

## Great Ming 421

### Chapter 421: What to Do When There's No Work Left

The porters promptly resumed chiseling holes into the stockade wall, happily busy.

With the stockade nearing completion, the common citizens who had come from Pujiao Temple were growing increasingly anxious.

What if there was no work left once the construction was done?

If the salt smuggler boss declared, "Alright, you can all leave now," how would they live after that?

A palpable sense of unease began drifting through the section housing the regular folk. A large crowd swarmed around Master Zhan Sheng, lowering their voices to express their worries.

Master Zhan Sheng nodded. "Understood. This humble monk will go ask Boss Xing."

He left the civilians' area and headed for the infantry camp.

As he passed through the gate separating the two sections, a guard unit blocked his path. "Your Token!"

Master Zhan Sheng replied, "The Tokens haven't been completed yet, have they?"

The soldiers looked slightly embarrassed. "That is true."

Master Zhan Sheng said, "This poor monk has something important to discuss with Boss Xing."

Knowing this monk spoke for the civilians, the soldiers passed on the message. Shortly after, a soldier returned. "Master Zhan Sheng, you may proceed."

Master Zhan Sheng nodded, thinking to himself: These people call themselves salt smugglers, yet their actions are remarkably disciplined, even surpassing officers and soldiers in military regulation. If they were merely salt smugglers, he'd dig out his eyes for dogs to eat.

Guided by the soldier, he arrived at the "conference hall" of the infantry camp. This so-called hall was merely a large wooden cabin hastily constructed with timber. Xing Honglang, the nominal leader of this force, discussed matters here with her subordinates.

In reality, the true commander was Gao Chuwu. Though he only ever nodded and said, "Okay, let's do that," nothing happened without his approval.

Approaching the hall entrance, Master Zhan Sheng saw Xing Honglang carving a piece of wood into a palm-sized plaque. She'd sculpted the characters "Chuwu" on it, turning it this way and that. Utterly delighted, she pressed it against her face...

Master Zhan Sheng coughed. "Ahem! Boss Xing."

"Ah!" Xing Honglang leaped up in fright. "Just now... that... I just liked this wood, so I couldn't help but rub it! I wasn't rubbing those characters!"

Master Zhan Sheng chanted, "Amitabha! Kindly manage the situation! This poor monk saw nothing."

Xing Honglang relaxed. "That's better. What brings you here?"

Master Zhan Sheng explained the civilians' worries, lowering his voice. "Everyone is very afraid there will be no more work and no more meals. As you know, outside there's a great drought, military chaos, bandits scattering everywhere – natural calamities and human troubles piled high. Life is incredibly hard for the commoners. They were used to hardship before, but here, working just a few days, getting fed and three jin of flour daily... this good life lasted mere days, and now it's ending. Their hearts are deeply unsettled."

Xing Honglang laughed. "Oh, that! Tell them not to worry. The work will never run out."

Master Zhan Sheng: “Hmm?”

Xing Honglang explained, “Now that the stockade is built, our foothold secured, of course we aim for a better life. The next step is to build all the things needed in their living area: blacksmiths, carpentry workshops, mills... basically turn it into a proper port town like any other. Set up everything essential, get everything functioning.”

Hearing this, Master Zhan Sheng thought privately: Are they transforming the ancient ferry dock into a handicraft town? Such ambition! This is even less like salt smuggler behavior. If you said you were a local official, it would feel much more believable.

Xing Honglang continued, “Go tell them they can build here like it’s their own home. Houses, workshops, businesses – build freely. Workers’ pay remains three jin of flour per day.”

“But they can’t just build randomly!” Master Zhan Sheng replied, finding it both amusing and concerning. “If two residents build houses connected, they’ll fight over ownership!”

Xing Honglang pondered carefully. It was a valid point. Town construction needed planning; leaving it to villagers meant houses crammed together, leaving no alley to squeeze through...

Trouble!

She knew nothing of planning and construction. Zao Ying surely didn’t either. Gao Chuwu? Forget it. Old Nan Feng? Probably no better. Everyone who came to Shanxi this time was a martial figure – no civil administrators!

Xing Honglang felt slightly awkward. “Master Zhan Sheng, initiating this, I might get overwhelmed. Looks like I need a scholar to help. You know any literate men who can plan and manage town development? Preferably one who’s served as an advisor?”

Master Zhan Sheng sighed inwardly. “What scholar would work for salt smugglers?”

Xing Honglang conceded, "True enough. Fine, I'll find someone. Don't worry about it for now. Tell the civilians to rest easy. More work is coming. If there's a brief pause, I'll still feed them. Oh, tell the merchants among the civilians to come see me."

The ancient ferry dock had always gathered merchants. Many small merchants operated here, mostly selling smuggled salt, along with all sorts of chaotic equipment.

Xing Honglang handed the carved Token to Master Zhan Sheng. "Give this to the merchants. With this, they can enter the main camp to discuss matters without needing permission."

Master Zhan Sheng took the plaque and examined it subtly. "This is Boss Xing's Token?"

Xing Honglang: "Yes? Why?"

Master Zhan Sheng: "If it's yours, shouldn't it bear the word 'wolf'? Why 'Chuwu'?"

Xing Honglang: "..."

After a few seconds, her face flushed crimson. Should she kill this monk to silence him? Then it hit her: I'm already married to Chuwu! What embarrassment? She calmed down. "I'm a traditional woman. Obedient to my husband after marriage. Hence, my husband is the true Boss. Engraving his name, what's the problem?"

Master Zhan Sheng thought, laughing silently: She persisted, didn't she? Haha!

He pressed his palms together. "Amitabha! Then this humble monk shall take his leave."

Once Master Zhan Sheng was gone, Xing Honglang beckoned the gate guards over. Pulling an identical Token from her pocket, she whispered, "See this deliberately nicked corner? Inside, look close, two crooked knife marks... Genuine Tokens I carve all carry this nick and these two marks."

The guards looked utterly confused. "Madam Xing... what's this all for?"

## Chapter 422: No Need to Worry About Food

Xing Honglang chuckled: “If someone carves the characters for ‘Gao Chuwu’ on a piece of wood themselves and tries to sneak into our camp, you guys... hehe, you get it?”

The guard soldiers suddenly realized: it was anti-counterfeiting! Truly worthy of Boss Xing, who had long traveled the martial world—her knowledge of its underhanded tricks was impressive.

Master Zhan Sheng had just gone back when the merchants arrived.

There were quite a few of them, over a dozen, all who had been trading at the docks for years.

Xing Honglang said: “Gentlemen, our stronghold is built now, and we have firmly established ourselves. Next, I plan to expand outwards. I called you here today for the matter of food.”

The dozen or so merchants had already guessed what they would be asked to do. They cupped their hands and said: “Boss Xing wants us to sell grain, right?”

“Yes!”

Xing Honglang said: “I’m not a proper merchant, so I can’t openly transport grain to Puzhou City. But you all can. I’ll give you this batch of goods at 200 wen per dou; set the selling price however you wish. Take this grain to Puzhou City or Hedong Road—sell it however you like... But make sure it gets into the hands of common citizens.”

The merchants murmured softly: “So it shouldn’t go into grain shops, right?”

“Correct! Don’t let this grain enter grain shops.” Xing Honglang chuckled again: “Once it enters a grain shop, who knows how many times the price would multiply before common citizens get their hands on it.”

The merchants naturally understood this principle. They cupped their hands: “Don’t worry, Boss Xing. Leave this matter to us.”

“But...” one merchant whispered: “If we ship a lot of grain to Puzhou City and Hedong Road, won’t the stockpile at the dock shrink? Here, you feed every citizen fully every day and pay them three jin of flour as wages. That consumes a huge amount—thousands of jin daily. If we ship more out, and the dock citizens see the stockpile decreasing, they’ll grow anxious.”

Xing Honglang chuckled: “No need to worry about that. I have my own solution.”

The merchants wasted no more words. Each bought a quantity of grain from Xing Honglang based on their business ability. Carrying it on their shoulders, hauling it in carts, or even hiring porters—they used every trick to head towards Puzhou City. Zao Ying led her cavalry out of the camp to guard these merchants, escorting them all the way into Puzhou City before returning.

This shipment removed a lot of grain, significantly reducing the dock stockpile.

The porters gathered at the dock began to worry again...

“Did you see that? Many merchants went into the granary this morning and hauled off large amounts of grain.”

“I not only saw it—I even helped load the goods. A merchant paid me twenty coins for porter work.”

“We consume thousands of jin daily, and now so much is being shipped out. Oh my, how long will the remaining grain last us?”

“The stronghold’s stockpile is still quite large, piled like a small mountain. But using thousands of jin a day, it probably won’t last a month.”

“What should we do? Even Boss Xing can’t handle this, right?”

The citizens murmured among themselves. Just as they were gripped by fear...

Someone shouted: “Look! The ships are back! Boss Xing’s ships are back!”

It turned out that the warship and two cargo ships had unloaded their goods, left the ancient ferry dock two days ago, and returned to Qiachuan Port. No one expected them to come back now.

This time, there was an extra cargo ship, making it a fleet of one warship and three cargo ships.

“The ships actually increased again?”

“Such huge cargo ships—having two was already amazing, but Boss Xing has three?”

“Wow, all three ships are covered in black tarps. Could the tarps hide nothing but grain?”

“It must be grain! Otherwise, Boss Xing wouldn’t have dared to ship out the previous grain.”

“Where on earth did they get the grain from?”

“Did they go to the wealthy Jiangnan region?”

“Who cares where they got it? Even if it’s from the underworld, if it fills me up, I’ll call her mother.”

The three large cargo ships slowly docked, bringing another massive load of grain.

The porters saw this sight and cheered excitedly, their earlier fear of shortages vanishing instantly.

Before long, the main camp sent someone over: “We need a group of porters to unload the grain from the three cargo ships. Same rule as before: three jin of flour per day as wages.”

“Me! Me! Me!”

The citizens surged forward again, happily starting to work.

But Xing Honglang approached the warship's captain and whispered about the dock needing construction work but lacking proper planning...

The captain nodded: "I'll bring this back as soon as possible. The village will handle it. By the way, Instructor He and Mr. Bai asked me to pass on a message: Gaojia Village is already eyeing Bai Shui County, Hancheng, and Dali County. The base in Huanglong Mountain is also expanding. Things are moving fast, and manpower is short—we can't add any more troops here. You might need to recruit some soldiers in Shanxi based on the situation."

Old Nan Feng, standing behind Xing Honglang, inwardly jolted: "Bai Shui County and Dali County are one thing, but Hancheng is tough..."

The place of Hancheng belonged under Xi'an Prefecture, Tonggong District, Tongguan Road.

The unit "Road" differed from county, district, or prefecture—the latter three were ordinary administrative divisions.

But in the Ming Dynasty, "Road" carried military significance!

Wherever it was set as a "Road," it held vital strategic importance.

For example, Hedong Road oversaw Jie Pond, the largest salt-producing site in the central plains, where the imperial court stationed heavy troops.

Another example was Tongguan Road, where Hancheng was located—it was the main axis cutting through the central heartland, linking Chang'an and Luoyang—a critical stronghold the court would never allow to be taken. If any rebels dared to target Hancheng, it would send fierce defenders.

Wang Zuogua had attacked Hancheng twice before but was beaten back aggressively both times; that fierce defender was Hong Chengchou.

The captain chuckled at Old Nan Feng: “Don’t worry, General. You’ve been out of the loop in the labor camps these years, so you don’t know all of Gaojia Village’s methods. Our way of dealing with Hancheng isn’t a direct attack—we’ll use various tactics... Well, even if we did go head-on, with the Deity stepping in, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Old Nan Feng cupped his hands and fell silent.

The captain said: “Compared to Hancheng, your move against Jie Pond in Hedong Road will be harder. Shanxi is too distant; the Deity is too busy now to personally assist here. You’ll be acting without the Deity’s protection, so tread carefully—that’s the Deity’s exact advice.”

Chapter 423: Keep a Close Watch

After conveying the Deity’s instructions, the captain had nothing left to say. He waited quietly as the porters moved the grain. Three whole cargo ships of grain would take a long time to transport, even with hundreds of porters working together.

He’d have to stay here another two or three days before returning.

Xing Honglang, Gao Chuwu, Zao Ying, and Old Nan Feng gathered together.

“Over in Gaojia Village, they’re preparing to set up base in Hancheng on Tongguan Road,” Xing Honglang declared. “We can’t fall too far behind—otherwise, those back home will laugh at us. Our fort is secure now. The merchants we sent ahead to Puzhou are on their way. The next step is to strike Jie Pond. The real priority is to get that salt back as fast as possible.”

Old Nan Feng wasted no words, simply clasping his fists. “This general volunteers to go.”

Zao Ying interjected, “This isn’t a battle—it’s about making contact with salt craftsmen near Jie Pond. General Nan Feng, you needn’t come. Stay and guard our ancient ferry dock—that’s best.”

Old Nan Feng nodded, not pressing the issue.

Xing Honglang elaborated, “Hedong City (modern-day Yuncheng, Shanxi) on the north shore of Jie Pond has many officials troops garrisoned there. So we’ll have to sneak to the south shore. We won’t need

many people for this. I'll take Iron Bird Flies with me. Instructor Zao, you bring a small cavalry unit to escort us. Let's see... bring fifty riders with us. The remaining cavalry will temporarily be commanded by General Nan Feng."

"Good!" Zao Ying turned to Old Nan Feng. "General, you can command cavalry, right?"

Old Nan Feng chuckled. "Of course I can! Any border army veteran knows cavalry—it's basic!"

That was true. A garrison commander from Jiangnan might lack cavalry skills, but those from the border army were all proficient.

Everyone silently thought: Having Old Nan Feng here really put their minds at ease.

"Then it's settled!"

The men, Gao Chuwu and Old Nan Feng, stayed to guard the fort.

The women, Xing Honglang and Zao Ying, were in charge of the mission.

Truly, women were holding up more than half the sky this time.

Early in the morning the next day, after breakfast, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, and Iron Bird Flies—along with fifty cavalry riders, Xing Honglang's forty-two salt smugglers, and Iron Bird Flies' eighteen salt smugglers—over a hundred people in total, all mounted warhorses. They rode out of the ancient ferry dock, galloping towards Jie Pond.

However...

Shortly after they left, in the woods north of the ancient ferry dock, two heads emerged. These were two elite border army scouts—also called Ye Bu Shou—seasoned border troops from Guyuan.

During the Guyuan military revolt, they hadn't followed Captain Wolf in attacking Chengcheng (where the Deity had crushed them). Instead, they'd joined the Bu Zhan Ni rebel forces.

They belonged to the “fifth squad” under Bu Zhan Ni, serving under Old Zhang Fei.

One scout whispered, “See that? Xing Honglang’s gone!”

The other scout nodded. “Judging by their direction, they’re heading for Jie Pond. It’s over a hundred li from here. Leaving this early on horseback, including time for rest and meals along the way—they won’t arrive till the middle of the night. This is definitely a smuggled salt run.”

“Heh. Once they’re gone, they won’t be back for two or three days!”

“If Xing Honglang isn’t here, then that little fort by the river should be easy pickings.”

“Exactly! They killed the Young Master—vengeance must be served. Let’s hurry back to inform Old Zhang Fei. With Xing Honglang gone, let’s crush that pathetic fort.”

“Hey, don’t forget the ship on the river. Those cannons... terrifying!”

“Don’t worry. We’ve been watching for days. Once it’s unloaded, it leaves. By the time we notify Old Zhang Fei and he marches troops here, the ship will already be gone. Then, no ship, no Xing Honglang—capturing that flimsy fort will be a breeze.”

Having planned this, the two swiftly slipped away north...

...

With Xing Honglang gone, Old Nan Feng was the only person left in the fort with any real wit.

Gao Chuwu was hopeless—the big oaf was still joyfully helping porters unload grain from the ship, striking up conversation with people from Sun Family Village: “Hey, are you folks from Honglang’s hometown? Can you tell me stories about Honglang when she was little?”

“What? She... she used to wet the bed? Wow, my Honglang had such an embarrassing moment?”

“No... you’re lying! Honglang is beautiful.”

Gao Chuwu and the Sun Family Village folks were having a lively, cheerful time.

Old Nan Feng gave him a sidelong glance, shook his head, and steeled his resolve: It’s all up to me now. Can’t mess this up. I’ve finally got this massive backer, the Deity. I’m not guarding the border anymore—back in this flowery central plains world. Barely started enjoying this good life. Don’t want to die here.

Old Nan Feng climbed the newly built watchtower, scanning the surroundings...

Suddenly, something flickered at the very edge of his vision—near the woods.

At this distance, the naked eye couldn’t make it out!

No problem. Gaojia Village had high-tech solutions!

He pulled a single-barreled telescope from his waist pouch and aimed it at the woods.

Now he could see: two sturdy fellows moving through the trees. Judging by their clothing and gear... they looked like border army scouts. Specifically Guyuan border troops. He vaguely recognized those faces...

Old Nan Feng’s mind raced: Actual Guyuan soldiers still operating out here? Must be aligned with rebels now. For Guyuan troops, that’d mean Shaanxi rebels—Bu Zhan Ni from Luochuan is the most likely chief.

He handed the telescope to two sentinels beside him. “Watch this direction. Use the telescope often. If I’m right, the bandit army will attack from here within two days.”

The two sentinels jumped. “Huh?”

Old Nan Feng snapped, “No time for fear! We’ve got a fort, cavalry, firearms, and naval guns. This battle is ours to win. The only question is whether it’s a major or minor victory. Haven’t you always wanted to play with this telescope? Enjoy it these next two days—have some fun.”

The two sentinels beamed with delight. “Understood!”

They took the telescope, marveling at it, looking east, then west, gasping “Wow!” now and then.

“Look, over there by the south bank! A big girl washing clothes. She’s pretty. Huge hips!”

Old Nan Feng’s face darkened as he snatched the telescope back. “Dammit! I told you to watch the north! What nonsense are you staring at?”

The sentinels sweated profusely. “General, we won’t do it again!”

“I’ve said it—the bandit army will be here within two days. No looking around aimlessly! Keep your eyes glued on the north!” He finished sternly, then suddenly his tone shifted. “But... their scouts just left. It’ll take them time to report and bring the main force. That means... a few hours of safety, at least. Heh... where was that big girl? Point her out for your General!”

The two sentinels: “.....”

Chapter 424: State a Price

After stealing several glances at the big girl washing clothes with a telescope, Old Nan Feng felt satisfied, very satisfied. He hummed a little tune as he walked down from the arrow tower, wearing a bright, cheerful expression.

He happened to run into Master Zhan Sheng leading a group of porters, still digging shooting holes on the fort wall.

Seeing Old Nan Feng so relaxed, Master Zhan Sheng smiled lightly and said, "General, you are in a good mood. It seems there is no trouble around, right?"

Old Nan Feng giggled and said, "We just discovered scouts from the bandit army; they will soon attack."

Master Zhan Sheng: "!!!"

The nearby porters chiseling the holes: "!!!"

The entire group looked at Old Nan Feng with strange eyes, thinking: The bandit army is about to attack, and you laugh so happily? With such a cheerful look? What exactly is wrong with you?

Old Nan Feng wore a smile full of amusement: "Ah, Zhongyuan is truly nice; there are pretty big girls washing clothes by the river too. Back in the north... ahem..."

He quickly stopped himself and dropped the smile: "You digging shooting holes, speed up! All remaining shooting holes must be finished in one day. Otherwise, when the bandit army attacks, our firearm soldiers will have no place to fire."

As soon as he said these words, the porters' actions accelerated threefold.

Damn it, how dare they not hurry? If they could not hold back the bandits, they would escape death only narrowly.

Master Zhan Sheng let out a long sigh, tightened his grip on his staff, and said, "Amitabha! Kindly manage the situation! Kindly manage the situation!"

Old Nan Feng gave him a sidelong glance: "Master, just from your build, I can tell you are a trained fighter; your skills are superb. I probably cannot defeat you, and Gao Chuwu may not be your match. Also, you carry a heavy aura of killing; in your youth, you frequently committed murder and arson, did you not?"

Master Zhan Sheng placed his palms together: "Past events are forgotten now by this poor monk."

Old Nan Feng chuckled: “To save these common folk, you will certainly need to act. How about it? Do you wish to swap that staff? I can get you a big blade; one glance tells me you are a skilled wielder of a knife.”

Master Zhan Sheng shook his head: “A knife bears too heavy a burden of bloodshed; this poor monk prefers his staff. Staff technique is the ‘divine art of subduing without killing’; I no longer wish to kill.”

Old Nan Feng snorted a laugh: “The ‘divine art of subduing without killing’—how easily can it be achieved? By my view, killing one to save two is immense virtue; what do you think, Master?”

Master Zhan Sheng shook his head: “Not killing even one and saving two, would that not be better?”

Old Nan Feng laughed loudly: “Master, you call that greed!”

Master Zhan Sheng said: “In such matters, a little greed is not bad.”

Old Nan Feng shook his head, turned, and walked away. In no time, he arrived at the warship. The warship’s captain sat at the prow, idly watching the porters shift goods on the cargo vessel.

Old Nan Feng beckoned to him with a wave, grinned, and said, “Brother, very bored?”

The captain grinned: “Yes, commanding such a powerful warship yet having no chance to act is rather vexing.”

Old Nan Feng said: “You will not be bored soon; the thieves are coming.”

This sentence made the captain rushing with pride: “Hey, then I...”

Old Nan Feng cut in: “I must ask you to hide first.”

The captain quickly grew anxious: "Why? Barely got a chance to act."

Old Nan Feng explained: "If your ship remains anchored here, the thieves will not make a move."

This sentence snapped the captain back to sense; yes, with this vessel's twelve cannons placed here, how would the bandits dare move?

Old Nan Feng chuckled lightly: "The fleet will unload as normal. After unloading, you will lead the fleet back to Qiachuan Port, yes? Sail north several miles until you no longer see the ancient ferry dock. Then find a place with calmer water flow to wait. Once you see dense smoke rising from the ancient ferry dock, bring the fleet back."

The captain instantly understood: "Hahaha, so that is it; thank you, General Nan Feng."

It was completely dark. Fortunately, a bright moon hung in the sky, casting silver light over Jie Pond, making the entire shore appear silver-gray. The naked eye could barely see.

Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, Iron Bird Flies and others dismounted a li away from Jie Pond. Zao Ying's people stayed behind, hiding with the horses in the woods.

Xing Honglang and Iron Bird Flies then led the salt smugglers and continued forward.

They all changed into black clothes, blending into the darkness, making them hard to detect with the naked eye.

Iron Bird Flies pointed to the huge city on the north shore of Jie Pond: "Look! Hedong City. The salt tax office of the court was inside. One thousand officials were always stationed there. However the bandits outside caused trouble, these one thousand officials never moved; they guarded Jie Pond tightly."

Xing Honglang nodded.

The two led their men around to the south shore of Jie Pond.

Jie Pond was over forty li long and four li wide. If they went around to the south shore, it was not easy for the authorities to spot them. The salt smugglers always contacted the salt craftsmen on the south shore to secretly bring in smuggled salt.

The two crept through the darkness. A village appeared ahead, surrounded everywhere by salt ponds, one after another, spreading over wide patches. Tall wooden walls encircled the salt ponds, almost enclosing the entire village and all nearby salt ponds.

There was a gate in the wooden wall with a small window. Peering through the small window showed two officials guarding behind the gate.

Xing Honglang whispered, "I haven't been in the salt trade for years. I didn't recognize these two soldiers."

Iron Bird Flies chuckled and said, "Relax, I recognized them."

He darted out from the woods and walked towards the two officials with a smile.

The officials sensed someone approaching in the darkness; they placed hands on their sword hilts and said, "Who is it? This is key territory for government salt; do not come closer."

"It's me, Iron Bird Flies!"

The two soldiers immediately smiled and said, "Oh, it's Boss Iron."

Iron Bird Flies chuckled, took out a silver ingot, and slid it through the small window in the gate. Quickly, the gate opened. The two officials whispered, "That's a lot this time. Boss Iron, are you aiming for something big?"

Iron Bird Flies said, "Yes, very big. It depends on if you are afraid or not."

The two soldiers laughed and said, "That depends on how big it is."

Iron Bird Flies said, "I want to take away all the salt in this village."

The two officials looked at each other, a bit confused: Take all away? Crazy?

However, this was just one of many salt villages around Jie Pond. Even if they took all the salt from the whole village, it had little effect on the court. Other villages would still make salt.

It was not that they dared not play, but just relying on the two soldiers, they certainly dared not.

"We must report this to the top."

One soldier said, "We need the salt tax office to approve before we dare help."

Iron Bird Flies said, "How much money is needed to get the salt tax office to agree? Name the price."

The soldier whispered, "At least... one hundred taels. No, two hundred taels."

"Fine! Two hundred taels it is." Iron Bird Flies took out a bag of large silver ingots he had prepared beforehand: "Go and inform them. I'll wait here."

The two soldiers nodded. One kept guarding the salt village entrance, and the other took the bag of large silver ingots and ran into the village. Soon, the Captain of the officials in the village also rose. After seeing the large silver ingots, he quickly rowed a small boat, crossed Jie Pond, and headed towards Hedong City on the opposite shore...

The salt administration offices of the Ming Dynasty were very corrupt. During Emperor Yingzong's time, an imperial decree had been issued: "Recently heard that officials in the salt transport offices of Lianghuai, Changlu, Liangzhe, and various salt tax offices refused to follow laws, pursued greed freely, allowed salt makers to privately boil salt and goods, extorted funds from merchant guests in countless ways. Among them, some patrol officers traded themselves, some pretended to be powerful figures to

make salt themselves, some forged merchant permits to sell along roads, and even gathered followers, assembled boats, arranged weapons to commit violent acts arbitrarily.”

It was not hard to see the prevalent problems in the Ming Dynasty salt system at that time: rampant corruption, years of defaults in salt tax duties, widespread smuggled salt, failed enforcement of the kaizhong system, leading to inadequate military supplies for border defense. The salt production and sales system was severely damaged, forcing the Ming court to send officials to impose control.

However, it was impossible to control; the root was rotten, so how could the surface be fixed?

Chapter 425: Want to Earn for Yourself?

The official from the salt tax office on Hedong Road had just fallen asleep.

Suddenly hearing a servant report that the soldier Captain from the salt village opposite was asking to see him, he immediately felt rushing with pride, his drowsiness gone.

Having held his position at the salt tax office for a long time, he naturally knew that salt smugglers often snuck to the south shore of Jie Pond to steal salt in the dead of night.

Usually, they'd slip some coins to the guards to open the gate, buy a few hundred catties of salt, and run off.

But when they wanted to play big, the guards wouldn't dare act on their own. They'd come see him. At that point, it wasn't about a few coins anymore—it meant a huge sum of money, a big deal.

So, being woken up in the middle of the night meant riches. Not being happy was difficult!

The salt official threw on a robe and went to the outer chamber. The guard Captain stepped forward, handing him a pouch.

The salt official felt the heft. Close to two hundred taels of silver.

Great joy surged in his heart!

“A big salt lord’s come?” The salt official chuckled, “How much does he want?”

The guard Captain replied in a low tone, “He wants all the salt from Fengjia Village.”

“Well!” The salt official laughed, “He’s playing big. This salt lord must be quite capable.”

The captain nodded, “He’s an old acquaintance of ours. You’ve seen him before, Boss Iron Bird Flies.”

“Iron Bird Flies?” The salt official murmured, “Can’t recall.”

The guard Captain said in a curious tone, “Just give me a price.”

The salt official paused, “Ah! Remember him now. That fellow. Didn’t recall his business being that grand. Can he swallow the whole village’s output now?”

The Captain replied, “Don’t know if he can swallow it, but he paid two hundred taels upfront.”

The salt official nodded, “Fine. For two hundred taels, I don’t care how he manages it. Fengjia Village’s salt is his. I’ll report to the higher-ups that Fengjia Village suffered a fire, the village is rebuilding, and has no salt to hand over. Done deal.”

The guard Captain said, “Good.”

He said ‘good,’ but didn’t leave. Instead, he looked at the salt official expectantly.

The official reached into the pouch, grabbed several pieces of silver—about fifty taels—and tossed them to the Captain. “Distribute this among the boys in Fengjia Village. Keep it quiet.”

The guard Captain was overjoyed. He hurriedly clutched the silver and backed out. Then he paddled a small boat back to Fengjia Village.

His journey involved eight li of travel over water on that return trip. It took quite some time. By the time he saw Iron Bird Flies again, it was well past midnight: “Boss Iron, it’s settled. The salt tax officer agreed. Fengjia Village’s salt is all yours to buy. But...you understand, those two hundred taels? That just secured your permission to buy salt. Taking it all away? That’ll cost an extra payment.”

Iron Bird Flies smiled, “Name your price.”

The guard Captain held up two fingers: “Twenty coins per catty.”

Iron Bird Flies agreed: “Deal! Round up the salt craftsmen too. Haul the salt out. I’ll pay transport fees to have them cart it to Puzhou.”

In normal years at Jie Pond, the salt production area, salt could fetch as low as four or five coins per catty. Outside salt-producing regions? Maybe seven or eight coins.

But with the drought now, and war? Different story. Even at the source? Twenty to thirty coins per catty. Places without salt production? Could hit seventy or eighty. Prices? Utterly insane.

But Iron Bird Flies didn’t care. After sealing the deal with the Captain, he went back into the forest and signaled to Xing Honglang. Xing Honglang’s forty-two followers, plus Iron Bird Flies’ eighteen men, filed out of the trees and stood guard near the village entrance.

Soon, guards organized the salt craftsmen. Cart after cart of smuggled salt emerged from Fengjia Village. They even negotiated the fee for hauling it all the way to the ancient ferry dock in Puzhou. The craftsmen happily started pushing their carts toward their destination.

Xing Honglang and Iron Bird Flies’ men flanked the transport team for protection.

Up to that point? It looked like a typical smuggled salt deal.

The soldiers thought little of it, waved cheerfully, and saw them off.

Only when the salt transport team vanished from the officials' sight...

Hoofbeats rumbled within the woods! Zao Ying burst forth with fifty cavalry! And dozens of riderless horses! Swarming out!

The sudden appearance terrified the salt haulers.

The cavalry, however, didn't harm them. They simply handed the extra horses to Xing Honglang and Iron Bird Flies' crews. Both groups mounted seamlessly – transforming instantly into something clearly not your average salt smugglers.

Gazing at those now-mounted smugglers, radiating fierceness? The salt craftsmen thought, "Boss Iron today? Something's different! He never had this swagger before. What gives?"

At that very moment? Xing Honglang finally addressed the craftsmen:

"Brother salt craftsmen. Today? The salt you sold me? How much of what I paid will actually find its way into your pockets?"

The craftsmen exchanged nervous glances. One murmured, "...Two coins per catty."

Xing Honglang laughed coldly, "I paid twenty coins. Per catty."

The craftsmen stood silently.

Xing Honglang chuckled darkly, "The officials screw you over too harshly. Interested in bypassing them? I pay you directly. Ten coins per catty."

Stupid question? Who wouldn't want their income quintupled?!

They chorused instantly: "Of course we want that."

Xing Honglang declared plainly, "Wanting it makes things simple. But first? Got the guts to flee Fengjia Village? Build a secret salt pond somewhere officials won't see? Sell all that illicit salt to me?"

The craftsmen froze at the suggestion: "T-This... How could we dare? Caught by the officials? Death sentence!"

Xing Honglang encouraged them firmly, "Don't fear! Jie Pond? It's huge! More than forty li long. Four li wide! Find some remote corner, a shore section hidden from officials' eyes. Dig your pond there. Tall reeds along the edge? Good cover. Impossible to see unless you're right beside it. Divert water into it. Evaporate salt freely. Every copper coin earned? Belongs to you. Way better than this life now, right?"

A craftsman voiced a concern, "Doing that? Makes us all black market refugees."

Xing Honglang countered briskly, "What's the world like out there? You unaware? Shanxi teems with rebel bandits! Perhaps five or six out of every ten peasants? They've all 'joined the rebels.' They're black market refugees too! Anybody terrified by that?"

The salt craftsmen heard this reasoning. It made sense.

One craftsman spoke up: "Building a hidden salt pond by Jie Pond? Hard to hide forever. But west of Jie Pond? There's Nitrifying Pond. Salt from there? Tastes slightly bitter. Not as good as Jie Pond's yield. So the officials? They never inspect it. Build a secret pond by Nitrifying Pond? Don't need to fear inspections."

He gritted his teeth and added, "If Boss Iron and... this... female Boss... promise to protect my lowly life... I'll dare it! Escape Fengjia Village. Live as a rebel refugee! Camp by Nitrifying Pond in a straw hut! Dig a pond. Make salt just for you. Only worry? That bitter taste. Might not meet your standards?"

Xing Honglang grinned widely. Gaojia Village needed salt primarily for alkali production! Who cared about bitterness? It wasn't for human consumption anyway. She chuckled, "Good! We'll build it at Nitrifying Pond then!"

Her decisive words kindled courage in the other craftsmen. Several more quickly volunteered: "We'll join too!"

Chapter 426: Too Extravagant

The salt craftsmen pushed the salt-laden carts slowly.

They had only traveled a few miles when dawn nearly broke.

Everyone was tired and decided to find a place to rest.

The salt craftsmen took the initiative to lead the way, guiding Xing Honglang and Iron Bird Flies slightly off-course in the northwest direction.

They arrived at an inland lake much smaller than Jie Pond, only about ten miles long and as narrow as two miles wide.

This was Nitrifying Pond.

Since ancient times, the salt produced here had never matched the quality of Jie Pond's, tasting slightly bitter.

Neither the government nor the common folk produced salt here.

Because the pond water contained too much salt and nitrates, no fish could survive, leaving no fishing villages along its shores.

The area surrounding Nitrifying Pond was utterly desolate.

Xing Honglang took one look at the place and loved it immediately!

Secluded from the main roads and devoid of inhabitants, it meant less vulnerability to attacks by officials or marauders.

Here, one could hide and grow discreetly.

Though a bit barren, this wasn't an issue.

Having lived in Gaojia Village for so long, she shared the mindset cultivated there.

Barren land wasn't terrifying.

One just needed to summon some laborers, pay fair wages, and before long wasteland could transform into bustling settlements.

This kind of creation out of nothing was precisely what the Deity most delighted in seeing.

The Deity loved seeing people build and build.

Every time something new sprang up, the Deity would beam with happiness.

Would a salt pond count as something new?

...

At the ancient ferry dock that morning!

The common folk sprang from their beds and rushed straight to unload the three large cargo ships...

They cherished this unloading work dearly!

Not only did the employers provide meals, but three jin of flour served as their wage.

More importantly, when they carried the grain from the ships into the dock's warehouse mound by mound, they felt deep comfort.

Years of drought and starvation had instilled constant dread—fear not just of their own hunger tomorrow, but even that the employers might run out of supplies.

But now, seeing the employers possessed such formidable strength, how could they not rejoice?

As the laborers toiled energetically, the elderly and weak, women and children were equally busy.

The day prior, they had drawn water from the Yellow River into wooden buckets.

By morning, the mud had settled.

They could now scoop the clear top layer to boil for the noodle paste.

Though flour was their sole ingredient, merely eating one's fill of such fare felt like immeasurable grace.

One deft woman kneaded dough, stretched it, twirled it, then looped it into a shape resembling coiled pastry before dropping it into the pot...

An elderly man beside her couldn't help laughing and teasing.

"What nonsense are you making? Why form it into twisted pastry? We're boiling plain water here, not oil!

"Twisted pastry needs frying."

The woman chuckled awkwardly.

“Haven’t had twisted pastry for years. I craved it, but without oil it can’t be cooked anyway.

“Just shaping it like this for a little fun.”

The old man nodded knowingly.

“Fair point! Let’s pretend this water is oil then.

“Consider boiled noodle paste our twisted pastry—it’ll taste just as fragrant.”

The woman sighed.

“Ah, I truly hope this drought ends soon.

“We could plant rapeseed, press canola oil...then fry us some proper pastry.”

Just as this thought lingered, a roar of cheers erupted from the laborers unloading the ships.

The elder asked in surprise.

“Huh? What happened over there?”

The woman set her dough aside to peer toward the ships.

Then, a burly man leaped down from one vessel clutching an immense jar.

His cry cracked with delighted disbelief.

“Everyone! Look! One ship holds jars—this one’s full of canola oil! Such a huge jar!”

“WOW!”

The others roared in astonishment.

Then, another porter jumped off the boat, carrying two loads of cured meat on his shoulder, with an expression of disbelief on his face. He shouted loudly, “Everyone, look what I’ve unloaded from the boat. It’s meat, cured meat, so fragrant!”

The people nearby made a commotion again.

Not only them, but other porters also gradually discovered that this time the cargo wasn’t just flour. There were only about two and a half boatloads of flour, and on half the boat, they had actually transported some sugar, vegetables, lard, canola oil, cured meat, beef jerky, chicken jerky...

When these things were being unloaded from the boat, the common people of Shanxi stared with eyes wide open.

Was it a mistake?

Several large boatloads of grain already showed an incomprehensible display of strength, but how could Boss Xing have transported these too? What terrifying power was this?

One porter excitedly rushed over to Master Zhan Sheng and laughed heartily, “Master, Master, look quickly, such a big piece of beef jerky, so big, so fragrant, take a sniff...”

“Bang!” Master Zhan Sheng knocked the man to the ground with his staff and scolded, “Poor monk I am a monk. What do you mean by bringing meat for poor monk to sniff?”

The man got up from the ground, looking embarrassed, “Ah, I forgot.”

Although Master Zhan Sheng didn't eat meat, he knew this much meat represented immense power. He glanced from afar at the cargo ship and looked at Old Nan Feng calmly commanding not far away. He thought to himself: If these people were really salt smugglers, poor monk I would offer my head for them to kick as a ball. That salt smuggler Xing Honglang was just a front they pushed out openly. That became increasingly clear, though he didn't know what exactly they were plotting.

Sigh! Whatever they were plotting, as long as they weren't harming people but saving them, it was a deed more virtuous than building a seven-story pagoda.

At that moment, Old Nan Feng carried a large jar of canola oil down from the boat and walked over to the woman who was shaping dough twists. He placed the oil jar into her hands and smiled, "I saw from a distance, you seem to know how to make dough twists?"

The woman nodded quickly, "Military Gentleman, little girl I was born in Yongning Village of Zhangying Township, and everyone in my whole village is skilled at making dough twists."

Old Nan Feng was overjoyed, "So what are we waiting for? This jar of oil is yours. Hurry up and fry those dough twists. Damn it, I've wanted to eat dough twists for many years."

The woman said, "Military Gentleman, have you also not eaten dough twists for many years? Ah, little girl I haven't had them for four years now."

Old Nan Feng laughed, "Only four years? That's nothing. I haven't had them for almost ten years."

The woman said nothing.

Old Nan Feng looked wistful, "It's been almost ten years since I left this bustling Central Plains... I even dreamt about it... cough... Why am I telling you this? Hurry up and get those dough twists made."

The woman quickly got to work, setting up another wok and pouring canola oil into it.

Half a wok of oil! So extravagant!

The woman felt a bit nervous. If the oil wok accidentally tipped over, even beheading herself wouldn't cover the loss. The people nearby clearly thought the same; they all stood far away, afraid their clumsy movements might knock over the wok.

Burn injuries were minor; wasting half a wok of oil was definitely a capital crime! A capital crime!

The oil boiled up.

With trembling hands, the woman stretched the dough, twisted it, formed it into dough twists, and dropped them into the wok, sizzle...

An aroma so delicious it could kill instantly spread everywhere. The sound of Old Nan Feng swallowing his saliva could be clearly heard several yards away.

Chapter 427: Is the Key Point the Spoon?

Before long, many people on the dock were eating fried dough twists.

They were crispy and crunchy, making a snapping sound with each bite.

If the Gluttonous Deity had seen this, it likely wouldn't have driven him crazy. Modern people were basically immune to fried dough twists, but for those enduring the severe drought years, taking a single bite felt supremely satisfying.

Old Nan Feng gnawed on a fried dough twist while gazing at the sky, tears streaming down his face: "Ah, my flower-filled Central Plains world, there are so many treasures here."

He was lost in mournful sentimentality!

All three cargo ships had unloaded their goods. The captain of the warship held a freshly fried dough twist, waved at Old Nan Feng, winked, and loudly ordered: "Set sail, we're heading home!"

The warships and cargo ships both departed the shore and headed upstream.

Old Nan Feng was rushing with pride, stuffed the fried dough twist in his hand into his mouth, crunched it while chewing, and swiftly climbed the highest watchtower.

On the watchtower, two sentinels were peering through binoculars at the distant woods. Old Nan Feng whispered: "Did you see them?"

"Yes," the sentinel whispered back: "Just as our ships left the shore, a person burst out of the woods and raced northwards at full speed."

Like a domineering tycoon, Old Nan Feng gave a sinister smirk: "Good, excellent!"

He hurriedly climbed down the watchtower, grabbed a Militia Soldier at random, and said with a laugh: "Prepare for battle. Have all the firearm soldiers ready, guarding each firing hole."

The wooden stockade wall was single-layered, with no space to stand on the top, so the defense method differed from that of a fortified wall. They couldn't prepare rolling logs and stones atop it, and their own spear soldiers couldn't possibly scale the wall to defend.

However, firing holes could be dug into this single-layered wall for the firearm soldiers, allowing them to take cover and shoot effectively.

Large groups of soldiers took their positions and were soon battle-ready.

Old Nan Feng led the over two hundred cavalry left by Zao Ying to a side gate of the stockade and said with a smile: "Wait here, don't move without this general's order."

The cavalry replied: "Yes, sir!"

As the soldiers began moving, a tense atmosphere spread across the stockade. The civilians noticed the abnormality right away and started whispering among themselves: "Did you see? They're preparing for battle."

"Is it time to fight?"

“Surely the roving bandits are coming?”

“Oh dear, what should we do? Our cannon ship just left, and the roving bandits arrived now? Did they deliberately wait for our cannon ship to go?”

“Without the cannon ship, the salt smugglers have only a few hundred soldiers. Can they fight thousands of roving bandits?”

The civilians were extremely nervous; large crowds surged toward Master Zhan Sheng, awaiting his decision.

Master Zhan Sheng let out a long sigh: “Everyone, grab your tools—sticks, hoes, rakes, pot lids, spoons—whatever you have. We’ve all eaten well these past few days and gained strength. The riffraff soldiers on the roving bandits’ side aren’t much tougher than any of you, so don’t be afraid.”

“Master, we have all the other weapons, but we really don’t have spoons.”

Two veins bulged on Master Zhan Sheng’s bald head: “Is the key point of this poor monk’s speech the spoon? Can’t you grasp the key point?”

...

Old Zhang Fei’s main force arrived!

As usual, thousands came in one wave.

That scoundrel attacked the ancient ferry dock last time; the warships bombarded him furiously, and the rifled gun troops on the ships shot dead several fierce bandit leaders, causing him heavy losses. The Pujiao Temple battle also saw him lose his adoptive son, Xiao Zhang Bao.

But...

The number of people in his gang this time was actually even larger.

This was a typical feature of the Peasant Wars of the Late Ming Dynasty. In the early to middle stages of the war, the bandit army lost almost every battle, yet managed to grow larger with each defeat. No matter how brutally the officials beat them up, their numbers only increased.

Last month they took a beating, but the next month they had an extra thousand men!

Could you believe it?

Old Nan Feng chewed on a blade of grass, watching the approaching bandit army with a look of disdain, too lazy to even comment.

Gao Chuwu shook his head, speaking with the typical Gaojia Village mindset: "These scoundrels have forcibly recruited many peasants from the surrounding villages again."

"Probably not many villagers are left alive outside Puzhou City," Old Nan Feng said. "The surrounding area has been plundered round after round by them. Those still alive have either hidden in Puzhou City, taken refuge in Pujiao Temple, or come to us."

At this point, Old Nan Feng grinned. "General Gao, do you know what this means?"

Gao Chuwu chuckled. "Huh? Testing me? Don't think I'm dumb now. If I think hard, I can get the right answer too."

He started racking his brain!

Pow!

A lightbulb went off in his head. He had it! Gao Chuwu laughed. "This means when we drive the sun chariot fast outside Puzhou, we won't run over any pedestrians! We can speed as much as we want!"

Old Nan Feng: "..."

The soldiers nearby: "..."

Silence. An eerie silence.

It took a while before Old Nan Feng, clutching his chest, managed to say: "It means if Old Zhang Fei's gang doesn't attack Puzhou City, they'll have nothing left to plunder here. They'll have to leave the area and go cause trouble somewhere else."

Gao Chuwu: "Ah? That can't happen! We can't let them go ruin other people's lives!"

Old Nan Feng gave a dark chuckle. "Then we have to kill Old Zhang Fei right here."

Gao Chuwu clenched his fist. "Alright! Kill him."

—

"Kill them all!" Outside the stockade, as Old Zhang Fei's army drew closer, the bandit chief himself was shouting orders. "Those salt smugglers in that stockade killed my son Xiao Zhang Bao! I want those salt smugglers to suffer a fate worse than death."

"Their big cannon ship has already sailed away! Xing Honglang herself isn't here either. The salt smugglers left to guard the stockade are a bunch of useless rabble without their leader."

Old Zhang Fei roared. "Listen up, men! Fight hard! Take down this stockade, and those three ships full of grain will be ours!"

"Howwww! Grain!"

Fighting to avenge Xiao Zhang Bao held little interest for the bandits, but the prospect of seizing grain instantly invigorated them.

What did three huge cargo ships packed with grain mean?

Fortune! Freedom from hunger!

The eyes of many bandits instantly turned red with greed.

Seeing the soaring morale, Old Zhang Fei couldn't help but smirk inwardly. Excellent. With this fighting spirit, the battle is as good as won. Though the enemy lacks the big cannon ship, they likely still have a lot of those firearms. Those things make a thundering sound when fired, really battering morale. But by stirring up the men's greed with the promise of grain, I've pushed them into a frantic, loot-crazy frenzy. This means the firearms will do much less damage to their spirit.

So long as all my men fight without fear of death, breaking into a measly wooden stockade shouldn't be too difficult.

"Bring out the heavy wooden planks we prepared earlier!"

At Old Zhang Fei's command, the bandit troops produced many thick, heavy planks. These things were at least an inch and a half thick and incredibly heavy; it was tough going even for one bandit to lug a single plank. Yet, they were incredibly effective at stopping firearm bullets.

Chapter 430 Opening Fire

Old Zhang Fei wasn't just a bandit; he was a seasoned veteran of rebellion, having fought on the frontlines for years. After rising up with Bu Zhan Ni in the first year of Chongzhen, he had accumulated a wealth of battlefield experience. By now, he knew exactly what worked—and what didn't.

For instance, the Three-Eyed Arquebus and matchlocks the rebels used were only good for one thing: making a lot of noise. Their accuracy was laughable, and the lead shot was weak. From thirty zhang away, those guns couldn't even pierce a board an inch thick.

But close up? That was a different story.

At ten zhang, even a thick wooden shield stood a good chance of getting pierced. So, Old Zhang Fei had the bandits craft shields nearly one-and-a-half inches thick. These were the kind of shields that could withstand anything the enemy threw at them.

These shields were heavy—so heavy that one man couldn't carry them alone. They were built to be braced against the ground, and the bandits would slowly push them forward, inch by inch, until they could get close enough to engage.

Once the rebels closed the gap, they'd toss the shields aside and charge. The stockade was weak—just a single layer of wood—and there was no one stationed at the top to defend. It was only a matter of time before they breached the wall.

Old Zhang Fei grinned at the thought of victory.

"No more pointless chatter with the villagers," he bellowed, waving his hand. "Let's take this stockade before Xing Honglang comes back! Move out!"

The bandits adjusted their formation, and with grim determination, they began their advance. The front lines raised their thick shields, slowly moving forward as the rest of the army followed. The sight of their advance was enough to send the villagers into a panic.

Inside the stockade, the mood was tense. The elderly, women, and children huddled together, their faces pale with fear. The able-bodied men gripped their farming tools tightly, sweat pouring down their brows.

But then, from above, Lao Nanfeng's voice boomed, cutting through the panic like a knife.

"Quit clinging to the walls, you faint-hearted lot! Get into the wooden houses! If you don't look, you won't be scared."

"But if we don't look, we'll be more scared!" came a frantic reply from below.

Lao Nanfeng's booming laughter echoed across the stockade as he watched the bandits approach. Meanwhile, the archers, stationed in the three watchtowers, had already taken their places. Though the towers were cramped, each tower housed about ten archers who readied their Kaiyuan bows and began to calculate the distance.

One archer raised his bow and shot, sending an arrow hurtling toward the advancing rebels. The arrows arced high, soaring over the thick wooden shields. They struck the bandits behind the shields, dropping a few of them, but the front lines were largely unaffected.

The bandits, well-prepared, raised their makeshift shields—leather, wooden planks, even pot lids. The arrows harmlessly clattered against these defenses.

A few impatient rebels retaliated, firing their own arrows upward, but their aim was poor. The bandits' bows were nothing compared to the Kaiyuan bows, and their arrows fell weakly to the ground with a dull thud, unable to reach the watchtowers.

Seeing this, Lao Nanfeng chuckled from his perch, watching the spectacle unfold. "Hold your fire, firearm soldiers!" he shouted. "At this range, your bullets won't get through those shields. Don't waste your shots!"

The firearm soldiers grumbled but reluctantly lowered their weapons. The bandits, feeling more confident with each step, advanced steadily.

Old Zhang Fei could barely contain his laughter as he watched the smugness grow on his men's faces. "Hahaha! Xing Honglang isn't here! The salt smugglers are no match for us! We've closed the distance, and they haven't fired a shot. The food in this stockade is ours!"

At that moment, Lao Nanfeng turned to his archers. "Alright, go down now. It's time for a change of tactics."

The archers, already anticipating this order, swiftly descended from the towers. Gao Chuwu, ever the strategist, led a squad of twenty grenadiers up to take their place.

"This distance is perfect for grenades," Gao Chuwu grinned, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

Lao Nanfeng smiled, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Excellent! Beacon tower, light the fire."

In the center of the stockade, a massive bonfire was lit. The thick black smoke rose high, a signal for the warships stationed to the north. The captains, waiting for this moment, sprang into action.

"Warships, depart! Back to Gudu Ferry!" they ordered with enthusiasm.

Lao Nanfeng let out a satisfied laugh, watching the smoke signal from the stockade. "General Gao, I'm ready to charge with the cavalry. The rest is yours."

Gao Chuwu grinned. "Leave it to me, Lao Nanfeng."

"Good!" Lao Nanfeng turned to his cavalry. Over two hundred soldiers were ready, mounted and waiting at the side gate of the stockade. He mounted his warhorse, gripping his spear firmly. "Stay calm. Let General Gao have his fun first."

As the bandit army pressed closer, the tension in the air thickened. Old Zhang Fei's confidence was palpable, but he had no idea what was about to hit him.

Gao Chuwu, the master of grenades, didn't wait for further orders. He lit the fuses and hurled the first grenade with terrifying precision. Behind him, the twenty grenadiers on the watchtowers did the same.

"Ugh, this tower's too cramped! Can't get a good run-up," one grenadier grumbled.

"Well, just throw it anyway!" another yelled. "We don't have time to mess around!"

The first grenade hit the ground with a soft thud, and then—BOOM! A blinding explosion rocked the battlefield, sending shrapnel flying. Bandits scattered in all directions, but it was too late. The blast had already done its work.

The bandit line faltered, the shields and men thrown into disarray. Some didn't even have time to scream before they were taken out by the deadly shrapnel.

Inside the stockade, the firearm soldiers didn't need any more prompting. They quickly opened their firing slits, aimed their matchlocks, and opened fire.

The first volley of bullets tore through the disorganized bandit ranks, adding to the chaos.

The tide of battle had turned.