

Great Ming 401

Chapter 401: The Situation in Shanxi

Xing Honglang disembarked with her forty-two subordinates to treat the wounded on the dock, but the hundred water troops remained on the ship. Before they sailed, Li Daoxuan had relayed a strict order from Bai Yuan: This was a trial voyage, not an excuse for trouble. For safety's sake, they were not to leave the ship unless absolutely necessary.

The water troops strictly adhered to the Decree of the Deity and obediently stayed put. To prevent anyone from suddenly rushing aboard, they deliberately kept the ship anchored more than ten feet away from the shore, watching the grisly spectacle unfold on the distant dock.

The dock was littered with corpses: militia local gentry who'd fallen resisting the bandits, fierce bandit raiders who'd charged and been cut down. One man lay half slumped over the fence, a spear lodged in his body; another floated face-down in the river, several arrows sticking from his back.

These water troops recruited from Bai Family Fortress had been guarding Horseshoe Lake for years, living peacefully and rarely venturing into the outside world. Witnessing the dock's carnage now, they were shocked to realize how cruel and chaotic the world beyond remained.

Inwardly, they couldn't help thinking: Thankfully, the Deity protects us back home. Our blessed lives didn't come easily; we must guard it ever more fiercely.

The thought process was quite sophisticated.

Xing Honglang handed a bottle of healing ointment bestowed by the Deity to Iron Bird Flies. He eyed the bottle in his hand. "What's this?"

"Yunnan Baiyao. Highly effective for wounds."

Iron Bird Flies: "Powerful medicine? How much per bottle? Name your price."

Xing Honglang fumed: "Your man is writhing in agony on the ground, and you're haggling over price?"

Iron Bird Flies looked embarrassed: "Business habit. Ahem... business habit."

Xing Honglang: "No charge. Hurry up and treat your men."

Iron Bird Flies: "Ah, how can we accept without paying? Even brothers must settle bills clearly. You have to name a price before I dare use it."

Xing Honglang snatched the bottle back, shoved him aside, and personally began applying the medicine to his men. Her forty-two subordinates spread out across the dock, bandaging wounds and applying ointments. Many people recognized Xing Honglang here. Several greeted her: "Thank you, Boss Xing!"

"Haven't seen you in ages, Boss Xing. Still as forthright as ever."

"Where've you been these years? Haven't seen you buying salt in Puzhou?"

Xing Honglang's people offered no explanations. Salt smugglers knew the importance of tight lips; revealing their current base of operations was unthinkable. They said not a word about Gaojia Village, focusing solely on applying medicine and treating the injured.

The dock gradually quietened. Uninjured survivors silently began clearing the bodies. It was the same routine: strip naked, then bury.

Xing Honglang waved Iron Bird Flies over, pulling him aside. She lowered her voice. "What nonsense is happening here in Shanxi? I return only to find this mess. Are the bandits running rampant?"

Iron Bird Flies nodded gravely. "Utterly rampant!"

Xing Honglang: "Tell me the details."

Iron Bird Flies: "Such crucial intelligence? Name your price?"

Xing Honglang raised a bowl-sized fist.

Iron Bird Flies hurriedly added, "Anyone can ask around for this information. Practically worthless, ahem... The Shanxi situation starts with Wang Jiayin. Ai..."

Hearing Wang Jiayin's name again, Xing Honglang cursed inwardly. That troublemaker really knows how to cause chaos.

Iron Bird Flies: "After Wang Jiayin captured Hequ County and established himself in Shanxi, his forces became strong and well-equipped. His own core troops exceed thirty thousand men. Moreover, the bandit leaders who followed him from Shaanxi into Shanxi number over a hundred. If they all heed his call, he could potentially command three hundred and fifty thousand troops."

Xing Honglang: "Damnation!"

Iron Bird Flies: "Seeing such numbers, he got carried away. He declared himself king in Hequ County, calling himself 'King Yizi, the Horizontal Sovereign'. He set up a mock imperial administration, quite the formal affair. He appointed Wang Ziyong (Zijin Liang) as Left Grand Councilor and Military Strategist, Bai Yuzhu as Right Grand Councilor, Wang Guozhong as Royal Guard Commander... Then, he dispatched the more than one hundred bands of the bandit army now under his command to scatter across Shanxi. Places along the Yellow River got it the worst."

Xing Honglang frowned. "Declared himself king? Heh! Thinks he's immortal! The court might've turned a blind eye if he hadn't crowned himself. Calling himself 'king'? He'll die swiftly."

Iron Bird Flies: "Exactly! Contacts of mine on the legitimate channels say the court is marshaling heavy forces to crush him. The fool remains oblivious, drinking and reveling daily in Hequ County."

Xing Honglang: "He's a goner. Forget him. What's the current state here?"

Iron Bird Flies: "A disastrous state, alas... Ah! Right. I have a memorial captured from a government courier station. Fancy taking a look?"

Xing Honglang instinctively reached for it, then remembered his pedantic nature. She snorted. "You don't intercept court memorials without reason. You captured this to sell it, didn't you? Price!"

Iron Bird Flies grinned sheepishly. "Then I shall quote: one bottle of healing ointment."

Xing Honglang blinked, then smiled faintly. "Know some sense, boy."

She took the memorial and opened it:

"Ever since the Tianqi era began, the land of Jin [Shanxi] has seen not a year without disaster, and last year was especially harsh. Compounding this were the urgent levies along the Yellow River, harder to transport than sparks extinguishing [impossibly difficult]. On paper, the court allocated 220,000 taels, but the actual cost borne by the people exceeded a million. Officials fixated solely on fulfilling assessments, simultaneously pressing for both new and old taxes. The people sold children to be wives, carved out hearts, and shattered bones – their very substance is exhausted. Now, the spring rains bring no relief [the court offers not a copper of aid]. Strange mists and gales fill the days. Hearts churn with unrest; survival hangs by a thread daily. The weak perish in ditches; the strong glare with unspeakable fury. The rising tide of rebellion is unavoidable and inevitable."

"To the south of Qinyang and east and west of the city [Yangcheng], rebels declaring titles and raising banners are too numerous to count. Some number in the tens of thousands, others mere thousands. As soon as one raises the banner, five or six out of ten are coerced into joining. Situations in Shangdang and Fenshui are no different, passing critical points innumerable times."

"To eradicate Shanxi's bandits, first pacify Shanxi's destitute."

Xing Honglang finished reading swiftly, astounded. "Five or six out of ten Shanxi people have remained as bandits?"

Iron Bird Flies nodded grimly. "Except for those major cities and towns we can tally, nearly half the peasants in the villages have been swept away by the roving bandits... They couldn't survive otherwise! When the bandits arrive, blades press their necks. Refusing means fighting to the death, just like us here at the ancient ferry dock..."

Xing Honglang sighed deeply. "The writer of this memorial shows considerable insight. He grasps: 'To eradicate Shanxi's bandits, first pacify Shanxi's destitute.' That idea is the crucial cornerstone. But... you

intercepted this memorial. So, it can't reach the emperor now? How will the court provide disaster relief? You wretched fool!"

Chapter 402: Give Me a Price

Iron Bird Flies spread his hands: "Boss Xing, rest assured. I only transcribed that memorial. I didn't dare alter the original, and I had it delivered to the court. I, Iron Bird Flies of Hedong, am also a Shanxi man. I don't want to cut off the lifeline for the people of Shanxi."

The fist Xing Honglang had raised slowly lowered. She sighed: "Forget it. Even if that memorial gets sent up, the court is unlikely to send aid and food to Shanxi. Shaanxi has been in turmoil for so many years, yet we've seen no aid from the court. Shanxi, then, is out of the question."

Iron Bird Flies frowned: "If the court doesn't rescue us... then..."

Xing Honglang cut in: "If the court won't save us, then we save ourselves! You're a damn salt smuggler! How many days have you ever followed the rules set by the court? Why are you suddenly hoping for the court now?"

Iron Bird Flies was both amused and exasperated: "Boss Xing, this concerns millions of people in Shanxi! How could I, Iron Bird Flies, possibly save them? Look, just now before you arrived, I was nearly hacked to death by those bandits right on this dock. With my strength, who can I save? Matters like this can only rely on the court."

"So, if you lack strength, you don't exert any effort at all?" Xing Honglang snorted. "One person isn't enough? Then get two people. Two aren't enough? Find even more! As long as there are enough people willing to put in even a shred of effort for our homeland, Shanxi can naturally be saved."

Iron Bird Flies: "That sounds pleasing to the ear, but actually doing it—"

Xing Honglang turned and shouted loudly to her forty-two subordinates: "Go to the ship. Push the grain carts down!"

Iron Bird Flies: "Huh? Grain?"

The moment he heard the word “grain,” Iron Bird Flies’s eyes lit up with a glow almost shaped like copper coins.

Xing Honglang’s subordinates returned to the ship, laid out a long plank, and pushed down over a dozen carts of grain onto the riverbank.

As soon as these grain carts appeared, well now, wasn’t that something! Everyone on the dock looked over, eyes fixed, their gazes practically reaching out hands.

Xing Honglang declared: “This Shanxi... this old lady has decided to save it!”

Iron Bird Flies quickly asked: “This grain... what’s the price?”

Xing Honglang kicked him straight into the water: “Damn it! Your first words are just about asking the price!”

Iron Bird Flies emerged from the water, sputtering: “Boss Xing, beating me this time was completely unwarranted! Don’t tell me you’re giving this to me for free. I wouldn’t dare accept it. You’ve got to give me a price! Only then, brother, can I dare take it over.”

Saying this, he turned to the large group of merchants on the dock—old acquaintances of Xing Honglang—and asked: “Everyone, what do you say?”

Strangely, their opinions were surprisingly unanimous. They nodded together: “Yes!”

Xing Honglang thought carefully. Indeed, there were many more benefits to charging money than not: “Iron Bird Flies, you give the price.”

Iron Bird Flies offered: “Four hundred coins per dou! How about that?”

A dan was a bit over one hundred catties. One dan equaled ten dou, meaning one dou was roughly over ten catties. Iron Bird Flies’s quote roughly translated to over thirty coins per catty.

Xing Honglang started rapidly pondering in her mind. Iron Bird Flies dared to offer this price to take over the grain, meaning the grain price in Shanxi had already risen to at least seven or eight hundred coins per dou. Though still a bit short of Shaanxi's thousand coins per dou, it wasn't far off. Clearly, the drought in Shanxi was also severe.

Coupled with the court's consistent ostrich policy – when bandits caused trouble in Shaanxi, they banned transporting grain into Shaanxi. Now that bandits were causing trouble in Shanxi, the authorities would surely ban grain shipments into Shanxi too. If this continued, grain prices were bound to rise even more.

The people of Shanxi, on the road of comparing misery, were fast catching up with the people of Shaanxi!

The current retail grain price in Gaojia Village was seven coins per catty. Compared to the people of Shanxi, they were truly several times happier.

Xing Honglang rolled her eyes: "Iron Bird Flies, at a crucial time like this, can't you do business making a little less profit?"

"I can! Of course, I can!" Iron Bird Flies said promptly. "Boss Xing just saved my life. Taking a smaller profit is no problem at all. How about this? I'll offer six hundred coins per dou to buy it from you!"

Xing Honglang's voice rose sharply: "When I said less profit, I didn't mean raise the price you give me! I meant lower the price you charge the common people!"

Iron Bird Flies was momentarily stunned. Finally, he understood. He sighed deeply and bowed respectfully to Xing Honglang: "Boss Xing, we are both salt smugglers. But my character is far inferior to yours. I understand. The goods you supply me, I will sell to the common people for six hundred coins per dou."

"That's more like it." Xing Honglang knew six hundred coins per dou was still very expensive, roughly equivalent to a retail price of about fifty coins per catty. Eating grain at that price would still be immensely difficult for commoners. But she couldn't sell at the Gaojia Village price right now either.

Selling it too cheaply would only lead to one person buying up huge quantities, hoarding it, or reselling it countless times. Eventually, it would still end up in the common people's hands at an astronomical price.

Only by pricing it slightly below the market price could she ensure no one hoarded it or flipped it too many times. That way, more people could actually buy it.

Xing Honglang asked: "Do you know why I'm handing these goods over to you?"

Iron Bird Flies blinked, thought for a moment, and suddenly understood: "I have the ability to move goods around safely while guarding them."

Xing Honglang: "Exactly! Since it's chaotic outside and ordinary merchants can't transport goods anymore, now we can only rely on people like you. Avoid the main forces of the bandits, and you can get these goods to villages and towns, sold directly into the hands of the common people. You can earn some, but don't earn too much. Consider it your share of effort, saving our homeland."

An awkward expression spread across Iron Bird Flies's face: "Back then, we hid from officials to sell salt. Now, we have to hide from bandits to sell grain. Really... sigh..."

Xing Honglang took two carts of grain and sold them on the spot to the merchants, fishermen, and farmers on the dock. The remaining grain, she handed entirely to Iron Bird Flies: "Come back to the dock as quickly as you can once it's sold. I'll find a way to get more grain. From now on, we'll meet at this dock for deliveries. We need to get as much grain into Shanxi as possible. Since the court won't relieve the poor, we have to save them."

Iron Bird Flies cupped his fist: "Good!"

Seeing Xing Honglang's group preparing to return to the ship, his gaze followed that large vessel. He looked left, then right. The more he looked, the more he liked it: "Boss Xing... about this ship of yours... give me a price quote?"

Xing Honglang raised her bowl-sized fist.

The bow main gun of the ship even turned soundlessly to aim directly at him.

Iron Bird Flies jumped in fright, hurriedly shrinking back to avoid it.

Just as the ship was about to set sail, Xing Honglang seemed to remember something. She turned around and called back to Iron Bird Flies:

“Next time we meet, bring a lot more salt! I need salt. A large amount of salt!”

It turned out, before this trip, Thirty-Two had personally come to find her specifically asking her to help acquire some salt to bring back. Salt was one of the essential raw materials for alkali production. Since Puzhou, Shanxi was the home territory of salt smugglers, Xing Honglang also carried the important task of establishing a purchasing channel for chemical raw materials on this journey.

Iron Bird Flies grinned: “Ah, now this is more like it! We should be selling salt! That fits our true identities. Just selling grain? What kind of salt smuggler does that? It nearly made me think I was about to go straight!”

As he finished speaking, he suddenly remembered something else. Cupping his hands as if shouting across water, he bellowed at the departing large ship:

“Boss Xing! About that salt you want... at least quote a price!”

Chapter 403: Delivering Another Cargo Ship

Li Daoxuan was eating dry pot fish when the ship returned.

Seeing his people hopping around vigorously on the deck, Li Daoxuan breathed a sigh of relief. Every time they ventured outside his sight, this Deity nanny worried intensely. Their safe return brought him immense joy.

However, Xing Honglang’s expression clearly wasn’t good.

Just then, Bai Yuan stepped forward first. “Boss Xing, congratulations on your safe return. Did the celestial ship’s trial voyage succeed? Any difficulties? I noticed your expression...”

Xing Honglang sighed. “Shanxi is in dire straits.”

Bai Yuan: “?”

Standing right on the dock’s edge, the two began discussing affairs in Shanxi, allowing Li Daoxuan to clearly overhear their conversation.

So Wang Jiayin had proclaimed himself king? What reckless audacity! As a subject of the Ming Dynasty, had he never learned Emperor Taizu’s lesson?

Amassing grain, postponing declarations of kingship, and avoiding the limelight—these were the true paths to reign. Rushing to become king the moment one gained a shred of power, then indulging in feasting and revelry? Only the aura of the uncouth could explain it. No wonder he died young; it remained to be seen how this historical variable Li Daoxuan introduced would alter events.

Xing Honglang declared, “Mr. Bai, I plan to return to Gaojia Village promptly.”

Bai Yuan chuckled, “Ah, rushing to marry Gao Chuwu?”

Xing Honglang’s face instantly flushed crimson. “What nonsense! I’m not rushing at all. I’m forced to marry him. Honestly, I wish I could never return—spare myself his pestering!”

Bai Yuan retorted, “Still talking like this? Careful, the Deity might announce he’ll execute him again.”

The threat jolted Xing Honglang into immediate action. She bowed deeply toward the sky. “Deity, ignore my babble! Please, don’t punish Chuwu!”

Only then did she elaborate, “I must get back to Gaojia Village quickly and discuss with Thirty-Two whether he can request more grain. To aid Shanxi... cough... to trade for salt from Shanxi.”

Li Daoxuan noted her correction but silently reassured her: “Aiding them is fine! You aren’t wrong; no need to pretend it’s just about salt. I understand.”

Besides, securing salt was genuinely urgent.

Gaojia Village’s chemical workshop was under construction. Once completed, it would demand vast quantities of salt for alkali production. Industrial-scale processes operated entirely differently from manual methods; the future salt requirement would be staggering.

Salt shortages were destined to return.

Naturally, Li Daoxuan could directly “bestow” both alkali and salt.

Yet such direct provision wasn’t healthy. Establishing their own supply chain was preferable.

It was time to bolster Shanxi—spur its people to revive salt ponds and expand production.

Xing Honglang hastened toward Gaojia Village.

Li Daoxuan didn’t shift his view. Instead, he opened his model cabinet, rummaged inside, and retrieved another ship custom-made by Cai Xinzi.

This inland freighter was slightly shorter than the first warship. Its flat deck layout featured neither towering cabin nor cannons. Only a small pilot house sat at the bow, housing simple controls and a steering wheel.

Though smaller, lacking heavy cannons and superstructure made its deadweight significantly lighter. Its cargo capacity actually surpassed the warship’s. Real-world flat ships could be stacked high with containers without capsizing, transporting immense volumes per voyage.

Li Daoxuan couldn’t be bothered typing instructions for Bai Yuan. Directly, he lowered the cargo ship into the box.

Aboard the warship, the weary water troops had just dropped anchor. Stretching, they prepared to disembark for rest. Bai Yuan, having just watched Xing Honglang depart, sat atop Qiachuan Fortress pondering Shanxi's plight.

Suddenly, the clouds parted overhead. Another colossal vessel descended slowly from the heavens.

Bai Yuan shouted, "The Deity bestows another celestial ship!"

The water troops cheered, "A new ship! A new ship!"

However, as it settled on the water, they stared dumbfounded. "Huh? No cabin? No cannons?"

"Is this... a fishing boat?"

"You idiot! Ever seen a fishing boat this size? It's a cargo ship."

"But why build such a massive freighter for simple goods?"

Enlightenment struck Bai Yuan. "Ordinary goods? True, but aiding Shanxi requires moving vast quantities of grain. Millions live there! Regular ships won't suffice. Shanxi's just the start—Henan, Hebei... countless others suffer. Delivering divine justice necessitates this scale!"

Understanding dawned on the water troops.

Bai Yuan announced loudly, "Time for another recruitment drive! Not combat water troops this time—logistics troops instead! Fellow villagers: high wages offered without frontline danger? Step up eagerly!"

The announcement ignited fervor, especially among Heyang's fishermen. High pay without battle risk? They surged forward enthusiastically.

Li Daoxuan watched Bai Yuan direct crew aboard the freighter. As they fumbled through its operation, his hand hovered ready to intervene at the first sign of trouble. Only after they gained competence did he shift his view back to Gaojia Village.

Xing Honglang hadn't arrived yet.

Li Daoxuan intended to find Gao Yiye—task her with announcing his plan to bestow relief grain for Shanxi—when a familiar figure caught his eye: Gao Sanwa.

The young man clutched a thick stack of papers. At the foot of the watchtower, he peered up furtively, hesitating as if torn between climbing and retreating.

Hmm? What's this lad scheming?

Gao Sanwa wasn't a child anymore. The reckless brat of Year Seven of Tianqi had matured through three years' worth of mischief: replacing Chinese characters with pinyin, skipping school, enduring the "dietary discipline" of bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat... Having lived through the full spectrum of boyhood escapades, he'd finally grown. He'd turned sixteen this year.

Yet traces of that sneaky, roguish spark lingered. His furtive loitering beneath the watchtower remained as comical as ever.

Mischievous, yes, but no malice lurks in this one. Surely he's not plotting to steal from the village treasury? Then why the secrecy?

Before Li Daoxuan could ponder further, a figure emerged behind Gao Sanwa: Thirty-Two seized the boy by the scruff of his neck. "Aha! Gao Sanwa! Skulking around the watchtower? Scheming to deface the Deity's sacred statue? Pranks I tolerate—but defile his image? An unforgivable offense!"

Chapter 404: Gao Sanwas Growth

Startled by Thirty-Two's scare, Gao Sanwa jumped up in terror.

His occiput 'thumped' against Thirty-Two's chin.

Thirty-Two covered his chin and squatted down, Gao Sanwa also covered the back of his head and squatted down, both groaned in pain, unable to speak for a long while.

A long time later, the pain finally subsided!

Gao Sanwa rubbed the back of his head and said, "Wow, Thirty-Two, what kind of person do you take me for? How could I ever scribble on the sacred statue of the Deity? Even as mischievous as I am, I know that's off-limits—I've never even thought about it, but you were the one having such ideas, weren't you?"

Thirty-Two felt a burst of awkwardness, "Definitely not!"

Gao Sanwa retorted, "You surely did!"

Thirty-Two declared, "I did not!"

Seeing he couldn't avoid trouble, Thirty-Two quickly changed the subject, "Kid, what on earth are you here for?"

Gao Sanwa realized he couldn't dodge either and confessed, "I... drew a comic book... and came to find Sister Yiye to ask her for some money to print it out."

"Huh?" Thirty-Two was greatly surprised.

"Huh?" Li Daoxuan was also greatly surprised.

Gao Sanwa explained, "Didn't Sister Yiye publish 'Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale' by funding it herself? I want to publish my own drawn book in the same way, but my parents won't give me the money, so I came to find Sister Yiye."

Thirty-Two replied with annoyance, "Since when did you get into this sort of trouble?"

Gao Sanwa said, "I've always liked it! Anyway, I'm not good at studying—especially since moving up to higher grades and starting junior middle school math, physics, and chemistry. I can't understand a word, so I used class time to draw a comic book."

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly: That kid, he reminds me of my own youth. Though I kept up in junior middle, I was totally lost in high school math, physics, and chemistry. I barely scraped through high school by cheating on exams, then took the path of art design, eventually becoming a freelance designer.

After listening, Thirty-Two pondered briefly and sighed, "Not every child is suited for studying; there are kids like you... sigh..."

He stretched out his hand, "What have you drawn? Show it to me."

Gao Sanwa protectively shielded his original artwork, "You won't burn it, will you? This is my only copy."

Thirty-Two laughed helplessly, "I'm not your mom—I won't curb your hobbies."

Gao Sanwa carefully considered this and, reassured, hesitantly handed over the original.

Thirty-Two opened it to look; Li Daoxuan also paid "close attention," drawing the scene near to scrutinize it.

It turned out Gao Sanwa had drawn an action story, roughly about a child who became a taoist, apprenticed and learned skills, but due to average talent, was despised by his master. The master's appearance somewhat resembled Ma Tianzheng...

Fine, Gao Sanwa had probably only ever met Ma Tianzheng among taoists, so that style had to be borrowed.

Ma Tianzheng—no, his master—refused to properly teach the child the Quanzhen swordsmanship, so the child was bullied by fellow apprentices. The appearances of these fellow apprentices resembled Young Master Bai and Third Miss...

These two were actually good friends of Gao Sanwa's, often joking together, yet now they were drawn as villains in the book.

Young Master Bai and Third Miss—no, Senior Disciple Bai and Junior Sister San—teamed up with other apprentices to bully the protagonist. The protagonist flew into a rage, shouting a famous line, “Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of the river—I’ll prove myself one day.”

He had actually added brief dialogue to his comic book!

Li Daoxuan gasped in shock, “Holy crap, is this kid a transmigrator? How does he know that trope?”

At that moment, Thirty-Two laughed, “The phrase ‘thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of the river’ describes the Yellow River segment between Shaanxi and Shanxi—it frequently changes course, so villages might be in Hedong sometimes, Hexi others... that saying comes from people in Heyang County, right? Kid, you actually used that proverb in your book, pretty impressive—you’re not all empty-headed after all.”

Li Daoxuan thought bemusedly, “Huh? So that saying originated here? Aah! I’m ignorant again.”

The protagonist in the book began to strive diligently, practicing swordsmanship fiercely until he mastered it. Not only did he defeat Senior Disciple Bai and Junior Sister San, but even his master Daoist Ma was no match for him. Finally, he descended the mountain as a skilled swordsman, traveled the realm, and became a great hero.

Li Daoxuan marvelled inwardly, “It’s a trash-to-triumph story! Incredible! The kid actually invented the ‘waste-material rising’ trope during the Ming Dynasty—he’s gonna skyrocket.”

After finishing the original, Thirty-Two remained silent for a long while before finally speaking, “For this book, no need to ask the Saint Lady for publishing funds—I’ll have the publishing house put it out.”

“What?” Gao Sanwa was overjoyed, “Really? Thirty-Two, you mustn’t trick a kid.”

Thirty-Two rolled his eyes, “You’re over sixteen now—no longer a child. I’m treating you as an adult, so let’s properly discuss publishing. The publishing house will fund the printing, and profits will be split fifty-fifty. Acceptable?”

Gao Sanwa exclaimed in delight, “I don’t need a split! I’d be happy even without it, as long as it gets published—I just want to see my book in print.”

Thirty-Two snorted, “You think that now, but if it sells big and rakes in cash, you’d feel the publishing house ripped you off and grow bitter toward them. Setting the share rules upfront is the adult way of handling it.”

Gao Sanwa was still young, not fully grasping this logic, but thrilled that Thirty-Two was helping, he cheered loudly and jumped up, “Ah, just do whatever! Hurry up and publish it quick—I want to show off my book to my parents.”

Thirty-Two shook his head with a smile, took the original into the publishing house, and assigned the woodcarver and the printer to handle the book.

Li Daoxuan watched it all unfold and was inwardly struck: This development is great!

The publishing house at Gaojia Village printed various textbooks he provided for language, math, physics, and chemistry, plus comic books like ‘Yang Family Generals,’ ‘Romance of the Three Kingdoms,’ and ‘Water Margin.’ Its only original work was Gao Yiye’s ‘Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale,’ but that one reeked of propaganda and wasn’t a good story.

Now, with this original submission from Gao Sanwa, a new wave might emerge—leading to the rise of “comic books” or “manga.” This was a highly promising artistic direction.

Heck, whether Gao Sanwa’s work could spark a trend remained to be seen.

Alright, the distraction was over—time to focus. Where was Gao Yiye?

Where had that little girl Gao Yiye run off to?

Chapter 405: The Villain Who Forcibly Married a Woman

Finding one small person in the bustling, lively Gaojia Village was truly enough to split your head.

Li Daoxuan searched and searched, looked and looked, for quite a while, and finally found her.

This little minx, Gao Yiye, was actually fooling around at the village entrance.

Beside the cement road connecting to Zhengjia Village at the Gaojia Village entrance sat a tall, imposing figure—that was Gao Chuwu.

Like some gaze-fixed stone, he stared eastward...

Gao Yiye tiptoed behind Gao Chuwu and let out a loud “Boo!” right next to his ear.

Gao Chuwu cried out “Ah!” in alarm and tumbled sideways. Right beside the cement road lay a drainage ditch about tens of centimeters deep—when the Deity brought rain, water would overflow the cement road and drain away through these ditches.

Gao Chuwu rolled repeatedly down into the ditch, coating himself in mud.

He sat up in the ditch, face smudged with dirt, and shouted, “Who? Who scared me?”

Gao Yiye giggled, “Senior Brother Chuwu, it’s me!”

Gao Chuwu: “Ah, it’s Yiye! You’re eighteen years old and still so mischievous.”

Gao Yiye laughed, “Senior Brother Chuwu, are you waiting for Sister Xing here?”

Gao Chuwu nodded: “Yes! Honglang said she’d take the chance during the celestial ship’s trial voyage to return to her hometown and transport some grain. Once this trip is done and she’s back, she’ll marry me. Hehehe.”

“Honglang? Such an affectionate name. Didn’t you always call her Miss Xing before?” Gao Yiye teased, “Upgraded to Honglang now, huh?”

Gao Chuwu grinned broadly: “Calling your own wife has to be affectionate, of course.”

Gao Yiye laughed, “Are you that eager to marry Sister Xing? Guarding this road, staring and staring, you’re about to turn into stone.”

Gao Chuwu: “Who wouldn’t be impatient by that?”

Gao Yiye smiled, “Senior Brother Daniu definitely wouldn’t be impatient.”

Gao Chuwu scoffed, “That oaf Daniu only cares about eating.”

“Who said I’m an oaf?” Zheng Daniu’s figure suddenly popped up from a hillside not far away. He darted over in one stride to stand before Gao Chuwu: “Ha! I knew it was you, you woman-obsessed fellow. What do you know about the wonder of food?”

No sooner had he spoken than Zao Ying’s voice sounded from the distance: “Daniu, Daniu, come on! I’ll treat you to braised rabbit.”

“Whoa!” Zheng Daniu was overjoyed. “Really? You’re treating?”

Zao Ying laughed, “Of course I’m treating! I know you have no money.”

Zheng Daniu: “I’m coming!”

He scampered over. Zao Ying, like a man, hooked her arm around Zheng Daniu’s shoulder and pulled him along carelessly. Side by side, jostling and squeezing each other, the two of them vanished into the distance in mere moments.

Gao Yiye spread her hands, “See, Senior Brother Chuwu? Learn from Senior Brother Daniu. He doesn’t chase girls actively, yet girls coax him with delicious food. He’s way smarter than you.”

Gao Chuwu: “This... can they compare? Zao Ying looks like a bloke. No man likes her, so she has to chase men herself. But my Honglang is a top-notch beauty under heaven.”

“Pfft!”

Gao Yiye almost spat blood.

“Pfft!”

Li Daoxuan almost spat blood too.

Just then, a public sun chariot drove over. It was fully loaded. A woman who looked very masculine poked her head out from the window and waved at Gao Chuwu, saying, “Chuwu, I’m back!”

Gao Chuwu was overjoyed: “Honglang is back!”

The public sun chariot stopped at “Gaojia Village Station”. Xing Honglang jumped out of the vehicle swiftly. Behind her, forty-two subordinates got off one by one. But as soon as they got off, they hid far away, not getting close to their boss at all.

Xing Honglang walked toward Gao Chuwu with a grin.

Gao Chuwu welcomed her with a grin.

When they were one meter apart, Gao Chuwu suddenly stretched out his hands forward: “Honglang!”

Xing Honglang also stretched out her hands forward: “Chuwu!”

They maintained this strange position for about a second. Then they simultaneously took a step forward and embraced with a “thud”.

Gao Yiye: “...”

Salt smugglers: “...”

Bus driver: “...”

Li Daoxuan: “Ahhh, when did these two invent this move? Isn’t it painful to watch?”

Upon hearing him speak, Gao Yiye raised her head: “Huh? Deity is here? When did you arrive?”

Li Daoxuan: “I shouldn’t have come. I saw a painful to watch scene. I need to wash my eyes.”

Gao Yiye was sweating nervously: “I didn’t expect they were like this already either.”

Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang embraced for about a minute. Then they slowly separated. Holding each other’s hands, they smiled with happy faces.

Gao Chuwu: “Honglang, how was the situation back in your hometown?”

The smile on Xing Honglang’s face faded. With a dark expression, she said: “It’s bad. I must seek counsel from Thirty-Two and the Saint Lady...”

Gao Yiye interrupted: “What do you want to talk to me about?”

Xing Honglang was startled: “Huh? Saint Lady is present?”

Gao Yiye smiled awkwardly: "Yes, I'm here! Apologies, I'm here! Continue your conversation, ignore me."

"Ahhh!" Xing Honglang suddenly broke free from Gao Chuwu's hand and explained in a panic: "That's not what happened. That wasn't it just now. Earlier, Gao Chuwu rushed to hug me. I tried desperately to dodge. But his actions were too quick. I didn't dodge in time. He held me tight with brute force. It took me a minute of struggling to break free. Then he grabbed my hand and refused to let go. I resisted desperately and barely managed to free myself."

"Yes, it was just like that," Gao Yiye said: "I can vouch that what you said is true. Deity witnessed it above."

Xing Honglang: "Deity is present too?"

Li Daoxuan swayed his body. The low cloud in the sky also swayed from side to side with him.

Xing Honglang: "Ah, disaster! I'm done for! Deity saw such a shameful thing. I'd rather die."

Li Daoxuan felt both torn between laughter and tears: With skin so thin, why embrace each other in a public place?

Xing Honglang: "I must see Thirty-Two. I must speak to him about the Shanxi situation. Then I seek a shipment of food..."

"Hmm!" Li Daoxuan began: "This matter is important. Resolve it swiftly. However..."

He paused: "Though this is critical, your marriage is no less crucial. If you don't clean your own house first, how can you clean the state? If you don't live well yourself, how can you help all Shanxi's people prosper? Anyway, Iron Bird Flies remains in dock selling your ten cartloads of grain. That leaves several days. Use this time to marry each other first."

Gao Chuwu was delighted: "Even Deity has spoken! Honglang, let's marry quickly. Once wed, you needn't be shy any longer."

Xing Honglang's face instantly flushed crimson: "Who's shy? I'm not shy! I refuse to marry you, you villain who forcibly marries a woman!"

Gao Chuwu chuckled: "Since you say so, I'll indeed abduct you."

He hoisted Xing Honglang onto his shoulder. Then he sprinted toward Gaojia Fortress. Shouting while he ran: "Everyone, take note! I've taken a wife home! Hahaha, we formally wed tomorrow! Brethren with time off, come witness the ceremony!"

Gaojia Village erupted in a roar of cheers instantly.

Chapter 406: Way Too Easy on Him

Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang were getting married.

This news swept through the entire Gaojia Village like the wind.

Although Gao Chuwu's position wasn't particularly high, just a battalion commander of the Grenade Troops, he was one of the original forty-two villagers of Gaojia Village. Gao Chuwu had been present at every step of the village's growth and development.

Inviting Thirty-Two, repairing the city gate, battling the Supreme Bright King, constructing the Dao Xuan Deity Cave, fighting against Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu, launching the public sun chariot, developing agriculture, building up the militia...

His contributions were simply too many to count.

The rewards he received were also countless.

Moreover, unlike Zheng Daniu, who ate any rewards he got right away without saving a scrap, Gao Chuwu handed all his rewards to his parents to save for him, specifically for marrying a wife.

Long preparations for quick use.

Now was the time for him to marry, time to bring out all those rewards.

The preparations began the day before the formal marriage. Banquets were set out on five hundred tables. Two hundred women alone were hired just to cook. Everyone worked together preparing the following day's feasts, colorful streamers, red paper, decorating the wedding chamber, and more. It was busy day and busy night. The Main Fortress of Gaojia bustled all night long, unable to settle.

At the auspicious hour the next day, Gao Chuwu set out for the bride's home, accompanied by his groomsmen Zheng Daniu, Ground Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, and other old brothers of the militia.

Of course, they needed vehicles for the bridal escort!

The lead vehicle, the Solar Vehicle No. 1, the oldest model, was personally driven by the groom and his chief groomsmen — both Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were the oldest pilots of the sun chariot.

Seeing this vehicle roll out brought tears to the eyes of many old villagers. Memories of the old days filled their hearts. The Old Village Chief pointed at the vehicle and sighed, "When the Deity bestowed this chariot upon us back then, our Gaojia Village was just that little... that tiny... We hadn't even finished building the cement road to Zhengjia Village yet... These two fools nearly crashed into the wall of the Five-colored Prison the very first time they drove this thing."

Zhong Gaoliang, who had specifically returned from Huanglong Mountain Prison to attend the ceremony, grinned. "I was still laboring in the prison back then, hahaha! Seeing Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu drive straight at me scared me to death. Now, I tell this story to those seven thousand-plus labor offenders every day, telling them to behave well, strive for reduced sentences, and come out to live a good life like me."

The Old Village Chief laughed, "How are those seven thousand-plus labor offenders doing now?"

Zhong Gaoliang replied, "After hearing Yizhangqing relay the Deity's words, they finally understood why their men died: it was heavenly punishment for doing bad deeds. So there was nothing left to hate—you can't fight the heavens, right? They also understood why they were locked up: because they received

things obtained by the bad men through robbery, making them accomplices. That's why they had this hardship. It was the heavens testing them. Now they obediently follow the heavens' arrangement."

The Old Village Chief smiled, "That's good. That's truly good."

Just then, the Solar Vehicle No. 1 started up, the two fools filled with high spirits. "Off to fetch the bride!" They only opened the sunshade slightly, allowing the wedding carriage to move slowly. The distance to the bride's house was extremely close—Xing Honglang's plastic mansion was right beside the Gaojia Business Circle.

If the vehicle drove too fast, they would arrive moments after starting, killing the excitement.

But even driving slowly, the bridal procession quickly reached the entrance of Xing Honglang's mansion.

The main gate was tightly shut!

Gao Chuwu knocked on the door.

Commander Zao's voice rang out from behind the door. "No red envelope, no opening the door!"

The groomsmen collectively sucked in a breath. "Oh no! Commander Zao is guarding the door! Getting through today might be tough."

Ground Rabbit shouted loudly, "Waah! Commander Zao, why are you guarding the bride's door?"

Commander Zao's laughter came from behind the door. "Your aunt is one of the bridesmaids today! Want this door open? Gotta give red envelopes to all the hundreds of brothers in my cavalry camp!"

Ground Rabbit exclaimed, "Waah! Are you robbing us? Can't do, can't do! Looks like we'll have to break in!"

“Come on! Try breaking in!” Commander Zao laughed heartily. “See if our cavalry camp fears you lot!”

Ground Rabbit yelled, “Brothers! Draw your blades—!”

Before he could finish his roar, a large fist swung over and smacked him to the ground with a thud, his crown falling off.

Cheng Xu, with his face covered, appeared. “Draw your blades, my foot! Are you seriously going to fight the cavalry camp, you idiot?! This place requires strategy!”

Commander Zao guffawed. “Strategy?! I, Zao Ying, am not easily trapped! Until I see those red envelopes, this door stays shut!”

Cheng Xu retorted, “You said it! Guards! Tie Zheng Daniu up into a zongzi and throw him into the village’s duck-raising pond! Don’t fish him out until Commander Zao opens the door!”

Thud! The door swung open from inside. Commander Zao leaped out and placed herself protectively in front of Zheng Daniu, shouting, “Don’t bully a good, honest man!”

Cheng Xu laughed triumphantly. “The door’s open! Militia, charge!”

Ground Rabbit charged headlong into the mansion but, too excited, tripped over the threshold and fell flat on his face, thump! The Grenade Troops surged past behind him, numerous large army boots trampling right over him...

Only after everyone had run past did Zheng Gouzi squat down and poke Ground Rabbit lying on the floor. “Mr. Rabbit... you alive?”

Ground Rabbit sprang up instantly, laughing heartily. “What am I called? Ground Rabbit! That move on the ground just now is my life’s signature technique, called ‘Grounding’! When I perform this technique, how could mere stepping kill me?”

Zheng Gouzi silently raised his fist. For this rabbit, fighting was indeed the only solution.

While the two of them fooled around at the entrance, the others had already swarmed into Xing Honglang's private chamber. Though the room carried the word "private" (閨 gui), it was indistinguishable from a wealthy lord's quarters. Not a trace of feminine crafts like embroidery could be seen. Instead, swords and blades hung on the walls.

Xing Honglang had been sitting there, flushed, waiting. Suddenly seeing the groomsmen rush in, Gao Chuwu grinned foolishly. "Honglang, I've come to marry you!"

Seeing so many people burst in, Xing Honglang panicked. "I'm not marrying!"

Gao Chuwu knew this was just his wife's habitual shyness resurfacing. While poised in other matters, Xing Honglang was more bashful about relationship things than any traditional maiden. This required direct action.

He rolled up his sleeves. "Guess I'll have to abduct the bride then."

Xing Honglang immediately adopted the opening stance of Jin Hong Fist. "Bring it!"

Gao Chuwu mirrored her, moving into the opening stance of Guanzhong Hong Fist. "Here I come!"

One wearing a bride's grand red robe, the other a groom's top scholar ceremony wear, they began to fight right there, shocking the groomsmen into pressing themselves against the walls.

However...

The fight started fast and ended even faster. In just one move, Xing Honglang was subdued by Gao Chuwu and slung over his shoulder. "Off we go! Abduction complete! Back home!"

The groomsmen groaned. "Tchh! Boss Xing went easy on him again!"

Li Daoxuan also laughed. “Hahahaha... This letting go was way too excessive!”

Chapter 407: Everyone Had to Be Happy

Gao Chuwu “defeated” Xing Honglang in one move, then carried her out as his male relatives and friends rallied around him and fled rapidly outward.

Ground Rabbit had just gotten up and steadied himself at the entrance, uttering one boastful sentence, when Gao Chuwu charged over like an engine.

In Gaojia Village, there wasn’t a single person who could win a head-on collision against Gao Chuwu—even Zheng Daniu could only achieve a draw.

What virtue or ability did Ground Rabbit have to endure Gao Chuwu’s collision?

With a bang, Mr. Rabbit was flat on the ground again.

Thus, a huge crowd trampled over him like a thunderous rumble as they dashed toward the sun chariot. Gao Chuwu placed Xing Honglang onto the chariot and immediately cheerfully called out, “Daniu, come drive.”

Zheng Daniu quickly jumped onto the chariot, followed by Zao Ying, the bridesmaid, who climbed up too. She was clearly supposed to be the bridesmaid, yet she constantly stayed by the groomsman’s side—had she mistaken her role or found the right match?

The sun chariot headed for the main fortress.

Zheng Gouzi squatted down again and poked Ground Rabbit on the ground, “Are you still alive?”

Ground Rabbit instantly jumped up, “Hurry, hurry, hurry! Follow the main group, or we won’t get good seats when the feast starts.”

Zheng Gouzi said, “Damn, worrying about your injury made me look like an idiot.”

The two of them dashed off after the sun chariot, returning noisily to the front of the main fortress with the big crowd. With 500 tables, that was too many to place inside—so they were set up on the open ground before the main fortress, and all Gaojia Village residents were free to drop by for the excitement.

Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng, who had specially rushed back from Heyang County, was teaching people how to speak auspicious phrases. He taught a saying to each newcomer: one person listened, ran to Gao Chuwu, and loudly announced, “Drums and gongs clamor wildly as the wedding curtain arrives; a colorful tent welcomes the new bride.”

Zhao Sheng then taught the next person, and after listening, that runner went to Gao Chuwu and loudly recited, “Joy flows endlessly as the wedding curtain parts; two hands help out a fairy-like beauty.”

After reciting, both felt something was off and turned toward Zhao Sheng, “Mr. Zhao, the bride didn’t come in a wedding curtain at all—she arrived by chariot.”

Zhao Sheng said, “...”

On the main fortress platform, Bai Yuan, who had hastened back from Qiachuan Port, was the officiant today—a role he had fought hard for because weddings were part of “propriety,” one of the Six Arts of Gentlemen he took very seriously.

Seeing the new couple being ushered forward, Bai Yuan wore a solemn expression, “First, bow to heaven and earth...”

Normally, if people did this bow, it was just a casual, symbolic gesture. But in Gaojia Village, bowing to heaven couldn’t be careless—everyone glanced up at the sky, where the Deity’s low cloud hung suspended.

The two newlyweds bowed formally and deeply to the Deity.

Li Daoxuan had an immortal face of delight as he chuckled, “Everyone gave gifts? Well, I’ll send you something too. Share and eat it later.”

He extended a golden hand that held a “six-inch” cake, slowly lowering it while cream lettering decorated the top: “Wishing Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang eternal love till their hair turns white.”

This was an Xzu cake he had ordered early that morning, with the shop clerk specifically instructed to write those words.

A six-inch cake measured 15 centimeters across, but for little folks, it was an enormous egg cake 30 meters in diameter—topped with colorful cream that looked unbelievably wonderful to their untrained eyes. The crowd stared dazedly in an instant.

“What else to expect from Gao Chuwu? For his marriage, the De ity gave a ceremonial gift, after all.”

“How much does the De ity favor Ga o Chuwu?”

“What must I do to earn your favor? Like an ugly, self-hating creature waiting in the corner.”

Zheng Daniu sniffed around, “The smell tells my nose it’s delicious! Oh no! I really want to eat it.”

Halt! Bai Yuan shot him a warning glare: the wedding wasn’t over yet—before anyone called for feasting, no one could eat a bite. Otherwise, it would ruin propriety—that word “propriety” must never be allowed to fade under my watch.

Zheng Daniu didn’t dare budge.

But Zao Ying slipped unnoticed to the giant cake, turned her back, scooped out some cream with a cupped hand behind her, and tiptoed back to Zheng Daniu, whispering, “Here, have this.”

Zheng Daniu was overjoyed, gobbling down the cream in just two or three bites. “So delicious! Ah... there’s more on your hand, don’t let it go to waste.”

He grabbed Zao Ying’s hand and licked it!

Zao Ying's heart fluttered with secret delight: Win a man's stomach, and you win his heart. He licked my hand! What an intimate gesture! We must be almost on the verge of marriage now. Hehehe.

She lowered her voice. "Daniu! Look, if the Deity favors someone and they get married, he bestows this heavenly egg cake upon them. If you want to eat more of this, shouldn't we perhaps..."

A lightbulb seemed to flash above Zheng Daniu's head. "I get it! Let's have Old Village Chief, Gao Laba, Gao San Niang, Gao Sanwa... get married one more time each!"

Zao Ying: "Pfft!"

While the two of them were sneakily eating cake and licking hands over here, the wedding ceremony on the other side had completed the bows to Heaven, Earth, and ancestors. Bai Yuan called out loudly, "The couple now bows to each other!"

Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang turned to face each other and bowed...

Usually, this bow is harmonious.

But this particular couple were both unusually huge, towering at least a head taller than ordinary people. As they bowed simultaneously, their heads collided with a loud "CLUNK!"

Both flipped backward and fell to the floor.

The crowd erupted in laughter. "HAHAHAHA!"

The solemn moment instantly turned into chaos.

Bai Yuan's face darkened. "We were at the final step! Did you have to ruin this gentlemanly ritual? Aiyo! How truly arduous it is to uphold the way of the nobleman."

Bai Yuan sighed deeply as he turned, his flowing white robes twirling around him. He left everyone with a supremely handsome, albeit retreating, back view. Though his commitment to the gentlemanly way had failed this time, his dedication to maintaining a cool and pretentious air remained impeccable.

Gao Chuwu climbed to his feet. "Honglang! The ceremony is complete! We are officially married now! You don't have to be shy anymore!"

Xing Honglang stretched out both hands toward him. "Chuwu!"

Gao Chuwu stretched out his own hands toward her. "Honglang!"

They collided once more with a "CLUNK!" as they pulled each other into a tight embrace.

"The rite is done! Now, let the feast begin!"

Five hundred tables starting the banquet at once was a truly spectacular sight.

A group of villagers particularly fond of sweets swarmed around the giant cake. Its ten-zhang diameter left them momentarily stunned and confused, unsure of where to even begin eating.

Li Daoxuan thought: One slice of this cake would take at least four or five people to finish in my world. Even if everyone in Gaojia Village ate their fill, they'd only manage a small piece. Leaving it all here is wasteful. How about I share some with other places? Letting everyone join in the joy!

Swiftly, he pulled out a knife. Reaching into the box, visible to the villagers, he made several sharp "snick-snick!" sounds, cutting the cake into several large segments.

He left the largest piece for Gaojia Village. Picking up the other pieces, he shifted his perspective: Chengcheng County, Heyang County, Fengyuan Town, Qiachuan Port, Quangou Village, Yang Village...

Finally, he took out a smaller piece even yet, and abruptly placed it inside Huanglong Mountain Prison.

Everyone, be happy today!

Chapter 408: Old Nan Feng Leaves Prison

Huanglong Mountain Prison was somewhat chilly early in the morning.

Being high in the mountains, the altitude was great, and the temperature low.

Yet Old Nan Feng had left his cell early, running on the exercise field. His more than six hundred rebel band soldiers from Guyuan followed behind him, running as well.

They had started the rebellion in Guyuan near the end of Chongzhen Year One (1628 C.E.). Arriving at Chengcheng County roughly at the start of Chongzhen Year Two, now it was late in the Third Year of Chongzhen.

These border army men had been labor offenders for nearly two years.

But during this time, they hadn't stopped training. Each morning, Old Nan Feng would gather everyone to stand in formation on the open ground, practice running, drill with imaginary spears, then switch to practicing grappling and subduing techniques in pairs.

An old subordinate once whispered to him, "We're locked inside a prison. Why all this training?"

Old Nan Feng promptly kicked the soldier at the time. "No one's killed us! We're just doing forced labor! One day they'll set us free! When we get out, you can't farm the land, useless at any trade. And if you can't even fight anymore, what the hell would you be good for then? You'd just become a thief, smashed to death with one slap from the Deity."

His words jolted all the Guyuan rebels awake. None dared complain again, obediently drilling basics under Old Nan Feng's command.

Though the air was cold, fine beads of sweat dotted Old Nan Feng's head. Since becoming labor offenders, they ate their fill, with meat regular meals. His men were physically stronger now, training harder than their frontier soldier days. Utterly bizarre.

Just then, Zhong Gaoliang appeared atop the prison yard wall and waved at Old Nan Feng.

Old Nan Feng called over his shoulder, “Captain Chen! See to the drilling!”

A Captain Chen answered instantly, “Aye, sir!”

Old Nan Feng walked to the wall’s base, looking up at Zhong Gaoliang. “Head Guard Zhong, your orders?”

Zhong Gaoliang waved again. “You can scale this wall, no problem. Climb up here.”

Old Nan Feng shook his head. “Can’t! I don’t have that skill.”

Zhong Gaoliang chuckled. “Others might believe you, not the Deity. One night, around second watch, you climbed over this wall. Didn’t escape, just scrambled back over after a bit. The Deity saw it all.”

Old Nan Feng’s heart leapt with shock!

Unseen by him, Li Daoxuan often shifted his godly view to Huanglong Mountain Prison while others slept, using the mystical lens to scrutinize where trouble most brewed. One night, the device recorded Old Nan Feng not only scaling the high wall but ascending cliffs beyond the valley. He sat pondering awhile atop the mountain before returning.

Zhong Gaoliang said, “Get up here. Got words for you.”

Old Nan Feng nodded. No more games—time to show his hand.

He retreated several paces, burst into a sprint, slammed a foot hard against the wall, vaulted upward, grabbed the top edge, pulled tight with both hands—and in one fluid motion, flipped atop the rampart.

Zhong Gaoliang exclaimed, “Tsk tsk! Impressive! Ten of me couldn’t take you.”

Old Nan Feng shook his head again. "A hundred men like me aren't match for muskets."

Zhong Gaoliang said, "Calling you out is the Deity's command."

Old Nan Feng's spirit perked up. "What is the Deity's divine will?"

Zhong Gaoliang replied, "The Deity says... Over the past two years of your labor service, you've performed well. You helped the prison guards catch escaped convicts multiple times, quelled several riots... But most important—you saved my life..."

He grinned widely. "The Deity says... saving me alone merits your sentence being commuted. So... You're free."

Old Nan Feng surged with overwhelming joy!

Zhong Gaoliang added, "Freedom's yours. Choose to leave Gaojia Village, or stay."

What choice was there?

Without a second thought, Old Nan Feng declared, "I shall remain! These fighting skills hold no worth for emperors anymore. Now... I serve the Deity."

For people in this age, "learn civil and martial skill, sell both to the emperor." But for those like him, there was no going back to serving imperial courts. Here offered hope's best path.

Zhong Gaoliang smiled. "Good. If you agree to serve, proceed immediately to Gaojia Village's Gaojia Fortress. Go to the discussion hall inside... An honorable and challenging task requires your presence."

Old Nan Feng's spirits soared. Men like him feared idleness more than hardship. Hearing duty called immediately invigorated him. "Then I go!"

Dropping beside the wall toward the yard below, he shouted at his drilling men below, "Brothers! By the Deity's grace, I am free! Now I labor under the Celestial One! Keep drilling hard! Captain Chen commands you! Keep discipline! This Old Nan Feng WILL gain your freedom!"

More than 600 Guyuan rebels roared back as one: "AYE!"

"Fine! Damn fine!"

No need returning to his prison cell—no belongings lay there anyway. Nan Feng strode straight through the jail gates. Outside, someone pressed a waiting horse's reins into his hand. With a nod, he mounted and kicked his steed into a gallop bound for Gaojia Village.

Caged nearly two years, he was quite familiar outside prison's walls... Labor offenders constantly rebuilt roads with cement, constructed cement houses, heavied loads, hewed limestone quarries... chaotic equipment shifts...

Through work duties, he'd observed distant Gaojia Village's prosperity... Seen Gaojia Fortress tower mighty above it all... Learned long ago of powers deep as oceans lurking there. Serving the fortress outweighed any rebel bandit life tenfold...

His warhorse passed Bai Family Fortress... Trains chuffed at a station yonder, but train travel sparked no interest: Why ride steel rails clutching his mighty steed? Snorting softly, he kicked his horse faster. The little train? Ho! This mount outraced any smoky engine!

Digging heels into the horse's sides, he left the train coughing smoke behind him...

But no fiery steed sustains its peak stride long... Soon the fine stallion tired, slowed... and the small train whistled triumphantly, surging past rider and mount.

Old Nan Feng muttered, "Hell's bells... Should've boarded with horse!"

Fortunately, small railroad platforms dotted ahead. Years earlier this one wouldn't stop—nearby village stood uninhabited... With lands reclaimed later, Gaojia Village sent agricultural teams planting corn surrounding this depot... so now trains did pause there.

Reaching this minor station, Nan Feng saw the train just preparing to leave... He urged his weary mount hastily scrambling aboard just seconds before departure... Only then did Nan Feng let out a sigh.

Chugging at 60 kilometers per hour, the little train carried Old Nan Feng racing toward a dreamt-of new life.

Chapter 409: Raising My Banner

Old Nan Feng arrived at the main fortress of Gaojia Fortress and was promptly ushered into the conference hall.

As soon as he entered, he saw a group of important figures engaged in a serious discussion.

He only recognized the Saint Lady, Thirty-Two, and Cheng Xu. The others were all strangers to him, so he dared not act rashly. Obediently, he sat down behind Cheng Xu and quietly pricked up his ears to listen.

Thirty-Two spoke first: "We need alkali production, which requires a large amount of salt. Since Puzhou, Shanxi is a major salt-producing region, procuring salt from there has become an inevitable step. Otherwise, even if we build the chemical factory, we'll lack the salt to start operations."

Chunhong couldn't help but ask, "Didn't the Deity grant us plenty of salt before? Couldn't we just request—"

Thirty-Two interrupted her: "We shouldn't rely on begging the Deity for every little thing. We only ask for help when we're truly unable to solve a problem ourselves. Salt was a problem we previously couldn't resolve, so the Deity provided it. But now that we're capable, we must handle it ourselves."

Cheng Xu chimed in: "Exactly! If we had no ships and couldn't reach the ancient ferry dock, begging the Deity for salt would be understandable. But now that we can reach Puzhou, it would be downright shameless to ask for divine help with salt."

Thirty-Two turned to Xing Honglang: “Miss Xing—ahem—Mrs. Xing, you’re familiar with the situation in Shanxi. Could you explain the process involved in obtaining salt from there?”

Xing Honglang, now wearing her hair in a married woman’s bun after her recent wedding, was present and seemed radiantly happy—as if nothing in the world could dampen her spirits—bubbling with vitality: “Actually, the salt isn’t produced in Puzhou. It comes from Hedong Road—the hometown of that fellow ‘Iron Bird Flies’ from Hedong.”

Xing Honglang continued: “In ancient times, where the Yellow Emperor battled Chiyou and dismembered his body, a large pond formed called Jie Pond. This pond abounds with Jie salt. People settled beside it to produce salt and built a large city—present-day Hedong Road.”

Everyone in the room acknowledged learning something new.

Li Daoxuan also nodded from up in the sky: This uneducated person just gained some new knowledge.

Xing Honglang stated: “Since antiquity, the government has strictly controlled salt. Thus, heavily troops have been garrisoned in Hedong Road to protect Jie Pond. The government manages both the production and sale of Jie salt.”

At this point, she grinned: “But Jie Pond is massive—over forty li long and four li wide. How could their garrison possibly patrol such a huge area? The government’s salt craftsmen live miserable lives. The salt they make is all seized by the government, leaving them only meager pay that’s barely enough to survive. So, the craftsmen often secretly sell salt...”

Thirty-Two concluded: “I see. So salt smugglers from Puzhou head to Jie Pond to buy salt directly from the craftsmen? That’s how the famed Puzhou salt smugglers emerged.”

Xing Honglang: “Exactly! Since Puzhou lies just west of Hedong Road—very close to Jie Pond—it became the transit point. Smugglers gather here in droves to find opportunities, sneak to Jie Pond, contact the craftsmen, buy the salt, hurry back to the ancient ferry dock, and ship it across the realm.”

She grinned again: “In my little hometown of Yongji, nine out of ten villagers have sold smuggled salt.”

Everyone laughed shaking their heads: “Just don’t let Fang Wushang visit your village, or he’ll haul everyone back for re-education labor.”

The topics discussed today were definitely things they dared not let Fang Wushang know.

Thirty-Two declared: “Mrs. Xing has clarified it all. If we want large quantities of salt for alkali production, we need at least one team stationed in Puzhou. They’ll solidify their foothold there to keep sending salt back continuously. Ideally, we should position ourselves in Jie Pond, but... Mrs. Xing mentioned it has heavy government troops. Moving against Jie Pond now would be ill-advised.”

Cheng Xu nodded: “If we send troops now to seize it, we’d cut off the entire Central Plains’ salt supply. That’s no different from openly rebelling—as foolish as Wang Jiayin declaring himself emperor! Hoarding provisions discreetly and biding our time is the true path to kingship.”

Bai Yuan interjected: “So overtly seizing Jie Pond now is unwise. But sending a small team to make contact with the salt craftsmen and secure their smuggled salt for us—that’s entirely feasible.”

Xing Honglang chuckled: “This is where I excel.”

Thirty-Two said: “Indeed, Mrs. Xing must spearhead this operation—reach Jie Pond and negotiate with the craftsmen. However, relying solely on your team can only handle small-scale salt trafficking. We can’t manage bulk quantities like this. Shanxi is unstable now, overrun with bandits scattering every which way. Moving small amounts of salt lets you stay nimble, avoiding both bandits and officials. But dozens of salt carts moving in a long line? You couldn’t guarantee avoiding them every time.”

Xing Honglang agreed: “That is a problem.”

Thirty-Two turned to Cheng Xu and Zao Ying: “That’s when Instructor He and Instructor Zao come in.”

Zao Ying frowned: “Surely involving us means exposing Gaojia Militia? The court would see us sending a cavalry unit and firearm soldiers to guard smuggled salt. That is tantamount to declaring rebellion.”

Cheng Xu chuckled: “Instructor Zao, you’re mistaken. Why would Gaojia Village get involved? We had no idea about any of this! This was purely bandit work. Shanxi teems with them—why would adding one more gang with cavalry and firearms focusing on heavy salt smuggling be unusual?”

Everyone paused in silence.

Xing Honglang laughed: “Perfect idea. Let it fly under my banner. After all, ‘Yongji Xing Honglang’ is a notorious salt lord across Shanxi—I don’t have any kinsmen left for them to execute anyway. Just say I rebelled, openly moving massive cavalry and firearm units to handle smuggled salt. The court won’t suspect Gaojia Village—just consider me one more fierce bandit chief among Wang Jiayin’s many captains.”

She added with a chuckle: “Wang Jiayin might even mistake me for an ally and spare our salt carts.”

Li Daoxuan mentally approved: Not a bad approach!

Thirty-Two stated: “Disguised as bandits—that could work. But... Mrs. Xing, remember we’re just pretending to be rebels, not actual ones. Don’t get carried away burning, plundering, or killing.”

Xing Honglang roared with laughter: “Don’t worry! I could never do such things.”

Zao Ying grinned: “Heh, guess I’ll tag along with my good sis for some fun in Shanxi.”

Cheng Xu turned to Zao Ying and asked: “Commander Zao, your cavalry camp never reached full strength, right? How many spare warhorses do you still have?”

Zao Ying replied: “Three hundred extras.”

Cheng Xu nodded: “Then I’ll send three hundred of my men along. They’ll ride horses for the journey but dismount to form ranks when combat demands.”

Chapter 410: Who Will Command This Troop?

As soon as Cheng Xu finished speaking, Gao Chuwu raised his hand abruptly: “I’ll go!”

He had just married Xing Honglang, and his wife was about to go far away to Shanxi. As a husband, he wanted to go along, which was quite reasonable.

Cheng Xu nodded: "Go ahead. Take fifty grenadiers with you. I will also send one hundred fifty firearm soldiers and one hundred spear troops with you."

After he finished arranging this, everyone present had strange expressions on their faces.

Clearly, everyone thought of one thing: who would command this infantry of three hundred? Gao Chuwu was definitely not considered; he could mindlessly throw grenades with fifty grenadiers, but if he commanded the infantry camp, he would lead everyone into a ditch.

Cheng Xu could not personally go, as he had to lead even more militia and guard the base at Gaojia Village. Why would he casually run off to Shanxi?

Bai Yuan certainly could not go either; he was an elegant gentleman pretending to be bandits, but which bandit would float about in white robes all day and talk of the Six Arts of Gentlemen?

There was also Wang Er, but he was busy catching up on "Thought Lessons," and he and his one hundred Old Villagers hadn't even finished learning the three major disciplines and eight points of attention. Sending them to Shanxi might revive their bandit tendencies, which would not do.

Who else had the ability to command independently?

Seeing their odd expressions, Cheng Xu smiled: "I know what you're all thinking. Alright, this person to send to Shanxi was actually chosen long ago by the Deity."

The others were puzzled.

Cheng Xu turned and waved to Old Nan Feng, who had been sitting quietly listening behind him: "Old Nan Feng, say a few words."

Old Nan Feng felt rushing with pride when named. He stood up, clasped his fists, and said: "I, your humble subordinate, volunteer to go."

His strange wording of "I, your humble subordinate, volunteer to go" suddenly popped out in the plain speech of the Gaojia Village group, seeming very jarring. But it was exactly this jolt that made everyone realize: right, this guy was an official military officer of the court! And he was a fierce border army commander. Though no one knew exactly who he used to be or his status, he was clearly an officer just below a Hundred-House, holding not a small official rank.

Thirty-Two chuckled: "Hey! That's what's called 'using people effectively'."

Cheng Xu smiled at Old Nan Feng: "The Deity pardoning you and releasing you from prison at this time was likely calculated for this mission to suit you best. However, don't assume you'll become the leader immediately. Frankly, I don't fully trust you yet. So, for this expedition to Shanxi, I appoint Gao Chuwu as Captain, and you as Deputy Captain. Got it?"

The moment he made this arrangement, everyone secretly thought it was brilliant.

Even Li Daoxuan showed approval. Clearly, appointing Gao Chuwu as Captain was mostly symbolic; in action, that fool probably wouldn't know anything and would ask for plans from Deputy Captain Old Nan Feng.

But if Old Nan Feng issued any deranged commands that violated Gaojia Village's core values, including but not limited to burning, killing, and looting, Gao Chuwu could use his Captain authority to veto them outright.

This arrangement was truly proper.

Old Nan Feng, having been in the system, understood the setup instantly and clasped his fists: "I, your humble subordinate, obey orders."

"Well, head to the barracks now," Cheng Xu chuckled. "Pick up a set of our Gaojia Village equipment. Bring back that spirit you had when fighting the Mongolians in the border army, and let us see the might of the Guyuan border forces."

Old Nan Feng laughed a bit: "Can I go to the Gaojia Business Circle first to eat some good meals? I also want to listen to this evening's Shaanbei Diaoqu performance."

The others were once again stunned. Cheng Xu took out a few pieces of silver and placed them in his hand, smiling: "Go ahead. The official departure is tomorrow, so do whatever you like today. Don't drink alcohol, but anything else is fine."

Old Nan Feng was overjoyed: "Hahaha, I served many years at Guyuan's border, then was locked up in prison for two upon returning. I've been dreaming every day of the world's pleasures. Hahaha, Gaojia Business Circle, I'm coming!"

He dashed out immediately.

The group found it amusing at first, but on pondering his last words, suddenly felt sad for no reason.

Right!

The rebel band in Guyuan were good men defending the nation for the sake of this world before they turned traitor. Without them, the Mongolians could have freely invaded the Central Plains and thrown everything into chaos. The peace of daily life for the Central Plains' people was all thanks to the border army.

At the border, they had no comforts, just bitter cold every day. They were hungry and cold, protecting this world, but nobody knew their suffering.

If they hadn't gone three years without receiving pay, would they have rebelled?

Thirty-Two let out a long sigh: "These border forces deserve pity. How about releasing the other border soldiers in prison?"

"There you go again! Thirty-Two, you're generally well-meaning, but too much of a pushover." Bai Yuan flicked open his fan, revealing the words "gentleman": "Serving at the border was tough, but after

rebellious, they turned their swords on innocent civilians. From north to south, they robbed and killed, causing countless families to break up. Though the orders came from the rebel leader North Water Wolf, they as followers had sins to pay for—they need reformation through labor.”

Thirty-Two nodded: “Ah! True! This world...”

This world always turns good people into villains!

Luckily, there’s the Deity, who keeps trying to change villains back into good people.

“Alright, everyone get to your places.”

Thirty-Two snapped to attention: “Everyone put your utmost effort to fix this world soon.”

With that, he waved: “Tan Liwen, organize a grain convoy to transport grain from our village treasury to Qiachuan Port.”

Li Daoxuan spoke: “We won’t touch the village treasury this time.”

Hearing Gao Yiye relay this, Thirty-Two asked curiously: “Not this time?”

Li Daoxuan: “Shanxi has millions of people. Helping all Shanxi’s residents eat enough requires massive grain quantities. Constantly moving grain from Gaojia Village’s treasury to Qiachuan Port and then to Shanxi takes too much time and effort. With Gaojia Village’s limited manpower, just transporting grain every day would leave no room for other tasks. So this time, I will give the grain directly at Qiachuan Port.”

Thirty-Two: “The Deity is merciful.”

Without the trouble of transporting grain, things became simpler.

Li Daoxuan also stated: "Another matter: our ships will multiply soon. Each time I give a new ship, you equip it with cannons. Transferring cannons from Gaojia Village's artisans' well to Qiachuan Port is very difficult. So... it's time to build a cannon factory near Qiachuan Port."

Thirty-Two understood: "Indeed, I'll sort that out."

He extrapolated: "If our territory keeps expanding, shipping everything from Gaojia Village will become impossible as distances grow. Seems we need to set up operations everywhere."

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly: Exactly! The main base is stable, so it's time to open second and third sites.