

Great Ming 411

Chapter 411: Bringing the Whole Family

The small Qiachuan Port became unusually bustling.

Three hundred infantry squads and three hundred cavalry squads from Gaojia Village crowded outside this tiny port.

The Heyang County militia inside Qiachuan Fortress first glanced down at their own shabby weapons, then gazed enviously at the Gaojia Village Militia equipped to the teeth, their eyes burning with admiration and resentment...

Zhang Yuanwai walked past them, lowering his voice. "Don't worry! Instructor Bai has promised me. As long as we diligently attend Thought Lessons, they'll equip us with gear just like the Gaojia Village Militia."

The Heyang militia erupted in joy.

At that moment, the clouds parted in the sky. The Deity's golden hand descended, placing a small mountain of flour onto the dock.

At Bai Yuan's command, the already prepared porters surged forward, stuffing the flour into sacks and then carrying them onto the cargo ship.

The broad, flat-decked cargo ship had a tremendous capacity. The entire flour mountain was loaded without crowding the vessel, though the gunwales dipped slightly lower. Extra space remained for transporting people.

Xing Honglang led her crew aboard the freighter, securing positions throughout the ship. Simultaneously, another warship began boarding people. Besides the original one hundred crew members, several hundred militia soldiers filed onboard, filling both cabins and deck completely.

Li Daoxuan observed this. Three hundred cavalry and three hundred infantry couldn't be moved in one trip by the warships alone. The carrying capacity of just two vessels was clearly insufficient. It seemed another cargo ship would need to be provided specifically for the horses and soldiers.

His hand stretched out. Another cargo ship manifested and descended into the box.

People on the dock immediately cheered: "The Deity has bestowed another celestial ship upon us!"

Only Bai Yuan wore an awkward expression. "Deity, Your bestowal of celestial ships comes too swiftly. This lowly one cannot train enough crew so quickly."

Li Daoxuan understood this perfectly well. However, cargo ships were simpler to operate since they required no cannons or specialized naval crew. He knew Bai Yuan would find a way.

Sure enough, Bai Yuan soon located a helmsman for the newly granted ship. While training the helmsman for the previous cargo ship, he had others observe closely as apprentices. Thus, producing another helmsman posed no great difficulty.

With the extra vessel, transport became manageable. The warship carried soldiers only. Horses from the cavalry camp boarded the new cargo ship, accompanied by a small group for their care. Shared among three ships, the entire force was finally embarked.

The "Gaojia Village Naval Forces" then officially set sail, heading towards the ancient ferry dock in Shanxi.

The Heyang County militia, still watching the three ships recede into the distance, suddenly spotted a force even larger than the Gaojia Village Militia approaching from the northwest direction. This troop numbered over two thousand, hauling immense supplies with numerous oxen and horses. At its forefront was a carriage whose drawn cart's curtain revealed the delicate face of a young woman.

Gao Yiye had arrived!

This marked Gao Yiye's first lifetime journey to the Yellow River's edge. The moment the carriage halted at the dock, she swiftly jumped out. "Wow! Such a huge river!"

Qiu Ju and Dong Xue followed close behind. They too beheld the Yellow River for the first time, their eyes shining with irrepressible delight and awe.

Bai Yuan approached welcomingly. "I hadn't expected the Saint Lady herself to come here. Was setting up a workshop worth such a personal visit?"

Gao Yiye giggled. "Truthfully, my presence wasn't necessary. But I wanted to see the Yellow River, so I cajoled my way along with the team."

She gestured behind her at the lengthy transport team. People were already unloading. They had transported large quantities of cement. A group of blue hats immediately began surveying the site, marking out extensive lines on the ground to designate the approximate footprint for the blacksmith workshop.

Yellow hats promptly started leveling the land following the blue hats' instructions. An enormous construction site instantly buzzed with activity.

The Heyang militia watched from Qiachuan Fortress, murmuring amongst themselves. "Gaojia Village always does this. Thousands of laborers mobilized at once, everything on such a grand scale."

"With the Deity supporting them, they never worry about wages."

"What exactly are they building here?"

Zhang Yuanwai came over. "I heard from Brother Bai. Gaojia Village is building a blacksmith workshop here. Mainly to forge cannons for easier installation on ships."

The Heyang militia exclaimed: "A cannon foundry? Impressive! So the cannons they make will also be brought inside our Qiachuan Fortress and mounted? Then we'll get to use cannons too!"

Zhang Yuanwai scolded good-naturedly. "Is that something to play with? They're meant for when river-bandits attack the river. Honestly, it's best if opportunity for their use never comes in our lifetime."

While they conversed cheerfully, another group arrived at the dock at full gallop. Leading them was Feng Jun, the Magistrate of Heyang County.

The moment the magistrate arrived, he dismounted and hurried to Gao Yiye. "Saint Lady, what scheme are you undertaking here?"

Gao Yiye smiled. "As Lord Feng observes, we are building a blacksmith workshop."

Feng Jun pressed: "I'm told this isn't just any workshop. You're constructing an armory for cannon-making?"

Gao Yiye nodded. "Yes! The Deity said transporting cannons all the way from Gaojia Village is too troublesome. For convenience, we'll build a cannon foundry right here. This caused quite a fuss among our blacksmiths back home. None were willing to come. They had to draw lots. The blacksmith who pulled the unlucky straw burst into tears twice."

Feng Jun wiped cold sweat, his mind screaming trouble. Previously, when these people cast cannons in Gaojia Village under Chengcheng County's jurisdiction, it was Magistrate Liang Shixian's problem. Now setting up cannon works in Heyang placed the burden squarely on him – a step that definitely put him on the path leading to execution along with their families.

He knew, with painful clarity, he couldn't stop it.

Observing the yellow hats hired by Gaojia Village happily digging at the construction site – all Heyang locals reliant on these wages to feed their families – Feng Jun realized stopping the project would alienate both Gaojia Village and Heyang's populace.

What could he do?

Gao Yiye pointed skyward. "Lord Feng! Be at ease. The Deity watches from above."

Feng Jun looked up. A low cloud hovered directly overhead. He hastily bowed deeply towards the heavens. "Esteemed Deity! This lowly official understands You grant sturdy ships and mighty cannons to protect the common folk. Yet this action will inevitably draw the imperial court's attention. When punishment falls, this official bears the blame... and faces execution alongside his kin. Pray, Most Benevolent Deity, grant this lowly servant a path to survival!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. Feng Jun was appealing directly to him now. The magistrate must have realized this was the most effective tactic, far superior to futile, petty schemes.

"Yiye, tell Feng Jun this: Have him bring his entire family to live in Heyang County. Then no one will be able to execute his nine kinships."

Chapter 412: One Sentence Makes You Admit Your Mistake

Feng Jun was completely dumbfounded upon hearing Gao Yiye's relayed message.

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Up here, I'm not bound by the rules you follow below, so I couldn't care less whether the court is pleased or not. I know this might cause you trouble, which is why I urge you to bring your family here. I will personally ensure their safety."

Feng Jun let out a long sigh. Blood began to trickle slowly from his nose, but he had no mood to wipe it. Cupping his fist toward the sky, he turned to the Heyang patrol officer behind him. "You heard what the Deity just said, didn't you?"

The Heyang patrol officer nodded.

Feng Jun continued, "You and I are in the same boat now. If this gets exposed, both of us will be charged with treason. So, for now, our only best option is to keep it hidden from the court. Later, take your soldiers and station them in Qiachuan Fortress. Raise your banner openly to pretend that both the fortress and the blacksmith workshops are under our official control. If a passing general questions you, tell them that Heyang County is acting under the emperor's secret decree to cast cannons and build warships to counter the bandits. As long as they don't personally ask the emperor, they'll have no way to know the truth."

The patrol officer's eyes brightened. "That is a clever strategy."

Feng Jun added grimly, "If anyone actually asks the emperor... we'll only be waiting to die."

The patrol officer lowered his voice. "It might not necessarily be death. Didn't the Deity say that if we move our families here... he'll protect us?"

Feng Jun's face twisted miserably. "The moment we truly need the Deity's protection, it means we've become rebels. Ah, let's just take it one step at a time."

Just as his mood plummeted further, he suddenly saw Gao Yiye strolling over again. She waved at him cheerfully. "Lord Feng, this is my first time by the Yellow River. Such a vast river must hold countless fish, right?"

Feng Jun nodded. "Of course!"

Gao Yiye chuckled. "Are they tasty?"

Caught between laughter and tears, Feng Jun replied, "This area is famed for a unique fish called the Qiachuan Black Snakehead. Its flesh is tender and delicious, renowned for its ability to dispel blood stagnation, regenerate muscles, nourish the body, and enrich the blood."

Gao Yiye's mouth instantly watered.

Li Daoxuan's mouth watered right along with hers.

Feng Jun, taking one look at Gao Yiye's expression, understood exactly what to do. He immediately ordered the yamen runner beside him, "Go ask at the fishermen's homes. See who has any Qiachuan Black Snakeheads. Buy me a few."

The runner hastily left and returned shortly, triumphantly carrying four scaly, dark-colored, spindle-shaped fish that looked extraordinarily delicious. Kept alive in buckets filled with water, he struggled under their weight but refused any help from nearby servants. He insisted on carrying them himself, hoping to curry favor with both the county magistrate and the Saint Lady.

Feng Jun announced, “Saint Lady, we have the fish. Please accompany me back to the county town. The riverbank lacks a decent chef; attempting to cook them casually here would ruin them. Only the chefs in town can prepare such delicacies properly.”

Gao Yiye beamed. “Then I shall impose upon your hospitality. Hehe.”

She brought along the two attendants, Qiu and Dong, along with Ground Rabbit (Zheng Gouzi) and a hundred guards. They followed Feng Jun toward the county town.

Gao Yiye was soon set to enjoy the fish, but Li Daoxuan remained without a bite. He couldn’t be bothered to search online delivery platforms—he knew without thinking he wouldn’t find this in Shuangqing City. Sullenly, he gazed into his diorama and lamented: I really shouldn’t have expanded my view to Heyang County. This cradle of Chinese food culture taunts me with a bizarre new delicacy every day. It’ll be the death of me.

Resigning himself, Li Daoxuan opened the food delivery app and placed an order for sour soup with yellow spicy ding fish, hoping to soothe his wounded spirit when it arrived for dinner...

As dusk fell, Li Daoxuan’s sour soup was delivered. Picking up his chopsticks, he was just about to tuck in when Gao Yiye and her entourage arrived at Qiachuan County Town.

The runner carrying the fish bucket raced ahead, eager to deliver the fish to the kitchen so the chef could start cooking immediately and please the important guests. His legs pumped furiously as he ran, simultaneously trying to care for the four thrashing fish inside the bucket, terrified they might die before reaching the kitchen.

Running too fast as a man isn’t always good; it can earn you disdain.

His sprint carried him through an entire street in seconds. Rounding a corner, he collided with a “crunch!” into a dark-skinned man. The man yelped in surprise but steadied himself. The yamen runner, however, lost his balance entirely and crashed heavily to the ground.

The bucket overturned, water splashing everywhere. The four fish flopped desperately on the hard street.

The runner panicked, scrambling to his feet in a flurry, desperately trying to pick up the flapping fish. The dark-skinned man he'd knocked into now saw the mess. He quickly bent down to help retrieve the fish. Between the two of them, after a chaotic struggle, all four fish were safely returned to the bucket. The runner dashed into a nearby shop, scooped several large ladlefuls of water from their storage vat into the bucket, and sighed with profound relief seeing the four fish swimming feebly but still breathing.

Watching this frantic scene, Li Daoxuan stifled a laugh. Look at your frantic desperation. Though currying favor with the powerful is indeed a survival tactic for small folk, you carry it too far. At this point, it borders on absurdity.

With the fish seemingly saved, the runner's panic ebbed slightly, giving way to a surge of anger. He grabbed the dark-skinned man by his shoulder and roared, "You nearly killed my fresh fish! If they die, could you bear the responsibility?"

The dark-skinned man now saw the runner's yamen attire and likely guessed the fish's purpose. He snorted contemptuously. "So these are for the county magistrate? Are you really this flustered? You ran into me! You were the clumsy one that dropped the bucket! I helped you gather the fish out of kindness, and now you try to pin the blame on me?"

The runner barked, "How dare you!"

His anger flared. How brazen! This man knew he was a yamen runner, knew the fish were for the County Lord—and he dared speak like this?

The runner demanded angrily, "Where do you hail from?"

The dark-skinned man answered proudly, "Jinshuigou Coal Mine!"

The runner froze. "..."

Li Daoxuan inwardly exclaimed: Ha! So that's why!

For nearly twenty rapid blinks, the runner stood motionless. Finally, it clicked: no wonder this sooty fellow acted so arrogantly. He was a coal miner from Jinshuigou.

After the mine was “contracted” by Gaojia Village, it had slipped completely out of official jurisdiction, becoming a private enterprise of Gaojia Village. Miners working at the Jinshuigou Coal Mine now earned astonishingly high wages.

Moreover, these men spent their days singing about “we workers have power” and possessing an almost messianic sense of “we are building a new world.” Naturally, a lowly yamen runner warranted little respect in their eyes.

The runner sneered coldly. “Feeling cocky, eh? Because you’ve got a powerful backer now?”

The coal miner retorted, “My confidence isn’t from a ‘backer’! I’m confident because I’m in the right! You crashed into me! Why are you yelling at me? I’m the one who should be mad at you!”

The runner shot back, “You want reason? You think I’ll waste time reasoning with you? I need only utter one sentence to force you to lower your arrogant head and admit your fault!”

The coal miner puffed out his chest defiantly. “Impossible! Utterly impossible!”

The runner declared triumphantly, “These fish are for the Saint Lady of Gaojia Village.”

The coal miner’s face instantly paled. “I’m sorry! I was wrong! Please quickly... quickly escort the fish to the kitchen! Hurry! Hurry! Don’t let them die!”

Chapter 413: It Seems Like an Idiot

Ancient Ferry Dock.

Iron Bird Flies sat inside a dilapidated thatched hut by the dock. Behind him lay piles of salt bags, each deliberately packed to the size of a human head. These small bags made it easy for his salt smugglers to carry one each on their backs and still move quickly to evade the officials.

He had only transported this salt to the dock yesterday afternoon.

It had been a real challenge!

Shanxi was in chaos.

After Old Zhang Fei, who had attacked the ancient ferry dock last time, was driven off by Xing Honglang's cannon fire, he hadn't fled far. Instead, he continued to scatter around Puzhou and Hedong Road. Bandits could be seen in nearby villages at any moment.

Some were large groups—hundreds or even thousands strong. Others were small groups of bandits—dozens to a hundred. They spread across various villages, looting, killing, burning, and forcing ordinary people to join them.

Iron Bird Flies took shelter from the larger bands but cut apart the smaller groups of bandits. He sold all the grain entrusted to him by Xing Honglang to the people of Hedong Road. Then, he slipped toward Jie Pond, purchased a large quantity of salt, and returned to the ancient ferry dock to wait for Xing Honglang's next arrival.

A Dock Worker slipped inside and bowed to Iron Bird Flies. "Boss Iron, do you still have grain left? I'd like to buy some more."

Iron Bird Flies shook his head. "Nothing left! I only have enough for a few days myself. Everything else has been sold away."

The Dock Worker wore a look of distress. "That's terrible. My wife is pregnant. She cannot run out of grain now."

Iron Bird Flies replied, "Just hold on a little longer. Boss Xing promised she'd bring more grain."

The worker whispered low, "Both Shaanxi and Shanxi suffer drought. Even if Boss Xing had three heads and six arms, could she really bring so much grain?"

Frowning, Iron Bird Flies sighed. “Ah! Either way, we can’t just wait for Boss Xing to save us. We must find ways to save ourselves. Try fishing in the river for now!”

The Dock Worker sighed and left.

Iron Bird Flies stepped outside the hut as well, glancing toward the dock. Large groups of merchants, fishermen, and peasants were reinforcing the dock fence, searching for thicker logs and hammering them into the ground...

However, these people were too hungry to muster any strength. As a result, the logs they brought weren’t large enough. They didn’t possess enough power to chop down whole trees or haul and prepare heavy timber if they had. Therefore, this fence wouldn’t stand tall.

Iron Bird Flies thought to himself: when Old Zhang Fei attacks the ancient ferry dock next time, it will surely collapse.

Ah!

Boss Xing, when will you return?

Just then, a Porter standing guard nearby roared, “They’re here! Ships on the river are coming!”

Iron Bird Flies rushed with pride. “She’s here? Marvelous! Is it Boss Xing’s ship?”

“I... I can’t be certain... three vessels came this time!”

“Three?”

Iron Bird Flies paused in astonishment before scrambling to higher ground to gaze over the river.

Along the northern stretch of water, three large vessels appeared. Still too far to see clearly, but the direction they came from told him everything—nine in ten chances it was Xing Honglang. After all, the imperial navy upstream along the Yellow River didn't operate such large ships.

The three vessels drew close enough for identification. One carried numerous cannon barrels that stood out prominently. Could it be Xing Honglang's battle vessel from the last trip?

This time, a large flag flew upon its mast, bearing the character “狼” (Wolf).

The other two looked peculiar—flat-decked craft. One was filled entirely with warhorses, likely a hundred or more. The second seemed laden with goods, covered in tarps. Though the contents remained hidden beneath the cloth, they could guess it must be grain.

Iron Bird Flies rushed with pride. “Boss Xing is here!”

Crowds rushed to the shore, cheering toward the water: “Boss Xing!”

“Yongji Xing Honglang!”

The poorer they were, the harder they cried out, for they were thoroughly exhausted from hunger.

Especially the dock worker whose wife was pregnant. Gazing at the three ships on the river, he felt as if he had spotted a lifeline. His shouts soon turned into tears: “My wife and child will be saved now.”

Standing on the deck of the cargo ship, Xing Honglang looked down at the cheering crowd on shore and sighed softly, “My folks back home are suffering so much these days.”

Gao Chuwu, aboard another ship, popped his head out to observe the scene ashore. He couldn't help but startle, “My wife has quite the reputation here!”

A grenadier sidled up to him, chuckling, "Battalion Commander, you're visiting your wife's hometown now, meeting her kinfolk. Better stay sharp! Otherwise, you'll become a laughingstock and drag down Madam Xing's dignity along with you."

That sounded right to Gao Chuwu. Wasn't this the classic scenario of the clumsy husband accompanying his wife back to her family to visit her relatives? Now was definitely not the time for any slip-up—showing any incompetence would earn her kin's scorn.

Gao Chuwu smoothed his hair, "How do I look?"

The grenadier exclaimed, "You look mighty impressive, Battalion Commander!"

Gao Chuwu burst into laughter, "Haha! Good! Let the folks from my wife's hometown see just what a fine man their new son-in-law is!"

He boldly strode to the very tip of the warship's prow, standing proudly while the river winds whipped through his hair, making it stream and flutter wildly behind him. His towering, formidable frame stood tall against the rushing wind...

The people on shore caught sight of this burly, bold fellow on the warship—thick brows, big eyes, broad as a tiger's back and waist as sturdy as a bear's—standing heroically on the bow like a god of war. His imposing presence truly startled them.

"Battalion Commander," the grenadier called out, "a real man needs to bare his chest to the wind to look truly heroic!"

Gao Chuwu paused, "Huh? Really?"

He grabbed the front of his shirt and ripped at the sides. Expecting the fabric to tear easily, revealing his massive chest muscles, he discovered instead that the cotton cloth was finely woven and robust. His attempt at a dramatic, effortless tear simply didn't work. He hadn't used enough force. The shirt didn't rip. Worse, his awkward motion caused him to twist sharply.

Losing his balance, he wobbled and plummeted overboard.

Fortunately, he was uniquely gifted—scoring zero in the liberal arts but a perfect hundred in physical education. As he fell, he instinctually reacted. His hand shot out and gripped the ship’s gunwale, leaving him hanging precariously over the river.

He couldn’t swim. Falling into the water would be disastrous. Frantically, he scrambled back up, his movements clumsy and utterly graceless in his panicked state.

The people on shore could only stare: “...”

“What is that man doing?”

“Is he an idiot?”

“He certainly seems to be!”

Gao Chuwu finally hauled himself back to safety on the deck, sitting down in dismay. “Oh no! I’ve ruined it! Now I’ll be an embarrassment in front of my marital family!”

The three ships pulled up to the dock one after another...

Xing Honglong was the first to leap ashore.

Her appearance froze the crowd. They could see it clearly—Xing Honglang now wore her hair in a married woman’s bun, a style she hadn’t sported just days before on her previous visit.

In this incredibly short time, she had gotten married!

The people on the pier gasped, “Huh?! Can that be right?”

Chapter 414: Lead the Way

Iron Bird Flies greeted Xing Honglang and clasped his hands in salute. "Boss Xing, finally, I've been looking forward to your arrival. The things you've brought this time seem quite abundant."

He turned his gaze to the three ships!

He saw figures disembarking from all three vessels. From the ship hauling the oil cart came merely a group of salt smugglers. But from the warship, soldiers were alighting—a huge number of soldiers, equipped with armor, spears, waist knives, hand crossbows, and many holding firearms. With such gear, their setup easily surpassed that of the officials by more than a level.

On one of the flat ships, they were unloading horses!

Once these horses left the ship, a soldier would smoothly mount one immediately. The movement was fluid and natural, showing they were clearly well-trained cavalrymen.

Iron Bird Flies thought to himself, alarmed: What lavish equipment was this? Was it something a mere salt smuggler should possess?

Then he saw Gao Chuwu walking over, head drooping. Xing Honglang tugged him to her side and smiled. "This is my husband. In the jianghu, he's known as Big Fool. He's a famous hero in Shaanxi."

Iron Bird Flies thought: Famous? I'd never heard of his reputation. I only knew of Wang Chuying, Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong), Bai Yuzhu, King of Disruption, Bu Zhan Ni, Wang Zuogua, and others. Where had this Big Fool sprung from?

Xing Honglang snorted: "What? Look down on my husband?"

Iron Bird Flies quickly put on a serious expression. "No, no, absolutely not. This Big Fool strikes me as a top-notch fine fellow."

Gao Chuwu grinned at him. "You're a decent chap, speaking such sweet words."

Iron Bird Flies thought: No wonder he's called Big Fool. This fellow doesn't even recognize polite flattery.

He leaned close to Xing Honglang's ear and whispered: "Boss Xing, what is this...?"

Xing Honglang responded: "As you see, I've rebelled too! My husband happened to have a few hundred brothers under his command, so he came to assist me. Now I have ships, soldiers, and grain too. Hehehe, I'm back this time to eliminate those scoundrels who bullied my hometown folks."

As soon as she spoke, cheers erupted from the dock.

"Great!"

"Boss Xing has come to back us up."

"Those damn drifters have made us suffer badly. Boss Xing, stand up for us!"

"Boss Xing, I'm hungry."

Hearing these chaotic sounds, Xing Honglang didn't hesitate and waved her hand. "Start unloading the goods."

The tarpaulin on the cargo ship was pulled back, revealing it was entirely filled with flour—huge sacks of flour, stockpiling the whole craft. One salt smuggler carried down a sack, opened it on the bank, and everyone peered inside.

Even though they had suspected it was food, seeing it firsthand gave them a major fright.

"Is the sack full of grain?"

"Are all the sacks on the ship like that?"

“My god, how many jin must this vessel carry?”

“Dear heavens, this ship’s grain alone could feed folks from several towns.”

Iron Bird Flies watched, utterly bewildered. “Boss Xing, where on earth did you obtain so much grain?”

Xing Honglang chuckled. “This was granted by the heavens.”

Iron Bird Flies didn’t believe a word about heavenly gifts. He thought: Boss Xing wouldn’t reveal it. That wasn’t surprising—with such a prized supply channel, he wouldn’t either. Monopolizing the source alone maximized profits.

“Boss Xing, no more chitchat. For this grain... quote me a price.”

Iron Bird Flies’s question echoed what everyone on the dock was wondering. They weighed their somewhat thin purses and thought: Last time, Boss Xing transported it over at 400 wen per dou for us. This time, it probably shouldn’t rise, right?

They had just thought of that when they heard Xing Honglang loudly say, “This time, the goods are plentiful, two hundred wen per dou!”

“Wow!”

Everyone was overjoyed.

At that time, the grain price in Shanxi had soared to eight hundred wen per dou, and in many places, there was no market at all. They hadn’t expected Xing Honglang to come and directly push it down to two hundred wen. This wasn’t like doing business; it was like engaging in charity.

A large crowd surged around, shouting, “Give me two dou!” “I want five jin!” “Twenty jin!”

The crowd at the dock was in a frenzy.

Iron Bird Flies didn't rush to move. He was different from those engaging in small trades. If he took goods, it would be more than ten cartloads at a time. He chuckled and said, "Boss Xing, what you're doing... If I take goods from you, I'd be embarrassed to sell them at a higher price again."

Xing Honglang replied, "Nonsense, of course, you can't sell high. See the large cargo ship behind me? I don't just have this one ship; I have a second, a third, a fourth... I have as much grain as you could need."

She laughed and said, "I came back to Shanxi this time specifically to suppress the grain price. If any bastard dares to hoard grain and inflate prices, I'll break them until they go bankrupt and have to sell their underwear."

Iron Bird Flies inhaled sharply and said, "There's that much? So when the next ship arrives, it might be even lower, right?"

Xing Honglang smiled and said, "Exactly! My ultimate goal is to press the grain price down to its usual annual price."

Iron Bird Flies thought to himself: the usual annual price is only seven wen per jin.

This...

In an instant, Iron Bird Flies changed his mind. He decided not to sell grain. After all, he was originally a salt smuggler, and grain selling wasn't his field. He shouldn't chase such dishonest money. Better to avoid becoming a target of Xing Honglang's crackdown.

"I'd better sell salt," Iron Bird Flies said with a laugh. "Last time, Boss Xing said you wanted salt. I managed to deliver quite a lot for you."

He led Xing Honglang to the side of the grass hut, pulled open the door, and pointed inside.

Xing Honglang glanced at it. There were thirty or forty salt bags as big as a human head. For common citizens, that was a massive amount; a town's people would eat it for a year or two. But for Gaojia Village's alkali production, such a small quantity was practically nothing.

She pointed at the cargo ship behind her and said, "Look at this ship. If I carry just a few of your salt bags like this, might it not seem a bit improper? Is that all you can manage? Can't you bring more salt? Enough to fill this ship?"

Iron Bird Flies said, "Gasp? This big ship? Full of salt? How many years would it take for how many people to finish eating it?"

Xing Honglang replied, "Never mind how many years it takes. I need more salt. This isn't enough; I'll have to make a trip to Jie Pond myself."

Iron Bird Flies looked at the army behind Xing Honglang and lowered his voice, "Boss Xing, are you planning to fight your way back to Jie Pond? Hedong Road has the imperial court's regular army stationed there. If you try to battle through to grab salt, it would blow up into a big mess."

"I'm no fool; I'm certainly not going to fight it directly," Xing Honglang said.

Xing Honglang added, "The imperial garrisons are north of Jie Pond. I plan to go around to the south of Jie Pond and contact the salt craftsmen there to produce salt for me. I haven't sold salt for years, so I'm out of touch with the ways there. You come guide me and help me get the salt routes straightened out, and I'll make sure you profit."

Iron Bird Flies chuckled, "Hee hee hee, I'm very familiar with the south of Jie Pond. But... about this guiding thing... Boss Xing, name your price."

Chapter 415: Are You Serious?

Xing Honglang and Iron Bird Flies agreed on the guiding matter, but this wasn't something one could set off on immediately after discussing. It wasn't urgent yet. Just unloading all that grain from the cargo ships was a huge task.

Although foolish, Gao Chuwu was exceedingly familiar with Gaojia Village's way of doing things. Raising his voice, he shouted toward the group of Dock Workers on the ancient ferry dock: "Brothers! Come help unload the goods! Take this grain off the ships! Find a dry place to pile it up! We'll pay each of you three jin of flour as wages!"

That shout caused an astonishing commotion.

The Dock Workers surged and gathered all at once. Even some fishermen and farmers followed, instantly transforming into Dock Workers. Anyway, idle strength was wasted strength. Why not earn three jin of flour to take back?

They boarded the ships, lifted the bags, carried them off the ships, and stacked the flour bags where the Militia Soldiers directed. Their faces bore smiles.

Old Nan Feng climbed to higher ground. He looked all around at the terrain. He leaned close to Gao Chuwu and spoke softly: "From now on, we'll have men permanently stationed at this dock. It's our bridgehead—vital for strategic purposes—for shipping grain from Shaanxi here and salt back. We must manage it well. A few bamboo fences aren't enough. We must feed these workers here, give them strength, and have them help us build simple defenses. We also need wooden houses built for our several hundred troops."

Gao Chuwu grinned: "Good! Good!"

Seeing his agreement, Old Nan Feng immediately turned to give orders. Thus, some Militia Soldiers ran off to chat with the workers loading goods: "After you finish unloading today, take your pay home. Eat well and sleep soundly. Come back tomorrow. We need to build a wooden stockade here. You'll work for us. We'll provide full meals. On top of that, pay three jin of flour per day per man!"

Who wouldn't jump at such work? The Dock Workers were delighted: "Okay!"

Old Nan Feng paced along the dock's edge. From time to time, he drew a line on the ground: "Here... we'll build a watchtower. At least three zhang tall!"

He walked forward a few steps: "The stockade wall needs a gate here..."

“Put another watchtower opposite the gate.”

Soon, he sketched out a huge wooden stockade boundary along the dock. One side bordered the water, the other encircled by a wooden palisade. It looked quite convincing.

“Too few people at the ancient ferry dock,” Old Nan Feng returned to Gao Chuwu’s side, shaking his head. “All together—merchants, fishermen, farmers—only a few hundred. Fewer than our troops. Human power is critically insufficient to build this stockade.”

Gao Chuwu: “Our soldiers can build too!”

Old Nan Feng shook his head: “We’re not an army of tens of thousands. Cavalry and infantry combined are just a few hundred strong. If we all build the stockade and the Soldiers collapse exhausted, rogue bandits could strike suddenly. It’d be extremely dangerous!”

Gao Chuwu looked wide-eyed and innocent: “Then what do we do?”

Old Nan Feng pointed at Xing Honglang: “Have your wife figure it out! She’s the local power broker here—she can definitely scare up workers.”

Gao Chuwu beamed and ran toward Xing Honglang.

At this moment, Xing Honglang was deep in discussion with Iron Bird Flies about secretly reaching the south side of Jie Pond to contact the salt craftsmen. Suddenly, she saw Gao Chuwu racing over. He stopped about half a zhang away from her, stretched his arms forward: “Honglang!”

Xing Honglang spun around instantly, extending her arms too: “Gao Chuwu!”

Thump! They embraced each other.

Cold sweat instantly poured down Iron Bird Flies’ back: Terrifying! How could Boss Xing show such womanly affection? Terrifying! Far more terrifying than rogue bandits charging at them.

Xing Honglang: "Gao Chuwu, what brings you here? Something to say?"

Gao Chuwu nodded: "We need to build this dock into a stockade, but there's not enough manpower."

Xing Honglang nodded. She understood: "I see! I'll ride a circle through surrounding villages and hamlets. I'll scare up a crew."

The area around this ancient town dock was, in fact, Yongji!

Yongji, at this time, was still a town under Puzhou. It wouldn't become a county until the Qing Dynasty. Yet, it was already bustling and populous then.

The town center wasn't far from the ancient ferry dock. The straight-line distance was over thirty li—about the same as Gaojia Village to Chengcheng County, or Qiachuan Port to Heyang County.

This was also Xing Honglang's hometown.

Xing Honglang swung herself onto a fine horse. Zao Ying came alongside: "I'll bring fifty cavalry escorts with you."

"Good!"

Two robust women turned around together, smiling at Gao Chuwu and the others. "Guard the dock well. We're going out for a quick look around and will be right back."

Gao Chuwu waved his hand. "Stay safe!"

The two women, leading fifty cavalrymen, galloped off like the wind.

The moment they left, a large group of merchants led by Iron Bird Flies swiftly surrounded Gao Chuwu, eyeing him with peculiar expressions.

Gao Chuwu felt slightly flustered. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Iron Bird Flies asked, “Brother Big Fool, you... really married Boss Xing?”

Gao Chuwu grinned. “Oh, that! Could it be fake?”

Iron Bird Flies pressed, “If you were threatened, blink your eyes.”

Gao Chuwu immediately widened his eyes.

His eyes bulged like copper bells, radiating lightning-fast... brilliance!

The crowd exclaimed, “Wow, he didn’t blink! He really did marry her!”

Iron Bird Flies looked incredulous. “That’s just unbelievable, brother. What on earth did you see in Boss Xing?”

Gao Chuwu beamed. “Beauty! She’s the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Pfft!”

Everyone immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

Iron Bird Flies wiped cold sweat from his forehead. “Brother, are you... alright?”

Gao Chuwu retorted, “Do I look like there’s anything wrong with me?”

Iron Bird Flies questioned, "You didn't marry her under the threat of her fists because you couldn't beat her, did you?"

Gao Chuwu grinned wider. "She married me after I beat her. On our wedding day, she was still complaining about me forcibly marrying a woman!"

The crowd gasped, "!!!"

The group instantly huddled together and whispered, "This guy seems serious."

"Heavens above! What's wrong with his eyes? Forcibly marrying a woman, and ending up forcing Boss Xing!"

"If he can beat Boss Xing, his kung fu must be truly formidable."

"No, no, it's hard to say. Boss Xing probably deliberately let him win. Otherwise, where would she ever find a man willing to marry her?"

"Then he must be marrying into her family! Absolutely!"

Iron Bird Flies turned back to Gao Chuwu and asked, "Brother, did you marry into Boss Xing's family?"

Gao Chuwu laughed. "Marry in? No way! I'm the only son of a family with only one heir for three generations! I couldn't possibly marry into another family. Honglang and I discussed it long ago: our sons will bear my surname. My house and farmlands must be passed down to my sons."

The crowd grabbed their heads in disbelief. "This completely defies understanding! Impossible to comprehend."

Chapter 416: Pujiao Temple

Xing Honglang and Zao Ying spurred their horses east with fifty cavalry riders.

To recruit workers for the dock construction project, returning to her hometown was the best option. She had solid popular support there and could easily gather helpers to build the dock stronghold.

Her hometown wasn't far either, merely ten li east of the ancient ferry dock. Riding at full speed, they arrived in moments.

"Cross the Su River ahead," Xing Honglang pointed, "and there lies Sun Family Village." She smiled wryly. "Though my surname is Xing, I grew up in Sun Family Village. My own relatives are gone, only old neighbors remain."

Zao Ying was puzzled. "Why?"

"Because I'm the daughter of a salt smuggler," Xing Honglang explained. "My father roamed everywhere dealing smuggled salt. He met my mother in Sun Family Village but didn't stay for her. He kept traveling until I grew up. It was only after my mother died of illness that he took me in, teaching me to sell smuggled salt."

Zao Ying chuckled. "Ah, so even we're alike! Ha! My family legacy is banditry too."

Both women laughed together.

The roofs of Sun Family Village came into view. Xing Honglang's face instantly darkened. The village had clearly suffered an attack. Its fence walls were collapsed, several thatched huts burned, and blade marks scarred the remaining buildings.

She dug her heels into her horse's flanks, charging into the village at breakneck speed.

Several bodies lay sprawled inside, the blood not yet dry. The attackers couldn't have left long ago.

Sensing Xing Honglang's distress, Zao Ying lowered her voice. "Boss Xing... we share your grief."

“Don’t worry,” Xing Honglang said, her expression grim but voice steady. Years of hardship had hardened her; she’d seen much death, losing many salt smuggler comrades. A few neighbor deaths, however tragic, wouldn’t break her. “This is nothing unusual for me. I can handle it.”

Instead, her mind grew sharper. Speeding through the settlement, she assessed quickly. “Over a hundred people lived here, yet barely ten bodies. Most villagers must have escaped...”

Zao Ying immediately signaled her riders. “Spread out. Search for clues.”

Skilled trackers, the bandits swiftly found signs. One reported, “They fled north. The bandits chased them north too.”

Xing Honglang frowned slightly. “North? I know! Pujiao Temple! They headed for Pujiao Temple!”

Zao Ying called a rider forward. “Ride hard for the dock. Bring our main force directly to Pujiao Temple.” The man clasped his fist in acknowledgment and galloped off toward the dock.

Xing Honglang and Zao Ying led the remaining forty-nine cavalry riders toward Pujiao Temple...

Pujiao Temple stood not far west of Yongji, its red walls and black tiles solemn and imposing. Founded during the Tang Dynasty, it occupied high ground—open, expansive, facing south, commanding a wide view downward.

Truly an easily defended position.

Now, the temple overflowed with refugees, villagers from settlements within a ten-li radius.

The elderly and weak, women and children huddled trembling in corners. Able-bodied men grabbed weapons, guarding every section of the temple walls. The monks themselves were formidable; gripping their staves, they stood alongside the villagers defending the perimeter.

Outside, a bandit army over a thousand strong swarmed up the temple slope. Villagers shot down with hunting bows. Arrows thudded against the pot lids and shields the bandits raised defensively.

But clearly, the villagers' hunting bows were feeble against the bandits.

These bandit forces now included former border army soldiers, garrison troops, and couriers, making them far more formidable. Though still unable to threaten the Ming army, they overwhelmed ordinary villagers effortlessly.

The scattered, puny arrows barely slowed them. Easily scaling the slope, they reached the base of the temple walls.

Bamboo spears thrust down from above. Bandits parried fiercely with their own bamboo spears. The defenders gained no advantage; instead, several villagers were stabbed, tumbling back inside the temple.

One fierce bandit effortlessly vaulted the red wall. But before he could find his footing, a staff-wielding monk charged him. The bandit slashed with his blade. The monk spun his staff with startling skill—a flurry of impacts slammed into the bandit.

The bandit screamed and collapsed.

Villagers rushed forward. A swing of a hoe cracked the bandit's skull, spattering brain matter.

The monk shook his head. "Amitabha! Kindly manage this! Kindly manage this! This poor monk uses a staff instead of blades precisely to avoid killing," he lamented. "Yet you kill on my behalf without blinking. Surely this cannot count against my precepts?"

However skilled he was, one monk made little difference. The temple walls were crumbling everywhere, bandits breaching point after point.

All seemed lost...

The monk sighed deeply. "Amitabha! Kindly manage this! Kindly manage this! This tribulation... I fear we shall not overcome it."

Suddenly, a hunter on the temple roof shouted. "Riders! Riders are coming! They're on our side—they're attacking the bandits! Hold on! Help is coming!"

Others rushed to positions overlooking the plain...

True enough!

Charging into the bandits' rear was a cavalry unit—small, fifty riders strong—yet ferociously slashing through the horde of a thousand, their momentum awe-inspiring.

Inside the temple, morale soared. "Hold steady, everyone!"

Xing Honglang and Zao Ying had arrived!

Without a word, they plunged straight into the bandit masses.

But this was no blind charge.

The bandits attacking the temple had committed their toughest fighters to the base of its walls. Straggling behind was the bandit chief, guarded only by a core group of fierce warriors—a small, vulnerable group. The perfect target for a cavalry assault.

So Zao Ying wasted no time ordering, "Cavalry—charge!"

Her sudden attack caught the bandit chief utterly unprepared.

This chief, named Xiao Zhang Bao, was the adoptive son of Old Zhang Fei, captain of the fifth squad under Bu Zhan Ni. Since his retreat with his adoptive father under Xing Honglang's cannon fire at the ancient ferry dock, he had been pillaging nearby villages.

Xiao Zhang Bao had been gleefully watching his men assault the temple when horses erupted behind him.

He grabbed his spear, turning hastily with a few dozen men to face this new threat.

The horses closed the distance incredibly fast. In a flash, they were upon him. Zao Ying thrust her spear—a lethal strike ran one fierce bandit clean through. Whipping the spear back and swirling it expertly, she aimed her next thrust straight at Xiao Zhang Bao's forehead.

Stunned by the charging warhorse, panic seized him. He rolled desperately to the side, narrowly dodging the deadly point.

Chapter 417: Dare to Report Your Name?

Xing Honglang also rode forward with the cavalry unit, but she quickly discovered that during this kind of mounted combat, she seemed useless.

She only knew how to ride a horse; she didn't "know how to fight on horseback."

Ahead, Zao Ying knocked over a fierce bandit with a single spear thrust, but Xing Honglang drew her waist knife and found she didn't really understand how to slash people while galloping fast on the horse; she simply couldn't use any force.

Indeed, every trade had its experts!

Damn it, she might as well get off the horse.

Xing Honglang pushed off with her hands on the horse's back, leaping up into the air.

Jumping down from a galloping horse was dangerous, but she didn't fear it at all. She landed with a dull thud, rolled several times to dissipate the impact, and then sprang to her feet.

As soon as she got up, she noticed the bandit chief had been rolling too; he stood up at the same time, so they came face to face.

That was how Xiao Zhang Bao and Xing Honglang confronted each other!

"Goddamn it, a woman," Xiao Zhang Bao roared, thrusting his spear straight at Xing Honglang's forehead.

Xing Honglang avoided it by sidestepping past the spear point, darting forward to close in. At that close distance, the spear became ineffective, so Xiao Zhang Bao discarded it decisively and drew his waist knife.

They clashed knives against knives, clang clang clang, and in an instant, three to five moves had passed.

But in those few moves, Xiao Zhang Bao's subordinates had bad luck. Zao Ying and her mounted bandit subordinates swept through Xiao Zhang Bao's main formation like a gale, unleashing a barrage of hand crossbows, spears, and sabers. In a flash, there were hardly any men left standing in Xiao Zhang Bao's main formation.

Someone roared furiously, "Those in the front, come back quick... ah..."

A long spear pierced out from his chest.

When the bandits in the front saw that the rear formation was being ambushed by cavalry, chaos broke out instantly. A large group scrambled backward, while the hardcore fierce bandits at the very front, who had charged up to the monastery's red wall, remained focused on attacking. On the front line battling the villagers' bamboo spears and farm tools, they had no time to turn and see what was happening behind them; they were still devoted solely to the assault.

The bandit army abruptly split into two sections.

Half moving forward, half retreating backward.

It was only when the forward-moving half heard the collective shouts of those retreating in the back that they finally realized what had happened. Turning around to look, they saw Xing Honglang's waist knife slash across Xiao Zhang Bao's neck; blood sprayed out half a zhang far...

"Roar!"

After one loud shout, the bandits descended into pandemonium, and everyone began running backward messily.

Zao Ying urged, "Honglang, get on the horse! Those men are coming back, and you're vulnerable on foot."

After Xing Honglang had jumped off earlier, her war horse instinctively circled around and trotted back close to her. She scrambled onto its back and, alongside Zao Ying, galloped off into the distance.

A large mob of bandits rushed back clamoring noisily together. Someone crouched beside Xiao Zhang Bao's corpse and yelled, "Bad news! The young boss was killed!"

"Hurry, go inform the Boss!"

"Goddamn it, where did this cavalry come from?"

"Chase after them! Avenge the young boss!"

They shouted fiercely, but trying to chase war horses on two legs was pure wishful thinking. Zao Ying and Xing Honglang shot dozens of zhang away in an instant, out of bow or arrow range, not to mention on foot.

The cavalry unit rode several dozen zhang away and halted, no longer fleeing, and watched the bandits from afar.

The bandits could only bellow at the cavalry unit, "Where are you bastards from? Dare to report your names?"

Xing Honglang shouted loudly, "I never hide my name! I am Yongji Xing Honglang. Remember my name!"

"Yongji Xing Honglang?"

"I have heard of this name; they are the salt lord around here."

"Damn it, why is the salt lord attacking us? We are all against the court; we should rebel together and fight the court."

Xing Honglang said: "This is my territory; whoever burns and kills and robs here, I will kill him and his entire family."

A fierce bandit was holding Xiao Zhang Bao's corpse and roared back: "You damn woman, don't be so arrogant here—just a mere salt lord, who dares to swagger because you have dozens of horses? If you have the guts, don't rely on your fast horses to escape; I'll cut you to pieces, you little salt lord."

That guy had just finished roaring this, when he noticed a large group of cavalry had arrived from the west; it was the main force of the cavalry camp led by Zao Ying. They couldn't find where Pujiao Temple was, so they had asked Iron Bird Flies to be their guide.

Iron Bird Flies wore merchant clothes, riding his horse at the front, with two hundred and fifty cavalry soldiers following behind; it was a grand spectacle, making Iron Bird Flies at the forefront feel incredibly imposing, his demeanor extremely arrogant.

Arriving at the place, he ran up to Xing Honglang and laughed loudly: "Bringing so many cavalry was really imposing. Ah, I also want to get a cavalry unit. Where on earth did you get so many horses? Can you sell me some? Give me a quote."

Nobody paid attention to him!

As soon as those cavalry arrived, they ran behind Zao Ying and stopped boosting Iron Bird Flies' imposing aura.

The fierce bandit who had just said he would cut Xing Honglang to pieces now saw several hundred more cavalry here; his face darkened, he could no longer utter the arrogant words, and he quickly led the other bandit troops to withdraw northward.

Zao Ying sneered: "Act tough and then run? It's not that easy. Boss Xing, you go to Pujiao Temple and chat with your old villagers; I'll go play with these stupid bandits."

Xing Honglang cupped her hands: "Good!"

Zao Ying urged her horse forward with a kick and chased toward the direction the bandits retreated: "Cavalry camp, follow! Let's have a good time playing with these fleeing bandits."

Behind her, three hundred cavalry troops responded with a rumble and chased after together.

Xing Honglang then waved to Iron Bird Flies: "Come, let's go to Pujiao Temple."

Iron Bird Flies shrugged his shoulders: "I guided the cavalry and got no benefit at all; Boss Xing, at least give me a quote for the guiding job."

Xing Honglang said: "Why have the words 'Hedong' in your name 'Iron Bird Flies of Hedong' if not for use? Helping the villagers of Hedong shouldn't require payment."

Iron Bird Flies muttered: "You've at least got to give me one copper coin."

Xing Honglang didn't know whether to laugh or cry; she took out one copper coin and flicked it, the coin spinning and flipping in midair. Iron Bird Flies caught it in his hand and laughed loudly: "Good! The payment has indeed been received. Let's go, Pujiao Temple."

The two slowly reached the front of Pujiao Temple.

The people inside Pujiao Temple, from their high vantage point, had seen the whole scene and knew these two were their own people; they had opened the temple gate early.

A group from Sun Family Village rushed out of the gate: "It's Xing Honglang! It's Xing Honglang from our Sun Family Village!"

"Honglang, we haven't seen you for years."

"Where have you been all these years?"

"You came back at just the right time; without you, we would all have been finished."

Apart from the people from Sun Family Village, there were many from other villages inside the temple, standing a bit farther back and whispering: "Who is that woman? The people from Sun Family Village seem very familiar with her."

"She's the salt lord—haven't you heard? People who hang around here all know her."

"I don't hang around outside; I only know farming."

Chapter 418: A Benevolent Coercion

Xing Honglang exchanged a few brief words with the people from Sun Family Village before getting down to business. There was no time for some village reunion meeting. She cast a glance over the situation at Pujiao Temple and could roughly tell that the common folks gathered here came from villages all around ten to eight leagues away.

It seemed many nearby villages had been plundered by rogue bandits. The commoners, left with no choice, had huddled together for warmth inside Pujiao Temple.

If she could recruit this whole group to work at the ancient ferry dock, it would be quite beneficial. However, communicating with so many people would be troublesome. Inevitably, there would be those who distrusted her. She needed to find someone who could take charge.

Xing Honglang asked, "Who is in charge here at Pujiao Temple now?"

"Amitabha." A middle-aged monk holding a staff stepped before Xing Honglang. "This poor monk's monastic name is Zhan Sheng. Esteemed lady benefactor, you may speak with this poor monk."

"War Monk?" Xing Honglang hesitated. "That monastic name..."

The monk revealed some small embarrassment. "This poor monk had a fiery temper in his youth and was fond of fighting and conflict. Hence, the monastic name Zhan Sheng (War Monk) was adopted. Now that I am older, I wish to change it. But everyone is so used to it, I... could no longer change it."

Xing Honglang said, "Very well, Master Zhan Sheng. The villagers gathered in this temple, do they all heed your word now?"

Zhan Sheng sighed. "The villagers have met with grave misery. They are utterly lost right now and desperately need guidance. This poor monk has no choice but to brazenly issue commands... Kindly manage the situation! Kindly manage the situation!"

Xing Honglang asked, "How many people are in the temple now?"

Zhan Sheng answered, "Approximately eight to nine hundred people."

Xing Honglang pressed, "Can your temple sustain so many people?"

Zhan Sheng's expression turned awkward. "That... is naturally impossible."

Xing Honglang inquired, "Then, Venerable Master, what do you plan to do?"

Zhan Sheng admitted, "This poor monk has not yet thought about this matter. The villagers suddenly surged here from all directions. They had hardly arrived when the bandit troops immediately followed. This poor monk was only concerned with how to defend against the bandit army. I completely forgot about the problem of sustenance... Esteemed lady benefactor, your question truly..."

Sweat trickled down his large, bald head. Eight to nine hundred people! What would they eat?

This was terrible!

Could it turn into a gruesome scene of cannibalism right in my temple? That truly would require some 'kind management'!

Xing Honglang declared, "Master Zhan Sheng, please help me relay this message to the villagers. I have a way to sustain them. The ancient ferry dock urgently requires a large number of laborers to move grain and build a wooden stockade. Those willing to work will be provided ample food. Additionally, they will earn a daily wage of three jin of flour."

Upon hearing this, Zhan Sheng's eyes instantly lit up.

However, he quickly thought of something else. He clasped his hands together. "Amitabha! Kindly manage the situation! Kindly manage the situation! Esteemed lady benefactor, though your plan has merit, what about the elderly and weak, women and children whose households have no able-bodied men? They are incapable of heavy porter work or building the stockade."

"Those without able-bodied men will be responsible for cooking for the workers!" Xing Honglang stated firmly. "Cooking duties also come with ample daily food."

Zhan Sheng's brows rose slightly. "This matter is no laughing matter. These eight to nine hundred people are already frightened, hungry, and exhausted. If they walk ten leagues without getting any food, it would be extremely arduous for them. Furthermore, if you have such large quantities of grain stored at your location, rogue bandits will inevitably set their sights on you. Isn't that incredibly dangerous?"

Xing Honglang declared with authority, "I, Xing Honglang from Yongji, am a notorious salt smuggler within the rivers and lakes community. My word is my bond. What I say, I mean. At the dock, we have

vast stores of grain. Feeding these eight to nine hundred people poses no problem at all; I even have surplus grain to sell. As for safety concerns, I also have soldiers stationed at the dock capable of fending off rogue bandits.”

Zhan Sheng’s expression turned solemn. “Esteemed lady benefactor is a salt smuggler. Your subordinates are certainly not government officials, then?”

Xing Honglang retorted sharply, “Are officials more reliable than I am?”

Zhan Sheng countered, “These commoners sought refuge in this poor monk’s temple specifically because they wish to avoid joining the bandits. If they go with you, even though it would mean living among bandits, how is that acceptable?”

Xing Honglang reasoned, “Ordinary bandits do not provide sustenance; they force their followers to plunder for food. I provide sustenance. I do not require their hands to be stained with blood. They need only work. For such ‘bandits,’ they will assuredly be willing to follow.”

Zhan Sheng pressed further, “And what happens when government troops come to suppress you? What then for these common folk?”

Xing Honglang stated confidently, “The imperial court always pursues the chief culprit while sparing the coerced followers. Once the officials kill me, these common folk will be allowed to return to their hometowns and original residences. They will be unharmed.”

Zhan Sheng stared deeply into her eyes for several seconds. “This poor monk believes he has seen countless faces. Esteemed lady benefactor does not appear to be lying. Very well, then I shall trust you this once. This poor monk will relay your words immediately.”

He gathered the villagers together and conveyed the message.

With a monk helping to spread the word, the effect was remarkably potent. They might not trust Xing Honglang, but trusting a venerable master of Pujiao Temple came incredibly easily. Soon, the atmosphere within the entire temple improved drastically.

The common folk who had just suffered the destruction of their homes and the loss of their kin began to lift their spirits once more, prepared to set out for the ancient ferry dock.

Outside was the chaos of war and chaos. Leaving truly required a certain measure of courage.

Cautiously, the villagers peeped out from the temple gates, trying to see if any rogue bandits lurked outside.

Thankfully, there were none!

Zao Ying's cavalry unit returned from the north, laughing heartily. "I chased that group of bandits far away! Ha! I pursued them, raining arrows upon their backs, sending them fleeing in panic!"

The people breathed sighs of relief.

Zhan Sheng slung a small bundle onto his back, gripped his staff tightly, and called out loudly, "All right everyone, start walking! Walk even if you have no strength! We abandon the temple! Make haste to reach the ancient ferry dock before dark!"

The vast crowd began to move.

Once the majority had started walking, the few villagers who felt some reluctance at the idea of 'working for a salt smuggler' dared not stay behind at the temple any longer. They had no choice but to follow the moving crowd.

This, in fact, was also a form of coercion!

Zhan Sheng understood this approach wasn't ideal. But benevolent coercion was always preferable to malicious coercion. Better for these common folk to be swept along by a salt smuggler than be forcibly recruited by rogue bandits.

The commoners moved slowly. Zao Ying's cavalry dispersed, guarding the flanks of the procession as they advanced steadily forward.

Fortunately, they encountered no rogue bandits at all along this journey.

It took the elderly and weak, women and children a full one to two hours to cover the ten-league distance. By late afternoon, their stomachs were rumbling fiercely with hunger, but finally, they spotted the run-down thatched grass houses of the ancient ferry dock...

And...

An enormous ship!

A warship. A cargo ship.

(Another cargo ship, which hadn't transported grain but had only carried Zao Ying's cavalry, had become empty once the cavalry disembarked. It had already returned ahead of time to Qiachuan Port.)

As soon as Zhan Sheng laid eyes on that huge cannon boat, his heart darkened with shock: How can a mere salt smuggler possess such formidable strength? No! This is surely more than just a salt smuggler. There must be some other power behind this person, merely using the salt smuggler as a facade.

The common folk, however, saw something entirely different. What they saw were sacks of grain. Vast quantities of grain sacks, piled high upon the cargo ship. They saw a group of Dock Workers, busy unloading goods from the vessel. It was clear they had been at it for a long time, yet half the grain onboard remained unloaded...

After a fleeting moment of stunned bewilderment, the crowd of eight to nine hundred commoners burst out in exuberant cheers.

Chapter 419: Increasing the Tax

In the Third Year of Chongzhen (1630 AD), Beijing, Imperial Study.

Emperor Chongzhen Zhu Youjian was flipping through memorials.

A memorial from Shanxi caught his attention, “Since the beginning of the Tianqi era, the lands of Shanxi have faced disasters every year without exception, and last year was particularly severe...”

This memorial was the same one that Iron Bird Flies had shown to Xing Honglang not long ago. Iron Bird Flies had indeed just copied it instead of intercepting the original, so it still reached Zhu Youjian’s hands.

Zhu Youjian’s mood felt like it was plunging.

“I need money, always asking me for money. That last line, ‘To eliminate Shanxi’s bandits, first soothe Shanxi’s poor civilians’—it’s just a way to get me to cough up funds, isn’t it?”

High-ranking eunuch Cao Huachun whispered, “They’re all eyeing Your Majesty’s private funds.”

“Hmph!” Zhu Youjian retorted, “Where would I get so much private funds to give them? What about these officials’ duties? Aren’t they supposed to help me govern the regions properly? Now that the regions are in chaos, they won’t lift a finger but come asking for money? Forget it!”

He casually tossed the Shanxi memorial into a corner, wanting it out of sight and mind.

He picked up the next memorial and looked closely; this one was submitted by Minister of Revenue Bi Zi Yan. It said that due to “severe shortfalls in expenditures,” he had drafted twelve proposals and requested the emperor to increase customs taxes.

Zhu Youjian smiled, “Look, this is more sensible—asking me to increase the tax. But increasing taxes? That’s no easy task. All the common people under heaven are my beloved subjects. Right now, everyone is poor, so we must not raise taxes.”

These words happened to be overheard by Minister of War Liang Tingdong, who had just entered the Imperial Study. Liang Tingdong immediately said, “The reason for the people’s poverty is corrupt officials. Once the trend of their corruption is silenced, and we then levy an additional land tax, the people will naturally agree.”

Zhu Youjian asked, "Oh? So, dear minister Liang, since my ascension to the throne, do you think all corrupt officials have been swept clean?"

Liang Tingdong hurriedly replied, "After Your Majesty ascended the throne, we rooted out the Eunuch Party and completely eliminated all corrupt officials and rotten clerks. Now the officialdom is clear and upright, making it the perfect time to raise taxes."

Zhu Youjian's mood felt like it was soaring.

He wrote the imperial decree himself: "Due to the eastern crisis, we imposed additional land levies, with no day of respite, and I have long been troubled by this. Now the border troubles persist unchecked, military demands grow urgent, and the Ministry of Revenue repeatedly petitions. We therefore decree: beyond the existing additional nine mil per mu, add another three mil of silver, totaling one cent and two mil per mu. However, the six prefectures in northern Zhili: Baoding, Hejian, etc., which were previously exempt, shall now levy six mil per mu. All these funds serve as military supplies for Liaodong and will cease once peace is restored. Given that the court deliberations are united, I approve as an expedient measure. Should not all our citizens, sharing a common enemy, be inspired to dutiful generosity?"

And so, the tax increase was finalized!

Just after sending down this decree, Zhou Shi Pu, the Right Vice Minister of Revenue overseeing new levies, arrived. Despite multiple demands, the various regions' taxes had still not been transported to the Ministry.

Zhu Youjian picked up his brush and wrote, "The Ministry of Revenue orders all provincial governors and inspectors to investigate causes of defaults, naming specific individuals for impeachment and punishment; if any fail to impeach by the deadline, they will be severely punished together."

After writing, Zhu Youjian felt a small flicker of delight. His level of governance was indeed quite competent. Once this tax increase was implemented, one million taels of silver would flow in effortlessly, securing the Liaodong war effort, ha ha ha ha!

At lunchtime, Li Daoxuan was eating Rongchang braised goose. The goose wings were delightfully chewy, leaving his hands greasy.

The view from the box focused on a vacant patch of land east of Bai Shui County. Four dragon heads were directed into the box, spraying mist for rainfall.

During the last expansion of view to see the Yellow River, part of Bai Shui County had entered his sight, but he had been busy managing Qiachuan Port. Now that Qiachuan Port was settled, he began secretly supplying a bit of rain to Bai Shui County and sending people there to sell books, setting the full strategy in motion.

Right then, the characters “Gaojia Village” on the box suddenly lit up. This indicated someone in Gaojia Village was ringing the bell to summon him.

This was relatively uncommon.

The people of Gaojia Village usually feared disturbing the Deity and strived to be self-reliant, rarely calling for him. Li Daoxuan knew it must be important, so he quickly wiped the goose grease from his hands with a napkin and touched the words “Gaojia Village.”

The view instantly shifted to the sky above the watchtower.

Gao Yiye was striking the bell, while Magistrate Liang Shixian of Chengcheng County and Magistrate Feng Jun of Heyang County stood behind her, waiting anxiously.

Li Daoxuan had switched views in such haste that he forgot to retract the four dragon heads supplying rain. As the view returned, they began spraying rain over Gaojia Village.

The villagers of Gaojia Village laughed heartily, “Rain!” and scattered under eaves for cover.

Gao Yiye chuckled playfully, ran inside to fetch an oilpaper umbrella, and opened it. She knew the Deity wouldn't mind her sheltering.

But Liang Shixian and Feng Jun were there to seek an audience with the Deity. With the Deity present, they couldn't flee at once—that would be disrespectful. So they stood stiffly unmoving, letting the light rain soak them.

Liang Shixian stayed stoic, unconcerned about getting drenched.

Feng Jun maintained a respectful expression, but his eyes darted around, clearly scouting for some way to shield himself from the rain.

Li Daoxuan noticed this tiny detail: Liang Shixian was tough and headstrong, while Feng Jun handled situations more flexibly.

Casually retracting the dragon heads, the rain stopped: "What urgent matter brings you?"

Gao Yiye lowered her umbrella: "The Deity is asking your business."

Liang Shixian and Feng Jun exchanged glances, rushing with pride. Liang Shixian opened, cupping his fists: "We report to the Deity that the court has begun acting irrationally. In this great disaster year, they imposed additional military levies, adding three mil of silver tax per mu on top of the original amount."

Li Daoxuan nearly blurted out "Wow"—he restrained himself, recalling Gao Yiye was below and shouldn't hear too much coarse talk.

Liang Shixian added, "Just when we saw the bandits move to Shanxi and Shaanxi could finally catch its breath, the higher-ups caused such havoc. Now, things will likely... sigh..."

Feng Jun took over: "Although Chengcheng and Heyang Counties, with rain from the Deity, have essentially survived the disaster year, other counties will suffer terribly from this."

Li Daoxuan thought: Fine! More people will surely become remaining bandits. But this shouldn't affect the two magistrates directly—Chengcheng and Heyang haven't paid taxes in years, delaying defaults. Why worry them?

Just as he pondered, Liang Shixian stated: “Chengcheng County has defaulted on tax silver for three years now, and Heyang for two. The Ministry of Revenue orders all governors and inspectors to investigate reasons for delays, naming individuals for impeachment and punishment; if any fail to impeach by the deadline, they will be heavily penalized.”

At this, he looked awkward: “The Provincial Governor sent envoys demanding why Chengcheng and Heyang keep delaying. Without a valid excuse, we’ll be punished!”

Chapter 420: Heavens Secrets Must Not Be Revealed

Li Daoxuan understood that the two county magistrates had come this time to discuss the issue of “tax collection” with him.

Chengcheng County had not collected any taxes since Fang Yaocai died in Year Seven of Tianqi.

After Liang Shixian assumed office, he had been using the help of the Donglin Party and employing a delay tactic; Feng Jun also joined in the delay.

Both were being evasive with the court, but now the court had pursued them earnestly, using words like “if they exceed the deadline and fail to report, they will be severely punished together,” indicating a serious effort to recover the unpaid taxes.

Could they continue this deception?

The two county magistrates were panicking in their hearts.

Li Daoxuan thought to himself: This is indeed a problem! If the court played seriously, they were bound to arrest and deal with these two county magistrates, and he would definitely have to protect them; once things escalated, the court might send troops to attack his place.

Li Daoxuan was certainly not afraid of the court attacking; just a few slaps would finish off the Ming army.

But what benefit was there in killing all the Ming army?

None!

There was no benefit at all.

Consuming large numbers of Ming troops here would only make the entire realm more out of control; more common people would be harmed by bandits, and the Jurchens in the northeast might also invade the Central Plains, causing an even more terrible scene of devastation.

It was not yet the time to have a direct confrontation with the Ming court.

How, then, could they ensure that the two county magistrates were not dealt with?

To be honest, this was indeed not easy to handle.

He could never take money out to help pay the taxes because once the tax silver fell into the court's hands, it could not be used for the people; most of it was squandered by corrupt officials, and he did not want to give even one copper coin to these corrupt officials.

How, then, could this be resolved peacefully?

Li Daoxuan suddenly thought of something: "Who is the current Provincial Governor of Shaanxi?"

Liang Shixian said respectfully: "Liu Guangsheng."

Li Daoxuan typed the three characters "Liu Guangsheng" into the computer and searched...

Before long, he had thoroughly investigated this fellow's life story.

Of course, "judging a person based on history" was a major taboo; it was impossible to discern a person's character and morality from historical records alone, but some major events in history could serve as crucial references, for example... Liu Guangsheng was about to step down soon.

The reason for his resignation was also simple.

It was precisely because of this tax collection drive.

The court wanted him to hand over the unpaid taxes from Shaanxi; Liu Guangsheng could not possibly submit it—no one understood better than him how terrible the state of Shaanxi was; to ask him to pay taxes was worse than killing him, so he simply gave up the burden and fled.

Seeing this, Li Daoxuan could not help but chuckle; this late Ming history was truly...

He said into the box: “Don’t worry about the tax issue.”

The two county magistrates could not help but be stunned: “Don’t worry? This... this matter was already like hair on fire—extremely urgent.”

Li Daoxuan said: “Don’t worry, if anyone’s hair was on fire, it would not be yours; just relax and boldly delay; if the Provincial Governor asked why there were unpaid taxes, just play dead—tell him there was none, and that was that; if he demanded the tax, there was none, but he could take their lives if he wanted.”

The two county magistrates said: “Would this really work?”

Li Daoxuan said: “If he said it would work, then it would; this was a heavenly secret; heavenly secrets must not be revealed; they should just do as told.”

That nonsense like “heavenly secrets must not be revealed,” if a Taoist priest had spoken it to the two county magistrates, they might already have ordered the yamen runners to “seize this divine being.”

But when these words came from the mouth of the Deity, it felt entirely different.

The two exchanged glances and nodded, feeling much steadier inside: “Then we your humble officials will do just that.”

They did not hurry back to the yamen. Instead, they borrowed paper and pen in Gaojia Fortress and wrote a load of nonsense. It started with some objective reasons, like three years of drought and rampant bandits, basically excuses throughout. The whole thing contained no direct challenge, but it clearly showed five big words: “No taxes, take my life if you want.”

They sent a trusted aide to rush this letter to Xi’an for Provincial Governor Liu Guangsheng to review. Then, each went home, plumped their pillows, and slept soundly, waiting to see what this “heavenly secret” was all about.

Several days later, news arrived.

Provincial Governor of Shaanxi Liu Guangsheng submitted a memorial to the court, saying taxes could not be paid. It began with objective reasons, much like what the two county magistrates had written. The entire memorial hadn’t a word directly opposing the emperor, but it clearly showed five big words: “No taxes, take my life if you want.”

Zhu Youjian was furious. Before he could vent his anger, he saw Liu Guangsheng’s final line: “I’m resigning!”

This exalted provincial governor official directly declared his resignation on grounds of ill health.

The New Provincial Governor Wang Shunxing took office immediately. But being new, he too was powerless to turn things around, only continuing to submit memorials to request: “Waive all unpaid taxes for Chongzhen Year One, Year Two, and the full arrears for Year Three; substitute alternate sums for the portion allocated to capital transportation.”

Zhu Youjian was dumbfounded at the sight. Were all provincial governors pulling such stunts?

Forget it! Forget it!

He couldn’t just appoint yet another provincial governor, could he?

This emperor must endure it!

Thus, the tax arrears were postponed once again.

Only then did the two county magistrates realize how this so-called heavenly secret had unfolded. The Deity truly was a powerful immortal, knowing the past five hundred years, the future five hundred years, and every detail in between.

...

Ancient ferry dock.

The stockade wall had been built, circling the ancient ferry dock tightly around to encase it completely. Three tall arrow towers stood protecting the dock in a triangular formation.

This water fortification dock had been constructed quite large. When planning this stockade, Old Nan Feng had designed it on military camp scale to hold three thousand people. Now, it housed only Three Hundred Cavalry Troops, three hundred infantry soldiers, and over a thousand commoners, which was more than ample.

Not only was the space plentiful, but it was also divided into zones.

There was a cavalry camp zone, an infantry camp zone, a zone for commoners, and a zone for the grain storage warehouse. Gates stood between the four zones with guards stationed who barred anyone from casually crossing zones without getting Gao Chuwu's Token.

With his skills in setting up camp like this, Old Nan Feng had effortlessly outshone everyone in Gaojia Village; even Cheng Xu was certainly no match for him.

However...

A problem arose!

Gao Chuwu had no Token at all.

It was all rough and ready ways; where would a Token come from?

Therefore, Xing Honglang was holding a fine piece of wood, rapidly carving it with a knife to personally make a Token for her husband.

Old Nan Feng was strolling behind the newly erected stockade wall. He waved a porter over and pointed to a spot: 'Dig a hole here, a small tunnel through the entire wall to see outside. Then make a little cover plate to cap the hole.'

The porter was deeply puzzled: 'Boss, why do this?'

Old Nan Feng snorted: 'Call me General, not boss.'

The porter quickly changed his words: 'General, why dig a hole and then make a plate? Isn't that just wasted effort?'

Old Nan Feng said: 'This is a loophole for firearms, fool. We must dig loopholes all around this stockade wall. Keep them covered with plates normally; to fire, open the plate and extend the firearm out to shoot.'