the residents of Gaojia Village got amused: “What bumper harvest? It’s just an ordinary year’s crop.”

“Exactly, harvesting only one or two shi per mu and daring to call it abundant— they don’t know what real abundance is like.”

“In Gaojia Village here, if you don’t get three to four shi per mu, you should be too embarrassed to say you can farm.”

“That’s because we have celestial fertilizer here; Heyang County doesn’t have that, do they?”

Hearing the little people gossiping, Li Daoxuan remembered something: he had only sent rain to Heyang County, not celestial fertilizer.

But this was a minor issue and easy to fix.

After a few instructions into the box, Gao Yiye went to find Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng. Thus, an “agricultural technology exchange team” led by Zhao Sheng and consisting of several senior farmers from Gaojia Village set off.

Li Daoxuan’s vision moved with Zhao Sheng. The group boarded a public sun chariot, heading toward Heyang County. Thanks to recent developments, the cement road from Gaojia Village straight to Heyang County was now fully operational.

The bus passed through large areas of Heyang County. Along both sides of the road, happy commoners could be seen everywhere in the fields, busily harvesting grain.

This was Heyang County's first harvest after four years of drought; even without celestial fertilizer, yielding only as much as an average year, they were more than content.

As the bus drove by, the farmers instinctively paused their work and bowed to it: "Thank you, Deity. It's all thanks to the Deity inviting the Dragon King to send rain..."

Li Daoxuan saw tiny glowing dots rising one by one from the farmers' bodies, gathering toward the box's walls. Stirred, he quickly checked the Rescue Index and found it had increased significantly without him noticing.

By now, he roughly understood how the index's rise translated into his vision range. Mentally converting the new surge in Rescue Index, it came to about an expansion of over thirty li in sight radius.

Li Daoxuan had an epiphany: Hold on! The distance from Heyang County to Qiachuan Port was exactly thirty-odd li, wasn't it?

Previously, his vision only reached Heyang County, but with this expansion, he should theoretically be able to see Qiachuan Port.

Thrilled, Li Daoxuan stopped following Zhao Sheng and frantically pressed the east and south buttons, shifting his vision southeast. After persistent pressing, a cement fortress finally appeared in his view.

Then he glanced sideways— Yellow River!

The Yellow River had finally entered his vision.

First, he saw a row of little fishing boats by the port, all just a few meters long, without a single proper large vessel. As his gaze shifted right...

The surging Yellow River waters began dominating Li Daoxuan's sight.

His box was now 5×3 meters in size, giving him a visible area of 1000×600 meters, and right at Qiachuan Port, the river's width was exactly over a thousand meters.

When Li Daoxuan pressed the “east” button as far as it would go, the entire box filled with muddy, churning river water, rolling violently.

The feeling was bizarre— it was as if a river flowed in his living room. Seeing the waters pass by stirred an urge to recite poetry.

Do you see the Yellow River waters descending from heaven!

Li Daoxuan's lips curved up: “Finally, I can see the Yellow River. I can put the ship models I prepared earlier into the box.”

But...

That alone made little sense— there needed to be little people to pilot them.

So he had to bring his own little people to the port first.

Just as he considered switching his view back to find them, a familiar figure emerged atop Qiachuan Port's fortress: draped in white attire, posture unnaturally poised and arrogant— it was Bai Yuan.

Beside him was a militia instructor from Xiabao Village in Heyang County, Zhang Yuanwai. Both stood on the fortress wall, hands behind their backs, watching the vast Yellow River while engaging in awkward small talk.

Zhang Yuanwai said: “Mr. Bai, could we get some of your fine weapons for our Heyang County militia?”

Chapter 388: Not the Deity's Signature Color This Time

The “high-quality weapons” that Zhang Yuanwai was talking about certainly weren't things like bows, hand crossbows, or spears.

He meant firearms!

“How wonderful it would be to have a few cannons mounted on this fortress at Qiachuan Port,” Zhang Yuanwai rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Pair that with a hundred or so firearm soldiers, and I guarantee that the next time the bandits come, we won’t even need Brother Bai to lift a finger. I alone can send them fleeing headlong!”

Bai Yuan produced a fan, snapped it open with a flourish, revealing the characters “Gentleman,” and chuckled. “You want firearms, huh?”

Zhang Yuanwai: “Want them? Desperately want them!”

Bai Yuan: “This isn’t something I decide.”

Zhang Yuanwai was startled: “You can’t decide this, Brother Bai? You’re one of the most prominent figures in Gaojia Village!”

Bai Yuan laughed heartily: “Matters concerning firearms are decided solely by the Deity.”

Zhang Yuanwai: “...”

Bai Yuan stated: “The Deity’s words are thus: ‘Firearms are instruments of violence. From the day they were created, it was for the sole purpose of slaying enemies more efficiently. Such things, in the hands of the virtuous, can save countless lives. But in the hands of the wicked, they can plunge the entire world into ruin.’”

Zhang Yuanwai: “!”

Bai Yuan: “Therefore, the prerequisite for wielding firearms is virtue.”

Zhang Yuanwai vaguely understood something: “I see! You mean those Three Main Rules and Eight Points of Attention that you insisted my men diligently study, right?”

Bai Yuan smiled: "Exactly! Your men have only just begun learning this. It's far too early for them to get firearms now. Wait until every single one of them can properly follow the Three Main Rules and Eight Points of Attention, and they're no longer a chaotic mob but truly soldiers of the people. Only then will Gaojia Village naturally transport a large batch of firearms here."

Zhang Yuanwai quickly responded: "Having a clear goal makes everything easier. Brother Bai, just you wait and see. Your little brother will train every member of this militia properly!"

Just as the two were discussing this...

Bai Yuan suddenly sensed something amiss. He snapped his head up and spotted a low cloud floating right overhead. This discovery delighted him beyond measure: "Ah! The Deity has come!"

Zhang Yuanwai, puzzled, exclaimed: "Where? I don't see anyone?"

Bai Yuan bowed deeply towards the sky: "I never expected the Deity would grace Qiachuan Port. I utterly failed to notice Your arrival. My profound apologies for this grave lapse in protocol. As for this 'propriety'... scratch that, scratch that."

The cloud layer parted, and a large sheet of paper unfurled in the sky: "No matter. I am merely here to observe casually."

Seeing this sheet appear, Zhang Yuanwai finally spotted it too and was utterly terrified. He hadn't truly believed the Deity could manifest right above them. Words miraculously appearing in the sky were truly alarming! He hastened to kneel.

Bai Yuan said: "Stand up. The Deity dislikes people wasting time kneeling in formalities. He is exceedingly busy. When speaking to Him, be clear and concise; do not waste His time."

Zhang Yuanwai instantly obeyed and stood up.

Bai Yuan reported: "Your humble servant reports to the Deity. As per Your command, I have been regularly coming to Qiachuan Port to oversee the construction of the fortress by the workers. Ten days

ago, the cement fortress was completed. The Heyang County militia has now stationed themselves within this fort and will garrison it long-term to ward off bandits. I have also brought veteran soldiers from Gaojia Village to drill them daily in the Three Main Rules and Eight Points of Attention daily. Once their discipline and quality are improved, we shall equip them accordingly.”

Li Daoxuan displayed a large paper: “Well done indeed. With you in charge, my mind is at ease.”

Receiving the Deity’s praise brought a broad smile even to someone like Bai Yuan, an intellectual who rarely showed such unfiltered joy.

Li Daoxuan: “Now that you have established a foothold by the Yellow River, I shall bestow upon you a fine vessel as well.”

“Vessel?” Zhang Yuanwai blurted out in surprise. “Is the Deity granting us a fishing boat for catching fish?”

His reaction was understandable. The things the Deity bestowed upon Heyang County were generally related to productivity – rain, flour, road construction. So when the Deity mentioned a vessel, fishing boats were Zhang Yuanwai’s immediate thought.

Bai Yuan, however, let his gaze sweep over the few dilapidated little fishing boats moored at the port. He thought: They have fishing boats here. Old and worn, yes, but enough to sustain the fishermen’s livelihoods. The years of severe drought didn’t reach the fishermen on the Yellow River to ruin them. Their lives are secure enough. The Deity speaks of bestowing another vessel? Strange! Could it be... not a fishing boat... but a... warship? Bai Yuan suddenly felt a surge of excitement.

Then, they saw the clouds part, and an enormous vessel slowly descended from the heavens. This descending object dwarfed anything the Deity had bestowed before. A large ship. A massive ship.

Though it was still high up, Bai Yuan perceived at a glance that this vessel was at least fifty feet long. In the context of inland rivers, a vessel of this size was essentially a behemoth.

Its gradual descent left Zhang Yuanwai, the Sharp Knife Troop soldiers from Heyang County, and everyone on the dock utterly dumbstruck. The fishermen on the port voiced their shock with astonished

cries: “What is that? Wow! A boat! A gigantic boat is falling from the sky!” “Is the Deity performing magic?”

“SPLASH!”

The ship plunged into the river, displacing a massive volume of water which surged outwards in waves. Li Daoxuan used his gloved giant hand to give the vessel a gentle nudge, guiding it to rest against the wharf at Qiachuan Port.

The few small fishing boats originally docked there were sent rocking wildly by the surge. Thankfully, the fishermen aboard them weren't thrown overboard – these were men who'd spent their lives braving the Yellow River's capricious currents. Knocking them off their boats was no easy feat. However, the sight left them all gaping, completely dumbfounded.

Before them lay a colossal vessel about fifty feet long. A typical modern swimming pool is only 25 meters long – this ship exceeded that, its size staggering. The fishermen tilted their heads back, staring up at its towering cabin structure, taking in the dozen or more cannons gleaming brilliantly under the sun. They were momentarily frozen, almost ready to drop to their knees in awe.

Zhang Yuanwai's jaw fell open wide enough to accommodate a duck egg. He had just moments ago been pleading with Bai Yuan to install a few cannons on Qiachuan Fortress... and now, a ship sailing down from the sky equipped with a dozen cannons...? Good heavens! Had he known they were false cannons, mere decorations, he might have been furious.

Everyone present wore expressions of profound emotion and intense excitement. Only Bai Yuan wore a peculiar expression, tilting his head as if deep in thought. After quite a while, they finally heard him speak in a strange tone: “The vessel bestowed by the Deity this time... it seems... off.”

Zhang Yuanwai: “Off? How? Such an immense boat! Such an impressive craft! What on earth could seem off to you?”

Bai Yuan answered with absolute seriousness: “This boat... it has natural wood grain. Utterly strange! Why isn't it painted in splendid multi-color? Where is the Deity's signature rainbow colors? This vessel possesses none of the Deity's characteristic style. This appears irregular... Could it be... the Deity is hinting at something?”

Li Daoxuan: "..."

Zhang Yuanwai: "..."

An idea seemed to suddenly brighten above Bai Yuan's head like a lit bulb: "I understand now! The Deity has granted us merely an unpainted vessel this time! He intends for us to paint it vibrantly ourselves! To demonstrate our reverence for Him!"

Chapter 389: Trial Run of the New Ship

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but chuckle at that explanation. Since this ship wasn't made of plastic but sheet iron covered with a sun-shielding composite material board, it needed repainting for aesthetics.

Cai Xinzi had applied wood-grain finish to the ship model to achieve an ancient tower ship look.

Who knew such a normal color would seem abnormal to the small people?

"Board the ship. Head to the captain's chamber."

Li Daoxuan displayed the large paper sign.

Bai Yuan immediately dismissed his chaotic thoughts and led the group to the vessel's side.

Though an inland river craft lacking the high bulwarks of seafaring ships, its sides remained dauntingly tall for the small people. Climbing required an undignified posture, leaving Bai Yuan—renowned for suave displays, not awkward scrambling—frozen in place...

A servant shouted nearby, "Master, there's a ladder here!"

Bai Yuan focused his gaze: a small ladder extended from the ship's flank to the deck. Every detail had evidently been considered during construction—truly impressive.

Now Bai Yuan could ascend. He climbed gracefully, swiftly navigating to the captain's chamber. Spotting the circular helm, he instantly knew it controlled direction. Beside it lay a familiar switch, identical to the small train's.

"Isn't this patently obvious?" Bai Yuan chuckled. "Press this switch to move forward, turn the helm to steer, press again to stop. Simple!"

Zhang Yuanwai marvelled, "So easy to operate? No sails or oars needed?"

Bai Yuan grinned. "Heh! Gifts from the Deity always work this way! Powered by immortal force—beyond mortal comprehension!"

Zhang Yuanwai dared not question this. But as one raised by the Yellow River, he understood boats: "Even with immortal power replacing sails and oars, maneuvers like turning or docking remain challenging with such a large vessel. Brother Bai, restrain that trigger finger."

Bai Yuan's hand hovered over the switch. Heeding the warning, he withdrew it cautiously. "True. Mastering vessels escapes my gentlemanly skills."

A servant stepped forward. "Master, I know a little about rowing."

Beside Bai Family Fortress lay Horseshoe Lake. Most servants grew up swimming there and could handle little fishing boats. But none had commanded such a sizable ship. Tentatively, they offered to try.

Rushing with pride, Bai Yuan declared, "Excellent! All oarsmen prepare! We'll test this mighty ship! Brother Zhang, aren't your Heyang County fishers Yellow River veterans? Summon them aboard! Master this craft, and river pirates lose their terror!"

Zhang Yuanwai beamed. "Brother Bai speaks wisdom!"

He yelled toward Qiachuan Port's fishing fleet, "All skilled swimmers and boat handlers—report to the big ship! Advise Mr. Bai!"

The fishers—long curious about the vessel—sprang into action. Over a dozen scrambled aboard, dashing about the deck, marveling at fittings they touched.

Li Daoxuan watched intently, one hand poised near the four buttons labeled north, south, east, and west outside the box.

The Yellow River stretched so wide it consumed his entire viewing space. The five-meter-wide box meant a ship mid-river lay beyond his reach. Any capsizing could drown the small people before rescue. His fingers constantly adjusted the directional buttons to keep the vessel box-hem-adjacent—where his hand could intervene.

Both inside and outside the box, tension hummed.

Amid this suspense, Bai Yuan clicked the electric switch.

The small motor spun the propellers, churning white foam at the stern. A fisher there cried, “Something whirls behind us—it’s pushing the ship!”

“A ship like this?”

“It’s celestial, naturally!”

“Turn! Port now! With this current, waiting delays avoidance of those rapids!” shouted a veteran River-watcher.

Bai Yuan focused entirely on rotating the helm. Sweat beaded his brow initially, but calm settled within minutes as he spun the wheel deftly. “Easier than expected! More freedom than driving the small train! Tracks bind that one; this celestial ship rules the Yellow River!”

A fisher leaped joyfully around the deck. “Beats little fishing boats—steady, swift! Casting nets here would soar efficiency!”

“Still stuck on fishing while owning such wealth? Haul grain to Northern Shaanxi! Where grain prices spike—one dou of rice costing one thousand coins! Fortune awaits!”

“Hah! That road belongs to us? Bandits claim your life before your coin!”

“Pirates frightened the helpless old us! In this armored ship? None daunt us! Trade routes open everywhere!”

“Even government navy ships couldn’t intimidate me now!”

“Careful! That’s near-treasonous talk!”

The fishers burst into laughter.

After his trial run, Bai Yuan steered back to Qiachuan Port. Fishers slung a long rope toward the dock, coiling it around a wooden post. But seeing the mighty ship against the tiny pilings usually mooring boats, one cried, “A lone rope won’t hold her! What if midnight currents sweep her off?”

“Anchor! We need the anchor!” hollered an old fisher. “Official ships use four-clawed iron anchors! Ours must have one—find it!”

Soon they located a massive anchor mounted on a stern frame. Pressing its mechanism released it with a splash. Ship securely moored.

Cheers erupted. “Success! Success! We’ve mastered this vessel!”

Chapter 390: They Really Harvest Quite a Lot

Being able to use something and being proficient in its use were worlds apart.

Li Daoxuan knew they couldn’t properly operate this vessel in a short time. Moreover, the cannons on this ship were all fakes—they needed to source stainless steel cannons from the artisans’ well in Gaojia Village and then install them one by one onto the ship.

For ancient people, this was no small undertaking!

They'd need to labor for quite a few more days before it could truly be put into service.

Bai Yuan obviously knew this too. He turned to Zhang Yuanwai and said, "Brother Zhang, we must select a crew, specifically to man this celestial ship. My Bai Family Fortress was built beside Horseshoe Lake; the surrounding villages have many fishermen. I plan to choose some fishermen from Bai Family Fortress as crew. Meanwhile, your Heyang County also has many fishermen who make their living year-round on the Yellow River. You should select some from there to join the crew as well."

Zhang Yuanwai lowered his voice, "The fishermen haven't joined the militia formation. They haven't learned the three major disciplines and eight points of attention yet. It seems improper to put them directly on the ship."

Bai Yuan nodded, "Truly improper. But the Yellow River's currents are treacherous. Without experienced old fishermen who know the waters aboard, great disaster might strike. So we have no choice but to let them board first while simultaneously teaching them the three major disciplines and eight points of attention."

At this, Bai Yuan's expression turned grave, "We absolutely must select the men carefully. If spies sneak onto the celestial ship and cause trouble, overturning the vessel... the Deity will surely grow angry."

The words "the Deity grows angry" startled Zhang Yuanwai tremendously. The saying went that a god's rage could rend heaven and earth. If the Deity truly became angry, blamed him for the poor selection, and vented that wrath upon him personally—how could he possibly withstand that?

Zhang Yuanwai had read *Journey to the West*. There was a passage describing how a couple quarreling in Fengxian County knocked over an altar table meant for celestial offerings, thereby offending the Jade Emperor. In revenge, the Jade Emperor withheld rain from Fengxian County. He decreed that rain would only fall once a chicken pecked through a mountain-sized pile of rice, a dog licked clean a mountain-sized pile of flour, and an oil lamp burned through a golden chain. Fengxian County suffered a drought for three years—famine spread across the land, corpses piled everywhere. Only when Xuanzang's entourage arrived was the feud finally resolved.

Modern people hearing this story would surely curse the Jade Emperor as narrow-minded, cruel, and heartless—a dog turd emperor unfit to rule the world. Even though he was a god, they'd want to find some "god-slayers" to chop him up and feed him to dogs.

But ancient people dared not blame the Jade Emperor's faults; they could only blame themselves for failing to revere the gods sufficiently.

Zhang Yuanwai swallowed hard, thinking: Whatever I do, I must not provoke divine wrath, or the consequences would be unthinkable. He immediately bowed deeply toward a low cloud drifting across the sky, "Deity, rest assured! This humble man will do his utmost to carefully select the crew and cause no trouble for your venerable self."

Bai Yuan and Zhang Yuanwai deployed a strong guard force to tightly protect the "celestial ship" at the dock. Zhang Yuanwai busied himself selecting fishermen of fine character, while Bai Yuan galloped back with urgent speed—first to the artisans' well in Gaojia Village to inform Thirty-Two to arrange men to replace the ship's fake cannons with real ones. Then he dashed home to Horseshoe Lake by Bai Family Fortress to recruit fishermen from his own lands, men who'd long followed the Deity.

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Yang Village, Heyang County.

A group of farmers were burning stalks in the fields.

Stalk burning was prohibited in modern times, but in this era, it remained a primary method farmers used to fertilize the soil and eliminate pests and diseases.

Watching the stalks burn, the farmers chatted, "Old Yang, how much grain did your family harvest this year?"

Old Yang shook his head, "Two mu of land, four dan of grain."

"Wow, quite a bit! Why the shake of the head then?"

Old Yang sighed, "At Gaojia Village, they get four dan of grain from just one mu! What's there to boast about getting four dan from two?"

“They weren’t bragging, were they?”

“What nonsense!” Old Yang retorted, “The smith, Young Yang, from the village—you all know him, right? He took his smithing skills to Gaojia Village to earn big money. He came back a few days ago to visit relatives and told us himself: one mu yields four dan at Gaojia Village.”

“Wow!”

This made the farmers of Yang Village unable to stay calm, “What methods did they use?”

Old Yang: “Heard it was thanks to celestial fertilizer bestowed by the Deity. That celestial fertilizer is far superior to our dung fertilizer. Called something... something about scientific proportion? Anyway, I didn’t understand it properly, only managed to remember those words.”

One farmer said, “Then let’s go buy celestial fertilizer from Gaojia Village.”

Old Yang: “Having the celestial fertilizer alone isn’t enough. You need to know how to use it. We’ve farmed all our lives—don’t we understand you can’t just fling fertilizer around haphazardly? If you mess up using the celestial fertilizer and apply it wrong, you’ll burn the roots, get no crop at all.”

That made sense!

Veteran farmers knew that not applying fertilizer just meant a slightly smaller harvest. But applying the wrong fertilizer could kill all the crops in an entire field, resulting in total crop failure.

Another farmer suggested, “Then we should go to Gaojia Village to learn it!”

Old Yang: “Worried they won’t be willing to teach.”

Everyone sighed. Indeed—who’d willingly teach others such a prized skill, their ultimate family secret?

“Hurry up and finish burning these stalks. Before winter comes, we still have time to plant some mixed vegetables.”

The farmers murmured agreement, readying themselves to get back to working.

Just then, a public sun chariot rumbled down the cement road past Yang Village. Over a dozen people hopped off—mostly farmers. Despite wearing clean cotton clothes, their sun-tanned skin and the way they immediately glanced toward the fields confirmed their identities—genuine farmers through and through.

Among this group of farmers was a scholarly man in his thirties. He appeared refined, gentle, almost fragile-looking. Surrounded by the farmers, he seemed to be the leader.

The farmers of Yang Village watched curiously: What kind of strange group is this? A scholar leading a bunch of farmers here?

These unexpected visitors unloaded several large sacks from the public sun chariot. Words were written on the sacks, but the farmers of Yang Village were illiterate and couldn't decipher what was inside.

Scanning the surroundings, the newcomers quickly spotted the assembled Yang Village farmers. Hoisting the sacks, they trotted briskly over.

The scholar followed, jogging along. After just a few paces, he suddenly clutched his knees, panting heavily: “Sl... slow down... I... can't keep up...”

The farmers stopped, letting him catch his breath, before continuing over a few more ridges. The short journey took this group a surprisingly long time. Finally, they reached the Yang Village farmers.

The scholar, huffing and puffing, gasped out: “Phew... phew... Y-you... are... farmers of Yang Village? W-we... came from G-Gaojia Village... I'm... Zhao Sheng... everyone calls me... Mr. Zhao...”

Old Yang jumped in alarm, “Mr. Zhao, please stop talking! Sit, sit... You’re from Gaojia Village? May I ask what brings you to Yang Village?”