

Great Ming 391

Chapter 391: Promotion of New Technology

Zhao Sheng took a while before his breathing evened out. “These men behind me are farmers from our Gaojia Village. They’ve been using celestial fertilizer in their fields for two or three years now, and have mastered it to perfection.”

As soon as he said this, the farmers of Yang Village were startled. They had just been discussing celestial fertilizer, and now mighty figures from Gaojia Village had arrived.

Suddenly, they understood what the characters on those sacks meant. It had to be “Celestial Fertilizer.” That was several large sacks of celestial fertilizer!

The gazes of the Yang Village farmers fixed on those sacks instantly turned feverish.

Old Yang seemed to grasp something and mustered his courage. “I see. You came to Yang Village to sell celestial fertilizer, right? But even if we had it, we wouldn’t dare use it casually. Unless... someone could teach us how.”

Zhao Sheng smiled. “What a coincidence. I’m here precisely to teach you how to use this celestial fertilizer.”

At this, the Yang Village farmers were overjoyed. Several nearly cheered out loud.

Old Yang’s expression turned serious. “The tuition won’t be cheap, will it? Can we afford it?”

This question instantly silenced the potential cheers from the Yang Village peasants. They were merely impoverished farmers, still reeling from three years of severe drought. Their families had long run out of money. Where would they get the funds for tuition?

“Tuition?” Zhao Sheng laughed heartily. “You really underestimate me, Zhao Sheng! Find time to inquire around Qingjian County. When has Mr. Zhao ever taken money for helping villagers? Hahaha!” He pointed to the sacks of fertilizer. “Even these sacks of celestial fertilizer are free. We’re giving them to you for trial. If you find them useful, you can consider buying some next spring for planting. Gaojia

Village will soon send people to establish a 'Fertilizer Supply Cooperative' in Heyang County Town. You'll be able to buy it there."

The Yang Village farmers were ecstatic.

Zhao Sheng slapped his buttocks as he stood up. "Alright, I'm fully rested, breathing easy now, hahaha! Time to teach you how to use celestial fertilizer."

The Yang Village farmers said eagerly, "Please instruct us, Master."

Zhao Sheng jogged towards a farmer's field. As he ran, he puffed, "Let's start with this piece of land... Huh... Aiyah... Hfft... hfft..."

The farmers: "..."

...

Huanglong Mountain, Prison Valley.

The entire valley resembled a natural prison, confining over seven thousand labor offenders. Able-bodied young male offenders were regularly escorted out for heavy physical labor, like constructing a road from Huanglong Mountain Prison to Bai Family Fortress. Or building a cement signal tower on the nearby highest mountain peak.

However, there weren't many young males left among these offenders.

The reason was simple. Able-bodied young men were the primary fighting force of the rebel army and suffered heavy losses. Many were shot dead, lined up for execution, during battles against the Gaojia Village Militia.

The majority of those remaining were the elderly and weak, women and children.

Unable to perform heavy labor, Gaojia Village had transported some spinning machines and cotton into the prison, putting them to work spinning thread and weaving cloth.

This particular noon, the prison entrance suddenly became bustling.

A large contingent of the Gaojia Village Militia arrived. Accompanying them were several large carts carrying strange machines.

These machines were brought into the prison area designated for the elderly and weak, women and children, and placed inside the workshop where they had previously been spinning and weaving. To accommodate these large machines, many of the old spinning and weaving machines were dismantled.

Then, under the arrangement of Head Guard Zhong Gaoliang, a large group of elderly, weak, women, and child offenders gathered in the workshop to observe these strange machines.

Arriving with the machines was an “engineer” from Gaojia Village’s “Artisans’ Well.” He wore clean cotton clothes, his hair neatly combed with straight bangs, he looked like a person of refinement and standing.

The engineer announced loudly, “What you are about to witness is the latest model ‘Steam Spinning Machine’ and ‘Steam Weaving Machine’.”

The labor offenders exchanged confused looks, utterly bewildered.

The engineer began a demonstration. “Add coal here. Pour water here... Right. Pay close attention.”

As the machine started, steam hissed violently.

The enormous contraption moved by itself, spinning cotton into thread with a swish swish swish.

The offenders gasped in amazement. “Wow! Incredible!”

Next, the engineer hung the freshly spun thread onto the weaving machine. With a clack of steam, the loom began operating by itself, clattering away. In no time, large quantities of cotton thread were woven into cloth.

“See that clearly?” The engineer wore a proud expression. “Do you know what this signifies?”

A young female labor offender from Yichuan immediately burst into tears. “Wuwuwu... I know... I understand...”

Seeing someone understand so quickly and even shed tears of... something, the engineer felt secretly pleased. Encouragingly, he said, “Good that you understand. Come out and tell everyone what you’ve understood!”

The young female offender sobbed, tears streaming. “I understand. With these machines weaving cloth, the prison doesn’t need us anymore. They can kill us all now. That way, they can save a lot of food.”

The other offenders nearby all panicked dramatically. Many of the elderly and weak, women and children wailed.

The engineer: “Ptui!”

He nearly choked on a mouthful of blood.

That’s what she understood?!

Furious, the engineer roared, “You understand absolutely nothing! Since when does Gaojia Village need to save such a pittance of food? Do we look like desperate bandits who kill to save rations?! Don’t lump us in with the rebels!”

The crowd of elderly, weak, women, and children asked, “Then what should we understand?”

The engineer was so furious he broke into harsh laughter. “Ha! Hahaha! I could be driven to death by you lot, hahaha! This machine means faster spinning! Faster weaving! Which means more cloth! Cheap cloth! From now on, cotton cloth won’t be outrageously expensive anymore! Got it?! Ordinary people can afford cotton clothes! Got it?! Even riff-raff like you, labor offenders, can wear clothes made of cotton! Get it?! GET IT?! Huff... you’ll be the death of me.”

The offenders: “???”

Engineer: “Talking about technological progress with you lot is like playing music to a cow.”

Head Guard Zhong Gaoliang stepped forward from the side, chuckling softly. “Don’t bother reasoning with them. Their minds move slowly. Thinking is hopeless for them. Just give direct orders.”

The engineer could only wave his hand and command. “This latest spinning and weaving machine is already being mass-produced. Very soon, all the old machines in this prison will be retired. You will all learn to use the new machines. Form small groups. Master the machines and then start production with them. Understood?”

Hearing they weren’t about to be killed, the elderly, weak, women, and children were immensely relieved and quickly responded, “Understood!”

Chapter 392: The Sudden Assassin

The elderly and weak, women and children finished learning how to use the new machines and began departing in scattered groups.

Zhong Gaoliang pulled the engineer’s arm and grinned, “Since you’re already here, don’t rush back. Have a meal here first. Though our mountain area isn’t as plentiful as Gaojia Village, you’ll get freshly harvested mountain delicacies. Heh heh heh... we caught a snake just today.”

The engineer was delighted, “Snake meat? Then I’ll take up your offer.”

Li Daoxuan’s mouth immediately watered at this. He quickly opened a food delivery app to search, but found nothing! Couldn’t buy snake meat. Aghhhh!

Damn it, these villagers were eating better and better lately, even trumping him, the mighty Deity! This was utterly unacceptable.

Li Daoxuan had no choice but to squat in a corner, drawing circles gloomily.

Just then, a young woman among the dispersing crowd of elderly, weak, women and children seemed jostled by the flow. Losing her balance, she stumbled sideways and fell out from the crowd.

Guards stationed nearby for security immediately reached out to steady her. Yet seeing her as a young lady, they hesitated halfway and withdrew their hands, not daring to touch directly.

The young woman stumbled through the gap between two guards and tumbled to the ground, landing right before Zhong Gaoliang and the engineer's feet.

Zhong Gaoliang was pondering whether to help her up, when suddenly the woman pushed off the ground and sprang up like a whip. A shard of porcelain slid into her hand from her sleeve, jabbing fiercely towards Zhong Gaoliang's throat.

The unexpected assault caught everyone off guard.

Zhong Gaoliang froze completely!

The nearby guards were slow to react; none had time to intervene.

The engineer was utterly inept at combat and couldn't possibly act.

Li Daoxuan was busy scrolling for snake meat on the app, his attention nowhere near the miniature world.

Just as Zhong Gaoliang was about to bleed profusely within five steps, a shadow flickered. Old Nan Feng darted out from the prisoners, latching onto the woman's arm from behind and yanking her back hard. The porcelain shard halted in mid-air, unable to strike.

He then hooked his foot under hers, sending her crashing down. Kneeling instantly, he pressed his knee against her back, immobilizing her under his weight.

Only then did the onlookers snap out of it. Guards drew their waist knives, and in a heartbeat, five blades hovered at the woman's throat.

Old Nan Feng stood and dusted his hands, "Heh, I noticed this woman acting suspicious long ago. Saw her hiding that shard during the meal. Thought she'd use it in a prison brawl. Never imagined she'd try to assassinate the Head Guard! This'll earn me a massive sentence reduction—years off! Hahaha!"

Zhong Gaoliang finally snapped out of his stunned state, his neck chilly. He touched it—no wound. "Waaah!" he cried, "Just had a brush with death!"

Li Daoxuan shifted his attention now, his heart racing with dread. Damn, this woman's brutal. That strike almost cost him a beloved villager—no ordinary one either, but a named villager whose name he knew and cherished beyond others. Had she died, he might have been heartbroken.

Quickly, he slipped on the Thanos Gloves and reached into the miniature world. His gigantic finger tapped the ground before the woman:

Placed a large note: Investigate thoroughly; uncover this woman's background.

Seeing the Deity personally intervene elevated the matter's seriousness instantly.

Where five blades had threatened the woman before, now ten glinted with fresh menace.

Zhong Gaoliang clenched his jaw darkly, "Why kill me? What did I ever do to you? I ensured you all had enough to eat and stayed warm. Why the murder?"

The woman had accepted death the moment she acted, expecting no mercy. Thus she stayed defiant: "I aimed to kill anyone from Gaojia Village. Of those I got near, you held the highest rank. So I chose you."

Zhong Gaoliang: “???”

Crowd: “???”

Li Daoxuan was equally confused.

Woman: “Gaojia Village men killed my older brother. With a firearm.”

Suddenly, everyone began to understand.

So that was it!

Among these labor offenders imprisoned with their families were many whose male kin had faced Gaojia Village’s firing squads. These elderly and weak, women and children mostly were relatives of fierce bandits from Wang Zuogua’s rebel forces. This woman was no exception; likely nine out of ten prisoners behind her shared such backgrounds.

The motive for murder was clear—no need to dissect it further. Li Daoxuan sighed softly.

The guards looked towards Zhong Gaoliang, awaiting his judgment.

But Zhong Gaoliang was no great man. Just a farmer abruptly risen to Head Guard; he had zero experience handling such situations. Bewildered, he scanned the crowd for guidance.

Finding none, Old Nan Feng spoke gravely, “Killing her is standard. Kill one to warn a hundred.”

Zhong Gaoliang hesitated, “Uh... Kill her, huh?”

Old Nan Feng nodded, “In border armies? Capture an enemy’s kin, and they’d die without hesitation.” Then he eyed the young woman oddly from head to toe before adding, “... they might... heh... before killing her.”

That unsettling “heh” chilled the room.

Though ready to die, the woman understood worse than death could await her. Genuine terror seized her.

Her face blanched.

She reasoned internally: Ten blades at my neck. Press hard and I’ll follow my brother swiftly—unharméd. Quick end.

Yet contemplation differed starkly from action.

Without depression, finding courage to suicide felt impossible. Even knowing death was certain, initiating it demanded immense resolve.

Zhong Gaoliang felt utterly lost at Old Nan Feng’s hints.

Some might heed such hard advice. But not Zhong Gaoliang. After becoming Head Guard, he hadn’t leased his family’s land to avoid becoming the exploitative landlords he despised. Instead, he lent plots freely to neighbors. Such was his nature.

Ordering an execution was beyond him.

He gazed upward, pleading, “Deity... what should I do about her?”

Li Daoxuan sighed again and presented a note: Bind this woman securely. Send her to Gaojia Village. Deliver her to Gao Yiyè.

Chapter 393: This Person is Fierce

The woman was tied up securely. To prevent her from attacking again, they checked her thoroughly from head to toe this time, not leaving her even a small “weapon” like a stone. Her hands were bound tightly, making her upper body resemble a zongzi. Then the guards threw her back onto the cart that

had delivered the weaving machine and assigned several men to watch over her. They escorted her all the way back to Gaojia Fortress.

Back in the fortress, they needed to handle a dangerous prisoner like her seriously. This was especially vital as she was being taken to see the Saint Lady, requiring heightened security. So the engineer went to the barracks again and invited Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, the two “experts” who had long guarded the Saint Lady, to escort her.

Thus, Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, one on the left and one on the right, escorted the woman tied like a zongzi, and entered Gaojia Fortress.

The woman glanced at Zheng Gouzi and felt he seemed somewhat decent, but the Ground Rabbit beside him looked nothing like a good person no matter how she looked; his whole aura reeked of ruffianism. She felt a bit panicked inside: Why did they hand me to such guys? Where is he taking me? Damn it, I really should have smashed my neck against the knife blade to die earlier. Now that I’ve fallen into these hands, the thing I dread most might just happen.

Just as she thought it, Ground Rabbit spoke up: “You woman, daring to assassinate Head Guard Zhong is truly vile. Lucky this old man wasn’t at the scene; if I had been, humph, I’d make you taste Mr. Rabbit’s big blade.” These were such foul words. The woman was stunned inside: Terrible! This man is indeed a shameless lecher, starting with such brazen talk. If I’m in his grasp, I can neither live nor die with ease.

Ground Rabbit added: “What are you staring at? Daring to glare at me? I hate your kind the most. Believe it or not, I’ll deal with you right now.” The woman: “!!!”

Li Daoxuan chuckled inside: How many years had Ground Rabbit been in Gaojia Village? Still spouting underworld slang! Kill if he means kill—why say “deal with”? How terrifying that sounded to the woman. He suddenly recalled Ground Rabbit’s arrival; he wanted to “join the militia” but said “enter the gang,” infuriating Cheng Xu. Such slang was fine for jokes among men, but to a woman, the meaning shifted instantly.

The young woman gritted her teeth: “I’ll haunt you even as a ghost.” Ground Rabbit replied: “Mr. Rabbit never fears ghosts.” He was upright and straightforward, never did wrongs in his life, so why dread ghostly knocks? But he couldn’t phrase it well; a boastful word left his mouth and soured fast: “Mr. Rabbit has strong yang energy; any female ghost arriving can only kneel before his sword.” Li Daoxuan: “...” Zheng Gouzi: “...”

The young woman: “!!!” How could they keep talking? The young woman clenched her lower lip and went silent. No woman enjoys chatting with a ruffian.

Silently, the group entered the watchtower... Passing the ancestral hall, the woman’s eyes briefly lingered on the Dao Xuan Deity Statue before she turned away. Since she was doomed anyway, she refused to submit to Gaojia Village’s deity.

Soon, the three of them ascended the watchtower. On the balcony, Gao Yiye was already waiting. Qiu Ju and Dong Xue sat respectfully behind her. Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi pressed the woman down to sit on the floor opposite Gao Yiye, then moved to guard Gao Yiye’s left and right to prevent the woman from leaping up to harm the Saint Lady.

With that posture set, the woman wondered doubtfully: Seems I worried too much earlier. The leader here is actually a woman, so she won’t let that self-proclaimed Mr. Rabbit disgrace me, right? Li Daoxuan spoke out: “What is your family name and given name? Who is your brother? How many years were you with Wang Zuogua’s forces? What role did you hold? Spell it all out clearly.”

Hearing Gao Yiye’s questions, the woman hardened her heart: “I won’t give my name; there are nine clans to protect. Call me Yizhangqing (a historical figure). My brother’s nickname was Little Yue Fei. He was just an obscure nobody under Wang Zuogua.”

Ground Rabbit asked curiously: “Huh? Yizhangqing? Such an unlucky name? Isn’t that San Niang from Water Margin? She lost her father, mother, brother, and married Short-Legged Tiger.”

The woman snapped: “Illiterate! Yizhangqing was originally the wife of Northern Song general Ma Gao. After Ma Gao died, she married Zhang Yong, a general under Yue Fei. The author of Water Margin just stole the alias for San Niang.”

Ground Rabbit exclaimed: “Oh? That really happened?” Li Daoxuan reacted: “Huh? That really happened?” Well, even the Deity was ignorant, so no point blaming Ground Rabbit. “Seems you’re educated, not a fool.” Li Daoxuan asked: “Your brother Little Yue Fei died in our fight with Wang Zuogua?”

Yizhangqing clenched her jaw: “Yes! So I planned to trade my life for a big shot from Gaojia Village, if only to avenge him.” Li Daoxuan reasoned: “That revenge is costly—two for one.” Yizhangqing realized it

wasn't Gao Yi Ye speaking to her but the Dao Xuan Deity; the Deity talked from the skies while the girl in front listened intently and relayed the words.

Thoughts of conversing with a deity stirred faint excitement— an absurd, unwelcome emotion she resented: “Costly or not, I have to fight. How else can I avenge my brother?” Li Daoxuan countered: “Right now, it's 0 to 1 between Gaojia Village and your family. You trade one, it's 1 to 2—still one loss to you. Don't fight, your family loses one, but you live. Thinking calmly, not fighting seems profitable.”

Yizhangqing declared: “God or not, I won't joke now. Kill me or slice me—I've long stopped wanting life.” “No, you want to live,” Li Daoxuan retorted. “If you truly wished death, with ten blades at your neck, you'd have smashed into one decisively. Why let us tie you like a zongzi and drag you here? Now in this state, if Gaojia Village does worse to you, suicide is impossible.”

Yizhangqing protested: “I can bite my tongue.” Li Daoxuan explained: “Biting your tongue won't kill you; it'll only hurt badly. After fainting from pain, heavy bleeding blocks your airway, causing death. But if someone nearby clears the blood to unblock it, you survive.”

Yizhangqing: “!!!” Li Daoxuan pressed: “Then your tongue aches, you can't die or curse, and enemies torment you endlessly—that's worse, isn't it? See Ground Rabbit beside you? He's fierce; children hear his name and fear nighttime cries. Are you truly unafraid of his hands?”

Chapter 394: Come and Kill Me

Li Daoxuan's words truly startled Yizhangqing. She couldn't help but turn to look at Ground Rabbit, who was sprawled out nearby.

Ground Rabbit grinned, “Yes, this Mr. Rabbit is extremely fierce. Killing a few dozen or a hundred people, I wouldn't even bat an eye. Especially skilled at killing women and children, one slash each, one slash each...”

Gao Yiye wondered aloud, “What I'm about to say is my own thought, not the Deity's words. Ground Rabbit, when have you ever killed women and children? And isn't your specialty weapon a sword? Since when did it become a blade?”

Ground Rabbit protested, “Hey hey, Saint Lady, now's not the critical time to expose me!”

Everyone: "..."

Yizhangqing: "Huh?"

Just a moment ago, she had been terrified to death of Ground Rabbit. But suddenly hearing this exchange between the two before her, she froze completely, dazed for a long moment. Her face was stiff as she said, "You tied me up and brought me here, deliberately saying all that to scare me. What on earth are you trying to do?"

"Alright!" Li Daoxuan said, "Honestly, there's no hidden agenda. You represent those labor offenders whose menfolk we eliminated. You're a typical example. People like you are numerous within the labor camp. I reckon at least half the prisoners in there have men in their families who died at the hands of Gaojia Village. This is an issue we must resolve. That's why I summoned you, to use you as a representative case to address."

Yizhangqing gritted her teeth. "Correct, people like me are plentiful. Sooner or later, they will take up arms and kill you all to avenge the men of their families."

Li Daoxuan retorted, "Don't think saying that will make Gaijia Village apologize for killing your brother. Why did your brother die? Surely you understand that better than us. You just refuse to admit it."

Yizhangqing: "..."

Li Daoxuan pressed, "Let me ask you this: Did your brother kill and burn houses? Did he rape and pillage? Ever point his weapon at unarmed ordinary people? While he was committing these acts, your feelings as a woman—how did you feel? Did you plead with your brother to stop? Did you feel anguish over your brother's actions? Or perhaps... when the food he robbed filled your belly, did you even feel happy?"

Hearing this, Yizhangqing instantly froze solid.

Absolutely right!

These issues truly existed.

As a woman, Yizhangqing was powerless to stop the men in her family. Women's status was too low. "The elder brother is like the father"—if a brother decided to pillage and murder, his younger sister had no voice, no control.

She could only watch helplessly as her brother ran amok with Wang Zuogua's bandit army.

Moreover, the food he plundered ended up filling her stomach. Thinking about it this way felt incredibly strange.

Li Daoxuan said, "If the family members of the people your brother murdered while doing evil came now, demanding to kill you and perish together with you, what would you think?"

Yizhangqing remained silent.

Li Daoxuan continued, "Alright, you actually know where the problem lies. But you're hypocritical. Your brother can kill others, but others cannot kill your brother. Because your brother put food on your plate, didn't he?"

Sweat poured down Yizhangqing's forehead, her expression complex.

Li Daoxuan used his "Focus" ability to scrutinize every nuance of her expression. If he'd seen even the faintest hint of indifference to others' lives and deaths, he would have ordered her execution.

However, Yizhangqing's face clearly showed remorse. Li Daoxuan's words seemed to have struck a chord.

"I... I know... I knew my brother did evil things. I begged him not to, but he wouldn't listen to me. But don't say I was happy because he brought back stolen food! I was miserable! I had nightmares constantly... I knew this path my brother and I were on was wrong... that we'd eventually face Heaven's punishment..."

Li Daoxuan said, "Wow? So you did know? Then let me ask you... do I count as Heaven?"

Yizhangqing: “!!!”

She froze utterly now!

Li Daoxuan said, “The picture grows clearer, doesn’t it? Those who commit evil will ultimately be punished by Heaven. Heaven has many ways to punish a person: dying at the hands of other bandits, being wiped out by the imperial bandit suppression force, falling to one’s death while walking, choking to death while eating, drowning while drinking water... or, being killed by the Gaojia Village Militia!”

“He couldn’t escape this fate because he was not a good man. Only good men receive good ends. How could an evil man meet a virtuous death?”

Yizhangqing began to waver. She knew. She truly knew. She had merely been blinded by hatred. Now, Li Daoxuan’s words jolted her realization: her brother could not evade Heaven’s Law.

And the Heaven’s Law... was speaking to her right now!

How utterly mortifying!

Li Daoxuan pressed on, “The Gaojia Village Militia was sent by my order. Your brother was punished by my decree. If you seek revenge, merely killing Gaojia Village followers is useless. You must defy Heaven itself to avenge your brother. Come now... come and kill me to fulfill your vengeance for your brother.”

As he spoke, he slowly reached his hand into the box.

A colossal golden hand wearing Thanos Gloves descended, reaching out towards Yizhangqing. The very fingertip alone dwarfed her entire body.

“Ground Rabbit! Untie her bonds. Let her try to kill me.”

Upon hearing the command, Ground Rabbit promptly stepped forward, untied the ropes binding Yizhangqing, and casually shoved a knife into her hand – One Blade. Then, he swiftly retreated to stand protectively in front of Gao Yiye, guarding against a potential outburst from Yizhangqing.

This small action earned Ground Rabbit a silent nod of approval from Li Daoxuan.

Yizhangqing gripped the knife, her whole body trembling uncontrollably as she gazed upon the heaven-piercing giant hand before her.

She wasn't stupid. She didn't need to try. One Blade was utterly useless. Couldn't scratch it. Couldn't even make a dent. This god inviting her to kill him? He was clearly just toying with her.

Li Daoxuan prompted, "Not going to try?"

Tears streamed down Yizhangqing's face. "How could I ever kill the Heaven? I don't have the power!" she choked out.

Ground Rabbit chuckled beside her. "Exactly! Defying fate? Who could possibly achieve that?" he smirked.

Gao Yiye sighed softly. "These are my own thoughts, not the Deity's words," she said gently. "Miss Yizhangqing, the reason your brother died was precisely because he defied fate, invoking the Heaven's punishment. You, captured alongside the elderly and weak, women and children, clearly didn't directly participate in the bandits' wars. Your sin lies solely in benefiting from the spoils brought back by your brother's evil deeds. Why must you compound your own guilt by seeking revenge for the death of such a wicked man?"

Yizhangqing wept helplessly. "You're right... I benefited from my brother's plunder... There's no turning back for me now..."

Li Daoxuan interjected, "On that point, you are mistaken. In my realm, as long as the crime isn't punishable by death, there is always a path to turn back. There is no notion here of executing families for an individual's crime. When someone commits an offense, we do not execute their nine clans, nor even their three clans."

Yizhangqing: “!”

Li Daoxuan declared, “What needed to be said has been said. Now, I pronounce the final judgment regarding your crime of attempting to assassinate the Head Guard.”

He paused, adopting a deeper, more authoritative tone: “Yizhangqing. For the attempted assassination of Head Guard Zhong Gaoliang—thwarted by intervention before its completion—the charge of ‘Attempted Murder’ stands proved. By law, the sentence ranges from at least three years to no more than ten years of imprisonment. However, considering your target was a person I hold in special favor—an aggravating circumstance—I, as the presiding judge, impose the maximum penalty permissible under the law. That is... an extension of your prison term by ten years. Comprehend the sentence?”

Yizhangqing looked up in shock. After the scolding, she had braced for execution, perhaps preceded by torture. But the final judgment... was merely an extension of her labor sentence by ten years?

“Return now,” Li Daoxuan ordered. “Reflect deeply upon the words I’ve spoken to you today. Contemplate the life attitude you should adopt henceforth upon your return to prison. Dedicate yourself to labor reform. There may yet be opportunities for sentence reduction, early release, and a chance to reform yourself. Your brother is dead. Will you follow his path to destruction? Or strive to live well, make amends for the evils he committed? The choice rests entirely within your mind. Commit another offense after this, however, will lead to certain death.”

Chapter 395: Eyes Unable to Recognize Mount Tai

Yizhangqing was once again escorted back to prison.

Her outburst served as a timely warning to Zhong Gaoliang. Prison security needed even greater attention going forward, and the management of the labor offenders required stricter and more cautious oversight. Even when dealing with the elderly and weak, women, and children, they couldn’t afford to lower their guard.

Therefore, the prison established new security standards and a more standardized management system.

Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, who had handled the entire incident, returned to the barracks. Ground Rabbit was full of energy. “Gouzi! We’ve done another chivalrous deed today.”

Zheng Gouzi rolled his eyes. “Really? We barely did anything. Don’t look so proud, like you just scored a major merit.”

Ground Rabbit: “Hmph, you have no idea, do you? What we just did carried significant virtue.”

Zheng Gouzi, puzzled: “Wasn’t it just a minor matter with a woman? Speaking of which, I find it really odd. Why did the Deity go to such lengths to talk to that woman for so long? Like Old Nan Feng said, isn’t execution the simpler solution?”

Ground Rabbit: “Ah, that’s where you don’t understand. That woman didn’t just represent herself. She represented all the families of the bandit troops. And not just those seven thousand! In the future, we might defeat more bandit troops, even defeat the official troops. We’re going to kill many more bandit soldiers, government soldiers, Mongolian troops, Jurchen troops... And the families of those soldiers, many like that woman, will become our enemies. There could be millions, even tens of millions of them! Filling prisons all across the land! So should we kill them all? That won’t do. Therefore, winning over their hearts is the superior strategy.”

“The Deity’s attitude towards that woman established the approach for handling all such enemies in the future. We just need to follow this plan, and that’s the right way.”

Ground Rabbit’s explanation finally made sense to Zheng Gouzi.

So that was it!

Ground Rabbit continued: “That woman, after returning to prison, will carefully consider the reasoning she heard today from the Deity’s own lips. She’ll spread it within the prison, letting all the labor offenders think deeply too. They need to ponder – should they really hate us? What attitude should they adopt towards their future lives?”

Summing up smugly, he declared: “Therefore, the Deity wasn’t just facing that one woman back there. He was facing countless future labor offenders. Do you still think that was a minor matter?”

Zheng Gouzi had a sudden realization: “No wonder!”

Ground Rabbit: "This Mr. Rabbit's cunning wisdom is rarely matched under heaven."

He spoke with great pride. Coming up ahead was a wall corner, but he wasn't paying attention to his path. As he rounded the corner, he collided thump right into someone's body. It was Wang Er.

It so happened that Wang Er, White Cat, and the villagers from Wangjia Village had just finished their "Thought Lesson" and were emerging from the "Cultural Room," heading towards the drill field.

Wang Er, masked and now renamed Old Tiger Wang, had only joined the Gaojia Village Militia a few months prior. He kept a low profile, not drawing much attention, knowing his own men needed time to rein in their energies after years of drifting outside.

Therefore, he didn't dare take these men out yet. Instead, he led them to Thought Lessons every day, studying the three major disciplines and eight points of attention. He wouldn't take the group out of camp until they had properly learned these rules.

Ground Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi, chatting as they walked, rounded the corner and thumped directly into Wang Er, who was leading the group. Ground Rabbit felt like he had run into a brick wall. He tipped backwards and landed heavily on his backside with a thud.

Wang Er quickly reached out to help him up. "Oh my! Brother, apologies! I didn't notice anyone at the corner. Are you hurt?"

Ground Rabbit dismissed it carelessly. "Of course not! This Mr. Rabbit isn't made of paper! How could a little bump hurt me?"

He clapped his buttocks and scrambled back to his feet, just in time to see Zheng Gouzi beside him, forcing back a laugh.

Ground Rabbit: "What are you laughing at?"

If anyone else had asked, Zheng Gouzi might have lied, saying he wasn't laughing. But he and Ground Rabbit were close buddies now; buddies don't need to be polite. He burst out laughing. "I'm laughing at

you! Practiced martial arts for so long, yet you're still such a weakling. A tiny bump and down you go! Hahaha! A paper tiger!"

Ground Rabbit: "!!!"

This was unforgivable.

Ground Rabbit turned to Wang Er. "I remember you! You're the man Mr. Bai brought back from Heyang County. At the battle of Qiachuan Port, you led a hundred militia local gentry, wearing a yellow hat in the fight."

Wang Er, seasoned by years of hardship and turbulent times, naturally possessed a calm and steady demeanor. His tone was measured and composed. "Yes. My name is Old Tiger Wang. Mr. Bai introduced me to join. I'm still just a new recruit. Please enlighten me on anything I don't yet understand."

Ground Rabbit: "Do you recognize this Mr. Rabbit?"

Wang Er clasped his fists respectfully. "Of course I do. You are Ground Rabbit. Everyone calls you Mr. Rabbit. At the Qiachuan Port battle, Mr. Rabbit threw the cannon's bomb to destroy the border army's shield formation. It earned the admiration of this brother."

Ground Rabbit laughed heartily. This guy was so perceptive! Praising him right from the start! Well, he decided, he wouldn't hold the collision against him. But his face (dignity) needed redeeming!

Ground Rabbit declared: "That bump just now? It wasn't that this Mr. Rabbit is weak! This Mr. Rabbit was distracted and not paying attention. Come, let's bump again. Let me show you Mr. Rabbit's prowess!"

Upon hearing this, White Cat behind Wang Er shifted uncomfortably, stepping forward as if ready to intervene.

But Wang Er, as if he had eyes in the back, pressed down one hand on White Cat's shoulder silently, telling him not to act rashly.

He hadn't endured these past years for nothing. He'd met all sorts of people, especially among the bandit troops – all manner of strange “gallant heroes.” Characters like Ground Rabbit were no novelty. Getting worked up over Ground Rabbit was a losing proposition. Wang Er smiled slightly. “A repeat bump won't be necessary. This humble man is weak. I was walking forward with my head down just now when you, Mr. Rabbit, were turning to speak with Brother Zheng Gouzi. Bumping like that, of course you took the fall. If we'd both been walking straight ahead, surely I'd be the one on the ground.”

Ground Rabbit: “Ha! Brother, your words are truly pleasing! I like you! If anyone bullies you in the future, just drop my name – Mr. Rabbit!”

As he spoke, he fished out fifty wen coins. This was the “Special Prize” he got for escorting Yizhangqing – not much, just fifty coins, a token gesture. He placed the entire handful into Wang Er's palm, then turned and left cheerfully.

Zheng Gouzi followed, his expression peculiar.

After they'd walked a good distance, something suddenly occurred to Ground Rabbit. “Gouzi, strange! It's not odd that guy knew my name. After all, I, the Rabbit, have earned acclaim far and wide! Heroes across the land hold this Rabbit in high regard! That's no surprise! But... why did he know your name?”

Zheng Gouzi: “In our villages around here? He used to be quite the famous hero and righteous man! Everyone was under his protection. Even the big brother in my village called him big brother! I followed him out to fight alongside him once! So why wouldn't he recognize me?”

Chapter 396: The Alkali is Running Out

Ground Rabbit began to feel something was off: “Huh? That's odd. Wasn't he someone Mr. Bai recruited from Heyang County? Why would he be protecting your Zhengjia Village?”

Zheng Gouzi replied, “He's from Wangjia Village.”

Sweat started trickling down Ground Rabbit's face. “Wangjia Village? It couldn't be that Wangjia Village, could it?”

Zheng Gouzi confirmed, “It is that Wangjia Village!”

Ground Rabbit pressed, "The big brother in your village also calls him big brother? You're from Zhengjia Village, so your village's big brother is Zheng Yanfu, right? He's Zheng Yanfu's big brother, and he's from Wangjia Village... Ah ah ah ah ah! Could he be... Bai Shui Wang Er?"

Zheng Gouzi chuckled, "Hehe, Mr. Rabbit. You may be dense, but you're not stupid."

Ground Rabbit let out a yelp, suddenly turned, and charged toward Wang Er.

Originally, Ground Rabbit had beaten up an official, left his village, and adopted the alias "Ground Rabbit" to "act with righteousness" precisely to follow in Wang Er's footsteps.

He never expected to meet him here, in this way.

His face flush with embarrassment, Ground Rabbit raced to Wang Er and threw himself flat on the ground: "Brother Wang! Please forgive this fool who failed to recognize Mount Tai! I offended you just now! Please punish me severely!"

Hearing this, Wang Er knew he had recognized his real identity. Smiling slightly, Wang Er shook his head and helped him up. "Stop that! I can't have my identity spread everywhere. It would bring trouble to Gaojia Village."

Ground Rabbit was startled. He quickly looked left and right, stood up straight, and dared not prostrate himself again. When he turned back to look at Wang Er, his face was filled with pure adoration. He desperately wanted to serve tea to Wang Er, but unfortunately, he had no tea or water right now. He couldn't even offer a simple gesture of respect.

"I... I..." Ground Rabbit stammered, "I left the village precisely to follow you, Brother Wang, and conquer the world! Until now, that desire hasn't changed."

Wang Er shook his head, his tone desolate. "Conquer what? My whole idea of conquering the world... was completely wrong. Mr. Rabbit, cherish the here and now. Here, is the real kingdom under heaven."

Here, is the real kingdom under heaven.

The words snapped Ground Rabbit awake.

That's right! Although he hadn't spent the last few years following his admired Brother Wang Er, following the Deity here was also excellent. Here, there were no bullying corrupt officials, no landlords oppressing good citizens, no murderous and ruthless villains...

Here, he had already done many deeds and realized his own crude sense of justice!

Wang Er gave his shoulder a heavy pat. "I truly wish I could be you."

Having said that, he walked past Ground Rabbit and disappeared into the distance.

Ground Rabbit turned to look at Wang Er's receding figure, unable to tear his gaze away for a long time.

Suddenly, White Cat walked up from behind and deliberately bumped into Ground Rabbit.

"Thump!"

Ground Rabbit landed squarely on his backside again.

White Cat let out a loud "Ha!" and followed after Wang Er.

Ground Rabbit sat on the ground for a long time. Suddenly, he grinned, relaxing at last. The regret he had held onto all these years, about not having followed Wang Er, vanished like smoke.

...

Ground Rabbit's guess was correct!

After Yizhangqing returned to the jail, a large group of labor offenders immediately crowded around her: “Miss! After they took you away, did they torture you?”

“Did they bully you?”

Many of these labor offenders had young men from their families killed by the Gaojia Village Militia. Thus, they all secretly applauded what Yizhangqing had done. Seeing her arrested, they were genuinely worried about her safety.

She was a young woman, and when such women broke the law, they often suffered far worse fates than men.

Seeing their concerned gazes, Yizhangqing couldn't help but sigh lightly: “Thank you all, I'm fine. Gaojia Village didn't harm me. They just added ten years to my sentence.”

“Ah?”

Yizhangqing clasped her head in her hands: “I spoke with the Deity... His words seemed so wise. My mind is all jumbled now...”

The labor offenders exchanged bewildered glances before finally asking after several seconds: “Miss, why don't you share what the Deity told us too?”

The seed Li Daoxuan had planted in the labor camp began to sprout quietly...

...

Early in the morning, Li Daoxuan was eating dragon wontons when he saw someone pounding desperately on Gaojia Fortress's gate—a woman, Chunhong.

Chunhong was the first among the four female secretaries to be assigned external duties, managing Gaojia Village's fabric shop—an industry entirely controlled by women.

Though just a small storefront within the Gaojia Business Circle, this shop tied together nearly all the women of Gaojia Village, and these women could influence the men in their households. Thus, the fabric shop's strength ran deep.

Chunhong had transformed from a pitiful fallen girl into a powerful department head—her life turned completely upside down.

Now cleansed of her past, she no longer wore seductive clothes but simple cotton garments instead. Delicate yet composed, she carried an air of dignity.

Her new appearance naturally drew suitors, but knowing herself unworthy, she kept interactions minimal—living with low-key simplicity.

This led Li Daoxuan to neglect her for some time, so her urgent pounding on the fortress gate surprised him.

Sentinels on the fortress wall hastily opened the gate to let her in.

Chunhong sprinted straight into the conference hall.

There, Thirty-Two was holding a meeting with a group of secretaries. Once, he alone managed all Gaojia Village affairs. Later, as tasks multiplied, Tan Liwen joined him. Eventually, one Tan Liwen proved insufficient, so Tan Liwen recruited more secretaries.

The Gaojia Village administrative department had grown from one or two people to a whole team, each member overseeing specific domains—commerce, agriculture, road construction...

Nowadays, Thirty-Two was far busier than Liang Shixian.

While Liang Shixian governed the “traditional” Chengcheng County with little beyond agriculture to manage, Thirty-Two oversaw the “up-and-coming” Gaojia Village, juggling all sorts of strange novelties. The Deity frequently assigned him new tasks that left him bewildered for days.

And here came another!

Rushing up to Thirty-Two, Chunhong cried anxiously, “Administrator Thirty-Two! Something terrible happened!”

Thirty-Two asked, “What? Did ruffians cause trouble at your fabric shop?”

Chunhong: “Nothing so trivial!”

Thirty-Two: “What else could happen at a fabric shop?”

Chunhong: “We’ve run out of alkali!”

Thirty-Two’s head spun in confusion: “Alkali?”

Chunhong: “Yes, alkali!”

Thirty-Two, puzzled: “But yours is a fabric shop—why would you need alkali?”

Tan Liwen and the other secretaries echoed, “Indeed! What use is alkali to you?”

Chunhong gave a tearful laugh: “Not a wealthy lord among you understands weaving! We need lots of alkali during cloth production! Before, when everyone weaved cloth by hand, the slow pace used just enough alkali. But now, with those steam machines running—goodness gracious!—the weaving speed has become unreasonably fast. Our village’s entire alkali supply is completely exhausted!”

Chapter 397: The First Chemical Factory

Thirty-Two was baffled. All the advisors were baffled.

Li Daoxuan, however, chuckled in amusement. So this was it—one of the heralds of the industrial revolution.

Advanced production tools had spurred progress in the textile industry, causing supporting industries to fall behind. To develop those complementary operations, every sector would be compelled to advance together.

Most fascinating. Time to kick back and enjoy the show. Blissful anticipation.

Li Daoxuan happily munched his dragon wontons while settling in for the entertainment.

After Chunhong explained the weaving process, Thirty-Two and the advisors finally understood that weaving required vast quantities of alkali.

Thirty-Two said, “Send someone to the artisans’ well. Fetch our alkali artisan.”

Soon, the alkali artisan arrived.

Previously, Gaojia Village lacked the ability to produce its own alkali; women purchased alkali for imitation weaving from the county town. Later, Xing Honglang spent some silver to coax an alkali artisan back from Xi’an, granting Gaojia Village its alkali production capability.

Suddenly summoned to the conference hall, the alkali artisan felt rather nervous. To such a humble craftsman, figures like Thirty-Two and Tan Liwen ranked higher than the county magistrate, nearly on par with the magistrate of Xi’an. He cautiously inquired, “Manager Thirty-Two, might I ask why you summoned this humble one here?”

Thirty-Two asked, “I hear our village’s alkali supply is insufficient?”

The alkali artisan’s face flushed with embarrassment. “Yes, terribly insufficient. Women badger me daily to make more.”

Thirty-Two said, “If the women need alkali for weaving cloth, just produce more for them. I’ll notify the artisan master to increase your wages.”

The alkali artisan looked miserable. "It's not about the wages. Even if I grew three heads and six arms, and hired dozens of apprentices, it still wouldn't be enough."

Thirty-Two was baffled. "???"

The alkali artisan explained, "Once those steam spinning machines start running, the cloth just flies off the looms! They work nonstop all day long. How can I possibly keep pace with steam power? The method I use involves soaking mugwort and smartweed in a cellar, then sun-drying them thoroughly. Only after that can I pour water over the mixture and add alkali powder to produce mineral alkali. Just imagining this process shows you how slow it is."

Thirty-Two thought it over. It was true; this alkali production sounded much like fermenting vinegar or wine, requiring significant time for processing. "Then what's the solution? Do you know other alkali artisans in Xi'an? Can we recruit more? Or perhaps dig more alkali pits?"

The alkali artisan shook his head vehemently. "With these clumsy hands of mine, I could never match the speed of steam machines in this lifetime. Especially since more machines appear each day—those blacksmiths are beasts, pounding out steam weaving machines nonstop. With each new machine, the alkali demand grows. Unless I wield immortal arts, these beasts will be the death of me."

Li Daoxuan thought: Hahaha! Handicraft workshops, meet the terrors of industrial revolution.

Thirty-Two pressed, "We must find a solution, mustn't we?"

The alkali artisan sighed. "This humble one sees no way."

Chunhong interjected, "Ah? Does that mean we're finished?"

The group exchanged uneasy glances.

Li Daoxuan gleefully noted to himself: This is when you should think of turning to the school. Let's see if you figure it out.

Just then, the door to the discussion hall opened. Third Miss slipped inside, holding a bowl of snow fungus soup. She beamed as she handed it to Thirty-Two. "Father, have some soup."

Third Miss was now sixteen, blossoming into a graceful young woman.

Unlike typical sheltered maidens, she didn't stay confined indoors. Instead, she appeared openly at the school, teaching children mathematics while independently studying various junior high textbooks. Having completed junior high materials, she'd already begun tackling senior high-level subjects.

Thirty-Two accepted the soup with a troubled expression. After a small sip, his face lit up with a smile. "So sweet! My dutiful daughter cooks wonderfully. This soup is simply 【exquisite in richness and sweetness】."

Third Miss smiled. "What worries you, Father? Your brows are knotted tight."

Thirty-Two gestured toward Chunhong. "Manager Chunhong just reported our alkali shortage. I summoned the alkali artisan, who says production can't keep up."

"Oh? Alkali?" Third Miss laughed. "You mean sodium hydroxide! That's not particularly difficult; it just involves several chemical processes... Primarily requiring sodium carbonate solution and limestone..."

She methodically outlined the process for producing sodium hydroxide. However, her explanation drew only blank stares; no one understood a word.

Even Li Daoxuan—the Deity who'd long returned his middle school chemistry knowledge to his teacher—was momentarily stunned. After mentally apologizing to that teacher several times, he barely grasped her meaning.

Modern people learned many things, yet rarely applied them, thus forgot most subjects within years.

Happily, the children of Gaojia Village faced no such issue!

Every bit of math, physics, and chemistry they learned found practical use.

Li Daoxuan's lips curved into a smile. Excellent! The younger generation, armed with modern scientific knowledge, is gradually stepping onto Gaojia Village's stage. After Young Master Bai, now Third Miss contributes vital solutions. Soon, more children will rise to action.

Might Gao Sanwa be next? The perpetual class-skipper who thinks $3+2=32$? Could he possibly rise to the occasion?

Li Daoxuan felt immense pressure indeed.

Thirty-Two declared, "Everyone heard? My dutiful daughter just taught you the method for mass alkali production! You especially, alkali artisan, shouldn't you hurry off to work?"

Sweat poured down the alkali artisan's face. "But... this humble one didn't even comprehend those terms. Sodium carbonate? Sodium hydroxide? Utterly unfamiliar."

Third Miss clarified, "Sodium hydroxide is caustic soda. Sodium carbonate is soda ash."

Now the alkali artisan grasped a sliver. He could produce both alkalis but painstakingly slowly. Running the materials through his mind, he finally parsed the steps Third Miss described—though he understood the procedure, the underlying principles remained obscure.

Third Miss chuckled. "You needn't grasp the underlying science. Just like cement production, establish an alkali factory first. Prepare all the machinery and materials my process requires, then begin manufacturing. Throughout production, workers only need master very basic operational procedures."

Precisely. In modern society's chemical plants, not everyone understood chemical principles. Workers conducting operations required no theoretical expertise—they simply followed the standardized procedures provided by technicians.

Chemists devise solutions. Song Yingxing builds machines. Miners extract raw materials. Workers operate the factory... Running a modern chemical plant demands an extensive collaborative chain—far beyond an individual alkali artisan’s capability.

Li Daoxuan mentally awarded Third Miss vigorous applause.

Thirty-Two naturally backed his daughter’s plan wholeheartedly. Without question, funds were allocated immediately. Thus began Gaojia Village’s first alkali chemical factory—and the world’s first chemical plant...

Chapter 398: The Celestial Ships Trial Voyage

Just as preparations for the chemical factory began...

Qiachuan Port!

The river boat, stripped of its fake cannons and now armed with real ones, was finally ready.

Its iron-plated hull was covered with composite material boards painted with wood grain patterns. Twelve large cannons, made of stainless steel capillary steel tubing, extended from both sides of the ship, presenting a formidable sight.

The eighty crew members personally selected by Bai Yuan from Bai Family Fortress were all prepared. Additionally, twenty fishermen from Qiachuan boarded as “trainee water troops”.

In truth, these twenty “trainee water troops” knew the Yellow River’s hydrological conditions better, but they hadn’t completed enough “Thought Lessons” and thus couldn’t become full members yet.

The total crew numbered a hundred.

It seemed a little thin!

But it was enough.

Spanish sailing ships of the same thirty-meter length during the same period typically carried only about ninety water troops. They only packed the holds with 500 soldiers when transporting troops for battle.

Bai Yuan looked spirited: "Our celestial ship begins its trial voyage today. Crew members, this celestial ship is a treasure bestowed upon the mortal realm by the Deity. Today, you will sail it far and wide, thousands of miles. Be cautious and don't capsize it..."

A sailor mumbled quietly: "Thousands of miles? We're only sailing to the ancient ferry dock at Yongji in Shanxi and then coming back. Round trip, barely two hundred miles..."

Bai Yuan: "Hmm? What are you mumbling?"

The sailor snapped to attention: "Report! I said nothing!"

Bai Yuan snorted: "Today, an important person sails with us aboard our celestial ship. Come, applause, welcome."

The crew looked bewildered, not understanding. But if the boss said clap, they clapped.

Then they saw a tall, strong woman, sturdier than the average man, step onto the deck. It was Yongji Xing Honglang.

Xing Honglang clasped her fist: "Brothers, Yongji is my hometown. I heard the bandits are causing havoc in Shanxi now. Worried for my home, I've brazenly tagged along on this trial voyage that happens to go to the ancient ferry dock at Yongji. I've also brought plenty of grain. It's all up to you brothers this time."

Her salt smugglers, over forty tough men, appeared on the shore. They guarded ten grain carts, loaded full, driving them one by one onto the ship.

The water troops understood—she was taking grain back to aid her hometown.

Months ago, Wang Jiayin failed to capture Qiachuan Port and turned on Hequ County in Shanxi. When the Shanxi commander's cannons misfired, they couldn't hold Wang Jiayin, who took Hequ. Then the other bandits poured into Shanxi to wreak havoc. The tales of horror from Shanxi were terrifying.

Xing Honglang's concern for her townsfolk was perfectly understandable.

The water troops clasped their fists: "Don't worry, Miss Xing. Leave it to us."

One Bai Family Fortress sailor snickered quietly: "Can't call her 'Miss Xing' anymore. Gonna be 'Mrs.' soon. Heheh."

Another sailor: "Eh? Her and Gao Chuwu are about to marry?"

"Soon. Heard the wedding's being planned."

"That pair dragged it out forever! Blame Gao Chuwu for being useless, always losing to Miss Xing. Then not long ago, Miss Xing went easy on purpose—then Gao Chuwu finally won."

Others beside them nodded: "Oh, so that's how it was."

Xing Honglang flushed crimson: "Hey! I heard that! What nonsense are you spouting? I didn't go easy on purpose! I genuinely couldn't win against Gao Chuwu anymore! He used his strength to force me to marry him! I can't beat him... scared he'd hit me... so I had to marry him. That's the story!"

Bai Yuan: "Wow? So that's it? Then Gao Chuwu is guilty of forcibly marrying a woman! That's a capital offense, exactly what the Deity hates most."

He then looked up at the low cloud in the sky: "Deity, isn't that so?"

Li Daoxuan flashed a large piece of paper: "Forcibly marrying a woman? Be executed!"

Bai Yuan said: "See, the Deity said to execute. We'll go back and inform Fang Wushang to execute Gao Chuwu."

Xing Honglang saw that and was shocked; the Deity had actually laid down a decree! She cried out with a loud voice: “Wrong! Wrong! He didn’t forcibly marry a woman. I was just talking nonsense earlier. I deliberately held back; I lost on purpose. I want to marry him. Deity, please don’t take it seriously. Punish me instead for speaking thoughtlessly and slandering Gao Chuwu.”

“Hahahaha!”

Li Daoxuan and Bai Yuan burst into laughter together—one laughing in the sky, the other on the boat. Then the water troops all laughed, and even Xing Honglang’s salt smugglers joined in amusement.

Xing Honglang’s face flushed so red it seemed about to bleed...

She had to vent her anger on her subordinates: “What are you laughing at? Hurry up and load all the grain onto the boat; we’re setting off.”

The subordinates stifled their laughter, pushed the grain carts onto the boat, and placed them in the cabin below. To prevent the grain from getting wet, they wrapped it in oiled paper and handled it perfectly.

Bai Yuan waved his hand: “Within Shanxi territory, be cautious in all actions.”

Xing Honglang and the water troops returned the salute. The captain flipped a switch, shifted the rudder, and the large boat began moving slowly away from the backwater of Qiachuan Port...

The large boat began sailing downstream!

Li Daoxuan pressed the buttons outside the box, fine-tuning his view to follow the ship model downstream. At first, the boat stayed in his sight, but soon, no matter how much he pressed “South,” the view stopped moving.

The large boat collided with the glass wall of the box, whooshed through it, and disappeared.

Li Daoxuan could only silently bless them in his heart.

May my little man not die!

Xing Honglang still had to return and marry Gao Chuwu.

At this thought, Li Daoxuan stiffened. Something felt off—wasn't this "marry after returning" development a classic death flag?

Damn it, with such a flag raised, wouldn't Xing Honglang be in grave danger?

That was terrible. She shouldn't have been sent.

...

Shanxi, Yongji!

Yongji was a very small place under Puzhou.

At that time, it hadn't become a county yet and was treated as a town-like area subordinate to Puzhou. Only after the Ming Dynasty collapsed and the Manchus took control was Puzhou elevated to Puzhou Prefecture, and Yongji this small town upgraded to Yongji County.

During the Ming Dynasty, Puzhou, along with Bingzhou and Pingyang, ranked among the country's 33 most industrially and commercially advanced cities. The place teemed with merchants, relying on the ancient ferry dock at Yongji on the Yellow River to distribute north-south goods to all regions.

But at that moment, the ancient ferry dock was a battleground.

A civilian militia of merchants, fishermen, and farmers was holed up at the dock, fiercely defending behind low fences, while a bandit army of thousands charged in a violent assault...

Chapter 399: Xing Honglang of Yongji Returns

The bandit army besieging the ancient ferry dock was led by Gaojia Village's old acquaintance, Bu Zhan Ni.

However, it wasn't Bu Zhan Ni himself, but rather the captain of his fifth squad, Old Zhang Fei. After Bu Zhan Ni led his followers into Shanxi with Wang Jiayin, his eight squads still operated independently as before, rarely gathering together.

This fifth squad traveled south along the eastern bank of the Yellow River until they reached Puzhou. Seeing Puzhou City was large with high walls, they dared not attack it. They skirted the city and came upon a dock that looked easy to capture.

Old Zhang Fei gave the order, and they began the siege of the ancient ferry dock at the Yellow River.

Old Zhang Fei lived up to his name—somewhat old, nearly fifty, with dark skin and a thick beard, appearing quite rough and rugged. That was why he had named himself Old Zhang Fei.

The bandit army under his command numbered neither few nor many—three thousand.

This was a massive force for such a small dock.

The merchants, fishermen, and farmers inside the dock quickly grabbed weapons, resisting desperately.

Interestingly, the dock had the highest concentration of merchants. Since merchants traveled widely, they often carried light armaments; each could muster a group of attendants or hired guards, much like Xing Honglang had her forty-two salt smugglers.

These men were highly combative, seasoned from constant clashes with various bandits, far surpassing ordinary farmers in skill.

Thus, despite their much smaller numbers, they held off Old Zhang Fei for a very, very long time.

This angered Old Zhang Fei, driving him into a frenzy! He ordered his men to redouble their assault.

Inside the dock stood a middle-aged man dressed in merchant clothing, slightly plump with a deeply worried expression. His name was Iron Bird Flies, a nickname, not his real name.

For he wasn't a legitimate merchant; he was a salt smuggler.

Salt smugglers had long thrived in Puzhou, Shanxi, as it was a major inland salt-producing region. An ancient text, *Zi Bu Yu: Puzhou Salt Smugglers*, recounted stories of these smugglers.

Of course, it never mentioned Xing Honglang of Yongji, as she was fabricated by a eunuch.

Iron Bird Flies had twenty enforcers; two were already dead, six injured, leaving only twelve on their feet, desperately shooting arrows at the bandits from behind the fence.

But Iron Bird Flies knew they couldn't hold out.

The bandit army was too numerous—a full three thousand. Even excluding the elderly and weak, women and children, over a thousand were combat-ready. Yet this tiny dock had only several hundred defenders; defeat was inevitable.

Behind them lay the surging Yellow River. The dock had small fishing boats at its edge, but when the bandits came, people scrambled to sail them away, leaving those behind no escape route.

Fighting with their backs against the river, they could only fight for their lives.

Iron Bird Flies roared at his men: "Kill! Kill! Fight like hell! Even if we die, take more of them down with us!"

His twelve men shot frenzied volleys at the bandits, but the bandits closed in relentlessly.

Just then, a wounded man lying at Iron Bird Flies' feet gasped weakly: "Leader... leader... look at the river..."

Iron Bird Flies replied: "Bandits are about to overrun the dock! No time!"

The man summoned all his strength: "Look... upon the river..."

Iron Bird Flies finally sensed something amiss. He quickly turned, glancing at the river.

Far to the north on the water, a boat approached. It remained distant, yet its silhouette was visible from such a distance, signaling its enormous size.

Squinting, he saw it had a tall cabin, resembling an official navy warship.

"The officials' navy?" Iron Bird Flies exclaimed joyfully: "They've come for bandit suppression!"

But the moment those words left his mouth, something felt profoundly wrong.

If the imperial fleet were to come, it ought to come from the southeast. How could it possibly arrive from the north?

No, no—the direction isn't the point. After all, I'm a salt smuggler, a villain the authorities want to catch and behead. What joy is there in that?

Bandits ahead and officials behind—either way, I'm a dead man now.

Meanwhile, Xing Honglang on the prow was also surveying the ancient ferry dock. She differed from Iron Bird Flies; not only could she see with her eyes, but she also had a telescope.

Pulling out a single-barreled telescope from her shirt, she took one glance at the ancient ferry dock and went pale: "Dammit! Bandits are attacking the ancient ferry dock!"

Her subordinate Old Zhu moved closer. “Damn those bandits, causing trouble at our home turf! The ancient ferry dock is where we made our first fortunes.”

Xing Honglang nodded. “Exactly! I’ll be damned—I saw an old familiar face there, too—always messing with our deals!”

Old Zhu: “Messing with us? Ah! Iron Bird Flies!”

Xing Honglang chuckled darkly. “The very same dummy. That jerk kept playing games to undercut me, costing me many a profit.”

Old Zhu burst out laughing. “So what now? Just watch him get slaughtered by the bandits?”

Xing Honglang gave him a sharp knock on the head. “Shut it! Am I, Xing Honglang of Yongji, really that kind? Though that crew often screws us over, we’re still folks from the same trade and hometown—surviving off the same common trade. How can we stand idle when comrades face danger? Besides, the dock is full of old friends too!”

Old Zhu: “Then we fight?”

“Fight!”

Xing Honglang turned to the Bai Family Fortress water troops. “Brothers of Bai Family Fortress, prepare for war. The ancient ferry dock must be saved.”

The crew instantly roared in excitement. “Hurrah!”

“Artillerymen, move it!”

“Thought I wouldn’t get to fire cannons on this trial voyage. Never imagined the chance’d come so quick.”

“Practicing on targets ain’t half as fun as shooting at real people.”

“Whoa, man—d’you hear yourself? That’s grim.”

The Bai Family Fortress water troops bantered relentlessly as they poured into the ship’s hold to ready the cannons.

These soldiers had trained for a long time and could load, aim, and fire with ease—but practice was still worlds apart from combat. The moment they learned they’d be fighting bandits, they were thrown into disarray, blundering in every way.

“Mother of mercy—calm down, calm down!” roared the captain, a veteran and close aide of Bai Yuan himself. “Don’t load both sides simultaneously—dummies! Load one side first! Only the eastern cannons can fire right now—load those!”

Realizing their mistake, the artillerymen scrambled to the east side. The ship tilted under their weight, terrifying them into rushing back to the other side to balance it out.

Twenty probationary water troops from Heyang County huddled trembling, unsure where to hide.

The captain sneered at their cowardice. “Stop your piss-poor trembling! Where are your harp-quivers? Draw them! Bolt them! Be ready to shoot!”

Meanwhile, Xing Honglang’s forty-two salt smugglers stood rigid, hands gripping waist knives, eyes coldly trained ashore. They were ready to leap overboard and cut down enemies at any moment.

Chapter 400: I Saved Your Life

Iron Bird Flies had already prepared himself for death!

Just then, the large ship in the distance fired its cannons.

“Boom!”

The sound of a cannon echoed far and wide.

The bandits besieging the city froze all at once, and the militia guarding the dock also froze.

Everyone was startled by the loud blast of the cannon and shuddered.

Then they saw a giant iron ball arc through the sky and land in the midst of the bandit army...

It didn't hit the front lines directly because the smoothbore cannon was so unreliable. The sailors on board were afraid of harming friendly forces, so they aimed at the center of the bandit army to ensure the shot wouldn't overshoot onto the militia.

This cannonball was far from accurate; using a smoothbore cannon to target person-sized foes was like shooting a mosquito with a cannon—utterly imprecise.

The shell failed to hit a single person and merely dug a huge crater in the ground, spraying mud and stones everywhere. The nearby bandits all shuddered, chilled to their cores.

Then...

“Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!”

The cannons roared repeatedly!

The ship had five cannons on one side for continuous firing. Four more shells flew over, and this time they were less off-target. One shell landed precisely where the bandits were thickest, killing one by hitting with a “thump,” then rolling along the ground and shattering the legs of two bandits.

It only struck their legs, but the massive kinetic energy transmitted through their bones, shaking them to death.

The other three shells also fell into crowded spots, immediately reducing the bandit army to frantic, terrified cries.

Old Zhang Fei, overseeing the rear, was stunned by the sight: “Disaster! The imperial navy has arrived. Damn it, how did the navy get to the upper Yellow River?”

The fierce bandits pressing the attack on the dock also assumed the imperial navy had come, a major shock. Even with infiltrated border army and garrison troops among the bandits, they rarely prevailed against regular officials, with losses outnumbering wins.

Officials remained too lofty for them.

The offensive abruptly stalled!

The twelve fierce salt smugglers under Iron Bird Flies instantly seized the chance, slashing swiftly to kill several bandits who had scaled the fence while roaring: “Hold fast! Hold the line with your lives!”

The bandits grew frantic, unsure whether to press on or flee.

Many turned to stare at Old Zhang Fei’s standard flag...

Eager to hear if their leader would beat the drum for advance or sound the gong for retreat.

But Old Zhang Fei was confusedly stuck in indecision, lost on what to do.

That hesitation bought time for Xing Honglang and her group.

Despite its size, the ship was fast; soon it was hundreds of paces away, turning in the river to bring its other flank to bear.

Then came “Boom! Boom! Boom!”—five more cannon blasts echoed from the ship!

Five shells flew at once into the bandit ranks, making the bandits wail for their parents again.

Moreover, at this range of hundreds of paces, rifled guns could be effective. The sailors from Bai Family Fortress upheld their master's fine tradition; now it wasn't an isolated battle. "Bang!" went a shot, blowing the head off a fierce bandit as he fell.

"Bang!"

Another gunshot sounded, and another fierce bandit fell.

Snipers weren't like cannons that dared not aim at the front. They had confidence in the accuracy of their firearms, unafraid of causing accidental harm. They specifically targeted the bandit leaders at the forefront. Several chieftains, on the verge of breaking into the docks, were successively shot and dropped.

This shattered what remained of their morale.

Old Zhang Fei, sensing the situation had turned disastrous, bellowed urgently, "Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!"

The bandit army gave the signal to retreat...

The bandit army, already frightened out of their wits by the cannons, pulled back with a roar, like a receding tide.

The merchants, fishermen, and farmers on the docks cheered together.

"I thought I was done for! I didn't expect the court's Naval Forces to come!"

"Wonderful, we're saved!"

“The court is still mighty! Arriving with cannons and firearms – so powerful!”

Ordinary folks were happy.

But Iron Bird Flies wasn't so joyous.

Usually, spotting the court's naval forces miles away, he'd start scrambling to disappear. But this time, he couldn't run. He certainly couldn't flee with the bandit army, could he?

Don't be fooled; though the bandits had retreated, he dared not step half a foot outside the docks now.

Yet staying docked also spelled big trouble. Soon, the court's naval forces would land, question everyone on the docks, and he, the salt lord, would be a dead man.

His twelve unscathed salt smugglers gathered around him. “Leader, what should we do?”

Iron Bird Flies gritted his teeth. “What can we do? If the officials are careless, mistake us for a regular militia group, and let us pass, that would be the perfect outcome. If they dig out our secrets during questioning... then all we can do is fight them to the death.”

The group fell silent.

Iron Bird Flies added, “Watch my eyes for the signal.”

So, the group of anxious salt smugglers stared fretfully at the terrifying cannon boat on the river. It slowly neared the dock. The face of a woman appeared over the gunwale, though her features were rather rugged, possessing a manly, imposing stature.

The woman waved at Iron Bird Flies and laughed boisterously. “Iron Bird Flies, you silly bird! Weren't you having a grand time snatching business from me? Now you need this old lady to save your hide?”

Iron Bird Flies exclaimed, “Huh? Yongji Xing Honglang?”

Xing Honglang roared with laughter. “That’s right, it’s me!”

A look of embarrassment crossed Iron Bird Flies’ face. “This boat...”

Xing Honglang had no desire to explain the boat’s origin— and it certainly wasn’t appropriate to discuss it publicly on the docks. News getting out would cause trouble for Gaojia Village. So, she simply claimed it for herself proudly. “Earned it selling smuggled salt! What do you think? Impressive, eh?”

Iron Bird Flies cried out, “Holy shit! How much salt did you sell to afford a cannon boat this beastly?”

Xing Honglang retorted, “Is now really the time for that? I just saved your life! Don’t you have something to say?”

A deeper shade of embarrassment flashed across Iron Bird Flies’ face. But the rules of the outlaws demanded respect—one shouldn’t act too stingy. He immediately composed himself and gave Xing Honglang a deep, formal bow. “Iron Bird Flies of Hedong acknowledges the life-saving grace bestowed upon him today by Yongji Xing Honglang. From this day forth, I, Iron Bird Flies, will never contest Xing Honglang for business again. If Xing Honglang ever has need of me, one word will suffice—I will brave blade mountains and seas of fire without hesitation.”

Xing Honglang chortled. “That’s more like it! Truly deserving of me saving your sorry hide. Annoying at business you may be, but at least you understand the outlaw’s code—far better than those worthless thieves with no honor.”

Iron Bird Flies’ embarrassment deepened considerably.

Xing Honglang swept her gaze across the dock. The few hundred people there were all covered in wounds and looked utterly wretched. She recognized many faces—old business contacts. This sight caused a pang of sadness in her heart.

She quickly ordered her subordinates, “Bring out the healing ointment. Tend to their injuries.”

