

Great Ming 431

Chapter 431 He Ping, The Man-Eating Salt Owl

The wooden planks dropped with a bang, revealing the militia's flintlock soldiers—and oh boy, did they look ready. A hundred muskets poked out through the gaps, like a row of overzealous pigeons expecting breadcrumbs. They were ready to make the bandits feel the love—the lead kind.

"Bang, bang, bang, bang!"

A cloud of white smoke billowed, thick enough to make a chimney jealous. The sound of muskets firing was like a chorus of angry grandfathers shaking their canes. The bandits had no idea what was coming, and now, a few of them were regretting every decision they'd ever made.

The Gao Family Village's muskets weren't exactly top-of-the-line. They were smoothbore, which meant they were about as accurate as a drunk man trying to throw darts blindfolded. But who needed accuracy when you had the element of surprise and sheer volume on your side?

The front ranks of the bandit army crumpled like expired bread, their faces meeting the ground in ways that would make gravity proud. The militia—behind their sturdy stockade walls, like squirrels in a bunker—reloaded with the kind of precision you'd expect from a group of people who had really gotten used to this routine. Thirty seconds, no sweat. They didn't even flinch. Maybe it was the safety of the fortifications or the sheer willpower of not wanting to deal with angry bandits on their lunch break. Either way, they were cool as cucumbers.

The bandits, on the other hand, were having a moment. The idea of grain—Old Zhang Fei's rallying cry—had them charging forward like they were contestants in some twisted food competition. Maybe the promise of grain was the only thing keeping them sane. Who needed a battle plan when you had carbs?

A few bandits tossed their wooden planks aside like they were clearing out their closets. These boards had been their shield, but now, they were about as useful as a broken umbrella in a thunderstorm. They could move faster without them.

One particularly eager bandit slammed into the stockade gate, hoping to knock it down with sheer willpower.

It didn't work.

The gate, made of solid tree trunks bound together like a woodworker's fever dream, barely even shook. The bandit looked at it, then back at his teammates, his face doing the mental math. It was a no-go.

Before he could process this cosmic disappointment, a spear shot through a gap in the gate like it was auditioning for World's Deadliest Throw. The bandit let out a surprised yelp as the spear skewered him in a one-way ticket to the afterlife.

"The gate's tough! There are holes! Spears poke through!" one bandit yelled, clutching his chest as if this was the first time he'd ever considered structural integrity. "Climb the walls!"

At this, a few lighter, sprier bandits scrambled up the stockade wall. They moved fast, with the same intensity you might see at a gym class dodgeball game. A few of them had already almost reached the top when—

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The muskets fired again, so close it was like getting hit with a high-speed dartboard. At this range, the bandits didn't have a chance. They were knocked off the wall like unruly children being shooed out of a candy store.

The remaining bandits at the wall looked up at the smoke and chaos, silently considering their life choices. They didn't have answers to that.

As the last volley of musket fire died down, the soldiers quickly shifted tactics. The flintlock soldiers pulled back from their firing positions, looking like they were taking a coffee break in the middle of the battlefield. No panic. Just cold, calculating efficiency. They weren't even sweating.

The spear soldiers were on the move now, slowly advancing like a well-coordinated ballet troupe. They raised their hand crossbows as they moved, aiming for the top of the wall where the bandits had dared to climb.

A bandit, now more daring than the rest, popped his head over the top, thinking he'd get a quick look-see. A bolt flew past him so close that his hair probably moved a little from the breeze.

"Pfft. Close, but not close enough!" he thought, laughing in that smug, "I'm the hero of this story" kind of way.

That is, until he popped his head back up and immediately got hit right between the eyes.

"Thud."

He dropped like a rock. The crossbow had, quite literally, had the last word.

"Nice shot, Jinx!" one soldier yelled to the crossbowman, who merely nodded as though he had just been on autopilot.

But then the bandits came over the wall again. More of them. This time, they were more cautious, crafty. One bandit, clearly trying to be clever, peered over just enough to see what was going on, then ducked down before the next crossbow bolt could meet his face.

He peeked out again. Nothing. So far, so good.

He stood up, stretched, and then—WHAM!

Three spears shot up like a perfectly coordinated K-pop dance routine and hit him dead in the chest.

He didn't even have time to blink.

The cavalry on the flank looked at the whole thing, wide-eyed.

"General," one of the cavalrymen asked, "Should we... step in?"

Lao Nanfeng, the picture of stoic wisdom, just shook his head and gestured for them to stay put. "Hold position. Don't move yet. This is... almost interesting."

Meanwhile, back near the commoners' section of the stockade, things were getting... chaotic. No grenadiers this time. The bandits who managed to scramble over were immediately met with a dozen farmers wielding hoes, pitchforks, and that one guy with a rake. They were as surprised as anyone to find themselves fighting, but it was far too late for second thoughts. The farmers, who probably hadn't seen combat since that one scuffle over the last piece of bread, were very eager to make up for lost time.

Zhan Seng, who was doing his best to stay out of the mess, had just pulled out his staff when a bandit dashed by. He swung, accidentally knocking the bandit into a pile of hay, knocking out a tooth in the process.

"Amitabha," Zhan Seng muttered, brushing off his robe. "I swore to never—"

But before he could finish, the villagers had already descended upon the two bandits that had climbed over, smashing their faces in with the kind of enthusiasm you'd see at a Black Friday sale.

"Amitabha!" Zhan Seng cried, "I swear this is NOT my fault!"

"Master, you're doing great! Keep it up!" a farmer shouted, slamming his rake into the back of a bandit's head with all the precision of someone hitting a piñata.

Zhan Seng sighed in defeat. "I was a monk. Once."

But things were only getting more... complicated.

Out of nowhere, a bandit threw a throwing knife at Zhan Seng. It was about as effective as an overzealous toddler trying to play dodgeball. Zhan Seng dodged, but just barely. The knife nicked his cheek, leaving a thin red line.

"Oh no, I'm bleeding!" two monks from Puji Temple shouted. "This is bad! This is BAD! Master, the blood! Get back! Everyone, get back!"

The crowd—confused—didn't move.

Zhan Seng stood there, his expression shifting faster than the weather during a storm. His eyes narrowed, turning bloodshot, his aura suddenly turning from Zen Monk to Ancient Demon. His voice dropped to a low growl.

"Who?! WHO DARES TO DRAW MY BLOOD?! Have you never heard of He Ping, the Man-Eating Salt Owl?! When I was slaughtering men like flies, you weren't even born yet! Now, you will learn!"

Zhan Seng swung his staff, each blow landing with the kind of force that made people wonder if they'd just witnessed an act of divine retribution. One bandit's skull exploded like a watermelon under a hammer, and another's throat was impaled with a sickening thud.

By the time Zhan Seng was done, the remaining bandits had begun to reconsider their life choices. And their dinner plans.

Chapter 432 Zhan Seng and He Ping

He Ping swung his staff with a whirl, and the battlefield behind the stockade wall turned into a scene from a nightmare.

Despite wielding just a humble staff—not a gleaming sword or axe—there was nothing humble about the results. One strike and a skull caved in like a melon dropped from a great height. Another snapped a bandit's neck with a crack that echoed across the battlefield. A third swing sent the staff smashing right into a bandit's groin, and let's just say... that man wasn't thinking about fighting anymore.

Every strike was brutal, savage, and as deadly as a cat chasing a mouse... only in this case, the mouse was the one who never stood a chance.

In mere moments, He Ping—formerly Master Zhan Seng—had dispatched seven or eight hardened bandits who had dared to scramble over the stockade wall. They were dead before they even realized it, their bodies crumpling as if their life force had been sucked out by the pure, unbridled rage in He Ping's eyes.

The villagers behind him watched, wide-eyed and horrified. They had always known Master Zhan Seng as the kind monk who could recite a sutra with the calm of a cloud drifting across the sky. But this? This was something else entirely. The Man-Eating Salt Owl, the ruthless warrior, was in full swing.

Someone whispered in disbelief, "He Ping? Could it be... that He Ping?"

Another villager gasped, "The Man-Eating Salt Owl? No way..."

"Oh my heavens."

"I heard he eats a man for breakfast," someone muttered, voice trembling.

The murmurs spread like wildfire. "Seriously? Holy hell!"

In the span of about thirty seconds, every bandit that had managed to breach the stockade wall was now lying in a bloody heap, their faces frozen in expressions that could only be described as terrified surprise. Not a single soul dared to approach, not after witnessing He Ping's one-man apocalypse.

But then, as if snapping back to his senses, He Ping's bloodshot fury started to fade. His eyes cleared, returning to their usual serene black-and-white. He tilted his head, blinking as if he had just woken up from a nap.

"Wait... What happened?" he mumbled, looking around at the carnage. "Did... did I just kill all these people? So quickly? Amitabha! This poor monk must have blacked out for a moment there. Shan zai! Shan zai!"

The crowd, still frozen, exchanged confused glances. "Did... did he just turn back into Master Zhan Seng?"

It was the most unsettling transformation they'd seen all day. From slaughtering bandits like a vengeful god to a peaceful monk concerned about karmic retribution in the span of seconds.

At that moment, two young monks shouted from the rear, "Master! More bandits are climbing over!"

Zhan Seng spun on his heel with surprising agility. Just as he did, a bandit leader vaulted over the wall like an acrobat who clearly didn't know what he was doing.

With a dramatic flourish, Zhan Seng's staff twirled through the air, and within a few swift, controlled moves, he knocked the bandit leader to the ground, pinning him underfoot.

"Benefactor, lay down your butcher's knife—"

But before he could finish the sentence, a farmer, holding a hoe like a warrior of old, came charging forward and, with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for smashing pumpkins at Halloween, turned the bandit leader's skull into mashed potatoes.

Zhan Seng blinked, clearly stunned. "Wait... did I kill him? This karmic sin of killing... it wasn't committed by me, was it?"

The villagers, sweat dripping from their brows, shook their heads frantically. "No, no, Master! Not you! It wasn't!"

A shout came from further down the wall. "Quick, over here! We can't hold them!"

Zhan Seng's eyes widened. The wall had been breached in multiple places. On one section, a dozen bandits had made it over and were chasing villagers armed with nothing but rakes, hoes, and the occasional wooden spoon. Not the ideal weaponry for repelling armed bandits.

"Lay down your butcher's knives!" Zhan Seng shouted, dashing forward, his staff held in front of him like a shield.

He found himself facing seven or eight bandits, all of whom were looking at him like he was the only obstacle standing between them and the village's food supply. Zhan Seng hesitated. He couldn't use the

full force of his staff, not with villagers looking on. He refused to kill, not even these bandits, no matter how ferocious they seemed.

Instead, he danced around them, dodging and parrying, avoiding lethal blows while struggling to maintain control. But his lack of lethal force quickly became his downfall. The bandits, ruthless and unrelenting, pressed their attack. Zhan Seng found himself on the defensive, caught in a series of precarious situations.

"Master, your face is bleeding!" A young monk shouted in panic.

Zhan Seng blinked and absentmindedly touched his face. His fingers came away stained with blood. "Huh?"

His eyes narrowed. A sudden flash of rage shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

"Who?" he snarled, eyes flashing crimson. "Who dared to draw my blood?! Haven't you heard the name of He Ping, the Man-Eating Salt Owl?!"

In the blink of an eye, He Ping was back. He struck without mercy, every swing of his staff a deadly blow. One swing sent a bandit's head exploding like a watermelon under a hammer. A swift reverse swipe and he impaled a bandit's eye socket, sending the eyeball flying like a grotesque cannonball.

The bandits, too stunned to react, were struck down one by one. With a final wham, the last of the attackers fell to the ground with a thud. The stockade wall was once again free of immediate threats.

But He Ping didn't stop there. No, the rage wasn't finished yet. His eyes burned with the desire for retribution, and he stood there, panting, looking at the bloody carnage. His staff was covered in blood, and his breath came in heavy bursts.

"Well..." Zhan Seng said, his voice calmer now. "That... was savage. You killed them so violently their eyeballs popped out? Oh, the karma! Amitabha, this poor monk must recite scriptures for you now to help resolve this bloodshed..."

Meanwhile, the cavalry battalion had still not moved, and the troopers were becoming visibly anxious.

"General," one of the soldiers called out, glancing nervously at the stockade wall, "Are we still waiting? The stockade's in distress! Should we not charge?"

Lao Nanfeng, calm as ever, shook his head. "Don't rush it. There's no real danger. Not many bandits have actually scaled the wall, and the men inside are holding their own. We'll wait."

The cavalry troopers exchanged confused looks, trying to figure out what exactly their general was up to. After all, in every battle they'd been in before, the cavalry was the first to charge. But Lao Nanfeng was a different breed. This was his first time commanding this kind of force, and his patience was starting to pay off.

Elsewhere, the bandit army was beginning to advance in full force. Seeing the tide turn in their favor, Old Zhang Fei, no longer as spry as he once was, decided it was time to join the fray. He wasn't one to lead the charge directly, preferring to command from the rear where he could easily escape should things go wrong. But now, seeing his bandits scaling the stockade and sensing victory in the air, he signaled for his main force to advance.

"Advance!" he bellowed.

But just as the bandits pushed forward, Lao Nanfeng's eyes sharpened. "Cavalry battalion, prepare to charge! On my mark, we open the gate!"

The cavalymen tensed, eager for action.

At that exact moment, the low rumble of an approaching ship echoed through the valley. A massive vessel appeared, cutting through the water at speed. The cannons on board were trained directly on Old Zhang Fei's advancing bandits.

The captain, a retainer from Bai Family Fortress, grinned broadly. "I've studied the art of Gentlemen—well, at least one-sixth of it—so let's make this count!"

"Fire!" he shouted.

The warship's cannons opened up with a deafening roar.

"Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!"

The cannons fired in perfect synchrony, and Old Zhang Fei's bandit forces, clustered together in tightly packed formations, became prime targets. Cannonballs screamed through the air, tearing into the ranks of the advancing bandits with brutal efficiency. Flesh and bone scattered in all directions, and the bandits were thrown into disarray.

Old Zhang Fei's face went ashen. He had been tricked. The warship had somehow returned earlier than expected, and now his forces were paying the price.

"Damn it!" he shouted.

Chapter 433 For Dao Xuan Tianzun Special Prize

Old Zhang Fei's assault collapsed in an instant.

The battle, once brimming with chaotic energy, faltered like a bad stage performance. The bandit soldiers in the main formation hesitated, glancing nervously at the stockade. Those scaling the fortress wall slowed their advance, clearly unnerved by the thunderous roar of the cannons.

Meanwhile, the seasoned bandits who had already breached the walls, now cut off from reinforcements, found themselves isolated and swiftly wiped out by the militia behind the ramparts.

A chill of dread snaked its way down Old Zhang Fei's spine.

Before he could even react, a gate opened on the fortress flank. Out from the opening surged a cavalry troop, led by a formidable general clad in mountain-patterned armor, brandishing a long spear, his horse kicking up dust like a warlord charging through an ancient battlefield.

This guy looked like he was ready to take over the empire—or at least run a successful tea shop with a side business in good posture.

Old Zhang Fei's heart sank. "Damn it! This fortress was a trap laid by the imperial army. We've walked right into their ambush."

That was the moment he realized the battle was lost.

Leading over two hundred cavalymen, Old Nanfeng charged forward, his expression fierce, but not quite in a "face of doom" kind of way—more like a grandfather on his way to a really good sale at the market.

However, Old Nanfeng's cavalry tactics were nothing like those of Zao Ying.

While Zao Ying would have charged in like a battering ram, cutting through enemies with sheer force, Old Nanfeng had a more subtle approach—one honed by years of fighting Mongols on the Guyuan frontier.

"Alright, idiots! Drop your spears and grab your Kaiyuan bows!" Old Nanfeng barked, his voice crackling with authority.

At his command, dozens of cavalymen immediately dropped their spears and grabbed their bows from their backs. However, there was a clear divide: the veteran horse bandits equipped with Kaiyuan bows and the newer recruits from Chengcheng County, who were armed with hand crossbows.

"Charge!" Nanfeng shouted. "Fire as you circle! Once you shoot, turn and shoot again! Got it?"

The cavalry responded with a cheer, a surprisingly enthusiastic group considering their awkward first attempt at firing from horseback.

Old Nanfeng watched them with a critical eye. Nocking a bow and firing from horseback was a true test of skill. The bandits who had been in the game for a while let their arrows fly, but their shots were wildly inaccurate, landing all over the place like someone had thrown darts in a hurricane.

Nanfeng grumbled under his breath. "Well, that's not going to work. Mongol cavalry are raised on horseback. You can't just teach a guy to shoot a bow and expect him to turn into Genghis Khan."

But just then, a thought struck him: The new recruits with hand crossbows were actually making an impact. They didn't need the constant arm tension that bowmen did, and as a result, their bolts flew straight and true, hitting their marks with precision.

"Ah-ha!" Nanfeng thought, beaming with delight. "The hand crossbows have the advantage!"

Meanwhile, the rebel forces were still recovering from the cannon fire, their morale slipping like a bar of soap in the rain. Then, out of nowhere, a storm of arrows rained down on them. They screamed in agony, realizing too late that Old Nanfeng had turned the tide.

Old Zhang Fei, watching his bandits falter, cursed under his breath. "Hold steady, damn it! Don't break ranks!"

But his commands were as effective as a leaking bucket. As soon as the cavalry started circling and firing, the bandits' cohesion unraveled faster than a poorly knit sweater. Soldiers scattered like chickens when the fox enters the henhouse, running for cover in the woods, the ditches, and anywhere else that wasn't a cavalry target.

Old Zhang Fei's eyes widened as his forces disintegrated before him. "No! Get back in formation!"

But the bandits weren't listening anymore. The sight of the cavalry firing while charging in circles was too much for them to handle.

Meanwhile, Old Nanfeng saw his moment.

He slung his bow over his back, pulled out his long spear, and raised it high, a grin spreading across his face. "Brothers, put away your crossbows! It's time for spears—let's make this interesting!"

The cavalrymen cheered, "Aoo-ooo-ooo!"

Nanfeng, suddenly feeling far more dramatic than necessary, roared, "Charge! Whatever you grab is yours!"

One cavalryman, with the kind of sheepish grin you'd expect from someone who knew they were about to ask a dumb question, piped up: "Uh, General, I thought military discipline in Gao Family Village said all spoils must go to the public treasury?"

Awkward silence.

Nanfeng's smile faltered. "...Right. So, uh, scratch that."

He quickly recovered, though. "Alright, alright—forget the spoils! Charge, and you'll earn a great merit! Tianzun will reward you generously!"

This, of course, was the real motivator. Forget gold and silver. Tianzun special prizes were legendary.

The cavalrymen's eyes lit up as if they'd just been told their lunch had been upgraded to a five-course meal.

"For the Tianzun Special Prize!" shouted one trooper.

"Charge! I'm in it for the Miaocuijiao!" another yelled.

"I want the small pudding ice cream!" a third joined in, practically frothing at the mouth.

Old Nanfeng raised his spear, utterly bemused by the sudden shift in the cavalry's demeanor. "I think we just found the perfect motivation," he muttered as the cavalry charged forward, their battle cry now more about snacks than warfare.

"Forward! For Tianzun Special Prize!" they roared in unison, their fighting spirit now infused with +32% combat power from the promise of sweet treats.

Old Zhang Fei, now thoroughly unnerved, could only watch as the cavalry bore down on him like a tidal wave of chaotic, snack-hungry soldiers. His forces, already disbanding in all directions, were no match for the cavalry's relentless assault.

Old Nanfeng reached Zhang Fei without even breaking a sweat. With a sharp twist, he raised his spear high, aiming straight for the rebel chieftain. "Rebel chieftain!" he called out, his voice booming with unrestrained confidence. "Don't run now! Your general has come to claim your dog head!"

And with that, the final chapter of Old Zhang Fei's rebellion was about to be written... one way or another.

Chapter 434 No One Steals Credit

Old Zhang Fei took one look at the man before him and knew he was in trouble.

This guy was clearly not some ragtag rebel. Just look at him—mountain-pattern armor fitted like a noble's vanity project, riding posture straight out of a military textbook, and that elegant spear technique? Oh, this wasn't just a soldier. This was an imperial officer—and one who'd actually paid attention during training.

"Damn it!" Old Zhang Fei roared. "Imperial troops disguised as salt smugglers to ambush me?!"

His rage hit the boiling point. With a violent yank, he unsheathed his eighteen-foot snake spear and charged, screaming like a man trying to make up for his life's poor decisions.

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing the moment he saw it.

"A snake spear? What is this, an opera audition? The real Zhang Fei never used one! Those things were storyteller inventions! You forged that monstrosity for branding, didn't you?"

The two men thundered toward each other, their horses pounding the earth like drums of war.

Old Zhang Fei's snake spear lashed forward, long and deadly, but Lao Nanfeng wasn't impressed. His own spear was only twelve feet—a full six feet shorter—but it danced in his hands with lethal precision.

In one elegant flick, he parried the snake spear aside, angling his own weapon just enough to open the defense.

As their horses passed each other, Lao Nanfeng's free hand darted to his waist, drew his saber, and plunged it straight into Old Zhang Fei's abdomen.

He didn't even bother to retrieve it. The blade stayed buried as both horses raced past each other. Lao Nanfeng reined his mount to a stop, turned, and watched Old Zhang Fei slump sideways, sliding off his horse with a wet thud.

"Hmph! You dare call yourself Zhang Fei? More like Old Jin Xuan!" Lao Nanfeng snorted, shaking his head with theatrical disgust.

With the self-proclaimed Zhang Fei down, the rest of the bandits fell apart like wet paper. Panic spread faster than the flu in winter; within moments, the battlefield was a stampede of fleeing men.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun had been watching through His divine perspective, He probably would've reached down, scooped up the survivors, and dropped them neatly into a labor camp with a note that said: "You're welcome."

But this was Shanxi—well beyond the reach of Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine hand—and manpower here was limited. The militia could only hold the field, watching the rebels flee like rats abandoning a sinking ship.

Lao Nanfeng rode back to the stockade, triumphant.

The fortress defenders had already secured their own victory. The warship's return had broken the enemy's spirit; bandits inside the walls were cut down, and those outside scattered. Gao Chuwu gave the order to open the gates and welcome their cavalry home.

Lao Nanfeng entered with a swagger, Old Zhang Fei's ear impaled on his spear tip like a grotesque trophy. He threw his head back and laughed toward the sky.

"Look! The bandit chief's ear! I personally took down their leader! I don't ask for a triple promotion—just transfer me back to the Flower World Star Agency! Spare me another minute of garrison life on the frontier!"

Gao Chuwu grimaced. "Ugh, that's disgusting! Get that thing out of here! You're going to make people lose their lunch."

Lao Nanfeng blinked. "This is proof of valor! A symbol of heroism!"

"Sure," Gao Chuwu said dryly. "But maybe next time, bring a written report instead of an ear."

Lao Nanfeng sighed internally. He clearly doesn't understand how officialdom works. When a small fry wins a big battle, the higher-ups swoop in to steal the credit faster than crows on a corpse.

He thought of an old tale—some emperor once claimed he personally cut down an enemy in battle. "Sure, Your Majesty," Lao Nanfeng thought bitterly. "You and your sword—right after the historian finished polishing your image."

Then, realizing he might need an ally, Lao Nanfeng leaned in and whispered, "General Gao, when we report this, let's say we killed Old Zhang Fei together, eh?"

Gao Chuwu blinked, genuinely confused. "Why? You clearly killed him yourself."

Lao Nanfeng looked pained. "No, no, that's not how it works! It has to be joint credit."

Gao Chuwu scratched his head. "That guy was so weak, I could've killed three of him with my eyes closed. If we say we did it together, doesn't that make us both sound pathetic? Hahaha! You keep the credit, I don't want it."

Lao Nanfeng froze. He's... not trying to steal it?

Was this guy naïve—or was Gao Family Village truly built different?

Then a sudden realization hit him: "Dao Xuan Tianzun sees all."

Of course! Gao Family Village had Dao Xuan Tianzun watching from above. No one could lie, cheat, or steal credit—not without divine retribution.

In Gao Family Village, merit was sacred.

And the wrath of Dao Xuan Tianzun?

Yeah... not something anyone wanted to test.

Understanding that, Lao Nanfeng felt an incredible weight lift off his shoulders. No more politics, no more fear of stolen glory. He pulled the ear from his spear and laughed.

He didn't need proof anymore.

No one in Gao Family Village would dare claim otherwise.

With a mighty swing, he hurled the ear into the rushing Yellow River.

A monstrous fish leapt from the water, gulped it down, and disappeared beneath the waves.

"Perfect," Lao Nanfeng said, grinning. "Nature's paperwork."

From the river, the returning warship drew near. Its captain—a Bai Family Fortress retainer with a flair for the dramatic—looked utterly disappointed. "General Lao Nanfeng! I only got to fire one volley before they ran! What a boring day!"

Lao Nanfeng roared with laughter. "Don't worry, Captain! Someday you'll fight the imperial navy—and even Westerners sailing giant ships from across the seas will come challenge you! You'll have plenty of fun then!"

Meanwhile, far away, Li Daoxuan sat comfortably, munching on a desert sand chicken. The aroma filled the air as he observed the Qichuan Ferry through his divine interface. It was buzzing with life—the heart of logistics for the Shanxi campaign—and a massive blacksmith workshop was already half built.

Blue Hats and Yellow Hats labored side by side, cement walls rising in geometric perfection.

To Li Daoxuan's modern eyes, it was art.

To the locals?

It was a crime against aesthetics.

Traditional Eastern architecture prized elegance and intricacy: carved beams, painted eaves, graceful upturned corners. Cement had none of that—just raw, solid, utilitarian power.

The ancient craftsmen would marvel, "So big! So strong!" before adding, "So ugly."

And Bai Yuan, of course, was already complaining.

Dressed in flawless white robes, fanning himself like an aristocrat judging tea leaves, he muttered by the riverbank, "This workshop is... a bit ugly. Yes, definitely ugly."

Then, spotting a ship's silhouette on the river, his expression brightened instantly.

"The warship's returning!" he said, eyes gleaming. "At last—news from Shanxi!"

Chapter 435 In Search of a Scholar

News from Shanxi—at last!

Not only Bai Yuan but even Li Daoxuan perked up at the report. He popped a desert-roasted chicken wing into his mouth, crunching contentedly as he tuned in.

The ship captain, a man who clearly loved the sound of his own voice, began recounting the events at Gudu Ferry in exhausting detail—his storytelling so vivid you could almost smell the gunpowder.

From his heavenly vantage, Li Daoxuan listened in effortlessly.

Bai Yuan's fan snapped open. "Excellent! Bu Zhan Ni's fifth company commander has fallen into our hands! Heh, that old rascal really is a recurring villain in our story. We've been trading blows since the first year of Chongzhen. Tsk! I remember when Dao Xuan Tianzun blessed us with those heavenly missiles—one launch and both Bu Zhan Ni and Wang Zuogua were bawling like toddlers! Hahaha!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled, nostalgia flickering in his eyes. Bu Zhan Ni was practically a career rival at this point. His seventh company commander, Night Ranger, was taken down by Cheng Xu; his second, Dian Dengzi (Lamplighter), defected to Gao Family Village; and now his fifth, Old Zhang Fei, had met his end under Lao Nanfeng's spear.

"This leaf," Li Daoxuan mused, "keeps sprouting new branches."

The captain went on, gesturing dramatically. "When I left Shanxi, Boss Xing was still at Xie Lake handling salt distribution. But before she departed, she left an order—Gudu Ferry needs proper urban planning. No more 'build-where-you-please' chaos. Otherwise, the place will turn into a slum in no time. Trouble is, all our men out there are fighters, not planners. We need to send some educated folks from Gao Family Village."

Li Daoxuan nodded. Finally, someone thinking ahead.

Urban planning was indeed vital. Gao Family Village itself had once grown like a toddler's drawing—cute, chaotic, and full of mistakes. Fortunately, he could just wave his divine hand and reshape the whole place like editing a sandbox game. But Shanxi? That needed proper human effort.

"Guess it's time to dust off the old design skills," he sighed. "Haven't touched any software in—what—three years? Three days without practice makes a craftsman rusty, so I'm basically a fossil now. Still, designing a small riverside town? Should be child's play."

He decided he'd personally draw the blueprint, then assign a cultured mind to implement it on-site.

The captain finished his report and returned to rest.

Bai Yuan, on the other hand, was already barking orders like a general on a caffeine rush. "Logistics team! Move it! Shanxi may be far, but our supplies can go farther! They've just fought a battle—ammo, gunpowder, lead shot, replenish it all! And don't forget food—load several boats of grain!"

He paused dramatically, eyes widening in realization. "And vinegar! Dao Xuan Tianzun has blessed us with vinegar! Didn't His Venerable Self decree: 'In Shanxi, we're iron-hearted and noodle-spirited—but go a meal without vinegar, and we'll riot.'"

He slapped his fan against his palm. "No wonder half the province turned bandit! They've been vinegar-deprived for years! It's culinary rebellion!"

"Bring more vinegar!" he shouted.

And so, under Bai Yuan's culinary crusade, Gudu Ferry bustled once again.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan got busy too. He opened his laptop—an artifact of another age—and fired up design software that probably hadn't seen daylight since the last dynasty.

Given Ming-era limitations, there'd be no skyscrapers—two or three-story cement buildings were already architectural flexing. Underground drainage? Forget it. This wasn't Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Simple gutters would do just fine.

A few quick strokes later, the new town took shape on the screen—a grid of wide streets, neat plots, and symmetrical layout that screamed "civilized progress."

Satisfied, Li Daoxuan printed the plan onto a small sheet and handed it down.

Bai Yuan received it with reverence, rolling the paper into a scroll like it was divine scripture.

Design? Done. Easy part over.

Now came the hard part—finding a scholar to oversee the project.

Li Daoxuan tapped the "Gao Family Village" seal on the box's exterior, shifting his gaze downward.

His divine view descended—and landed on a scholar indeed: Dian Dengzi Zhao Sheng.

Zhao Sheng was leaving the main keep, silver ingot in hand, wearing the satisfied smile of a man who'd just received his bonus.

He'd recently been on an "assignment" in Heyang County, teaching farmers how to use chemical fertilizer and grow new crops—one of those noble yet poorly paid jobs that screamed "public service."

For his efforts, the treasury had rewarded him a shiny ingot. And now, holding it like it was his newborn child, he dashed toward the commercial district.

Li Daoxuan watched him run and immediately thought, Oh no. That's a man whose lungs aren't built for cardio.

Sure enough, halfway up the incline, Zhao Sheng started wheezing like a broken flute. He had to slow to a crawl before finally reaching the clinic door.

Inside, an old physician sat calmly brewing tea. Zhao Sheng presented the silver with both hands. "Doctor, I've returned."

The doctor smiled. "Mr. Zhao, I've told you, I can't take your silver. You never charge the villagers for your help; how could I charge you?"

Zhao Sheng countered earnestly, "Then at least take it for the herbs! You pay gatherers for them. I can't freeload off medicine bought with your own coin."

The doctor sighed and accepted. "Fine. Mr. Zhao, your shortness of breath is called asthma. It won't vanish in a day—it needs long-term care."

Zhao Sheng nodded obediently.

The physician scribbled out a prescription—an ancient dance of brush and ink—and handed it over.

Zhao Sheng unfolded it... then froze.

Not a single recognizable character.

He stared at the page like it had personally insulted him. "Doctor," he said gravely, "why is it that every time I read your writing, I feel like an illiterate caveman?"

The doctor puffed his beard. "Nonsense! My handwriting's perfectly clear. Which word don't you recognize?"

Zhao Sheng pointed. "This one."

"Ephedra," the doctor said.

Zhao Sheng blinked. "That's Ephedra? It looks like you dropped ink on the paper and called it art!"

He pointed again. "And this?"

"Almond," came the calm reply.

Zhao Sheng groaned. "If you hadn't told me, I'd have thought it said 'dragon riding on tofu.' But now that you mention it... yeah, it does look like 'Almond.'"

He held the prescription aloft, gazing heavenward at a tragic forty-five-degree angle. "Oh Dao Xuan Tianzun above, why must doctors write like divine calligraphers possessed by ghosts?!"

Li Daoxuan raised his own paper sheet, sighing. "That's a question I'd like answered too."

Chapter 436 Setting a Benchmark

Zhao Sheng shot up from his seat and jabbed a finger toward the ceiling.

"Look! Look! Even Dao Xuan Tianzun himself is complaining about your handwriting!"

The old physician turned crimson, caught between guilt and panic. "Dao Xuan Tianzun forgive me! I—I'll make it clearer this time!"

He bent over the table and scribbled something furiously. "There! This one's legible, right?"

Li Daoxuan and Zhao Sheng leaned in at the same time. Both froze. The air went still.

The doctor puffed out his chest. "That's licorice root!" he declared proudly.

Zhao Sheng's lips twitched. "If that's licorice root, then I'm the Emperor of Mars."

Li Daoxuan just sighed. "There are mysteries in this world that even heaven won't explain..."

Clearly, logic had packed its bags and left the clinic. Zhao Sheng, clutching the hieroglyphic prescription, gave up trying to decipher it and let the attendant gather his medicine — a hefty bundle he lugged out like a man carrying a sack of cosmic injustice.

Li Daoxuan had been watching for amusement, but as Zhao Sheng stepped out, an idea sparked in his mind.

This guy... might actually be the perfect choice for Gudu Ferry.

Most scholars, bless their fragile souls, were about as practical as silk shoes in a swamp. They knew how to debate poetry, not dig ditches — and courage wasn't exactly their strong suit either.

Take Principal Wang, for example. Smart man, respectable teacher. But outside the comfort zone of Gao Family Village? He'd probably barricade himself indoors, waiting for Dao Xuan Tianzun to send an all-clear sign.

San Shier, Tan Liwen — same problem. Brains? Plenty. Backbone? Negotiable.

But Zhao Sheng? Entirely different breed.

Sure, the man had been a rebel once — a reluctant one. But he'd led three thousand men, marched through counties, faced death more times than a bad gambler, and somehow survived.

The body might be frail, but the heart? Solid iron.

And above all, Zhao Sheng had something rare: character. He wasn't the type to crumble or scheme when no one was watching. Li Daoxuan could trust him to manage Gudu Ferry without constant supervision — and maybe even keep the locals alive while doing it.

"Alright," Li Daoxuan muttered. "Decision made. If only his lungs would cooperate..."

He started looking for Gao Yiye, planning to send word through her — only to realize, once again, that she was nowhere to be found.

Finding Gao Yiye in Gao Family Village was like trying to catch smoke with chopsticks. The village might have been bustling with tiny residents, but she had a talent for disappearing whenever needed most.

At that moment, Li Daoxuan finally understood why holy figures in old tales always wore ridiculous outfits — bright robes, tall hats, golden halos. Not because of vanity — because it made them easier to spot from the heavens.

"Even Dao Xuan Tianzun would lose patience trying to find you," he grumbled.

Scanning carefully, his focus drifted across the village until he finally spotted her — sitting in the bookstore, of all places.

And she wasn't even reading her own illustrated Tales of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon Extermination! Nope — she was nose-deep in a comic called Breaking Through the Firmament.

Li Daoxuan frowned. The title alone sounded suspiciously like something Gao Sanwa would cook up after a midnight inspiration binge. And sure enough, a closer look confirmed it — the same "underdog's revenge" comic Gao Sanwa had bragged about earlier, now officially in print.

Gao Yiye was hooked. Her delicate brows furrowed and relaxed in rhythm with the plot, her lips curling into a victorious grin when the scorned hero finally smashed his rivals to pieces.

Li Daoxuan zoomed out a bit — and burst out laughing.

The entire bookstore was full of people reading the same comic! Everywhere he looked — taverns, tea stalls, noodle shops, even a braised duck stand — everyone had a copy. The whole district was gripped by Firmament Fever.

At a corner table, a middle-aged man squinted at the page and nudged a passing kid.

"Hey, little scholar! You can read, right? What's this line mean? This book's got too many blasted words for us honest illiterates!"

The kid straightened up proudly and read aloud:

"Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of the river! Don't you dare look down on me!"

The man's eyes lit up. "Hot damn! That's deep. Sounds like something worth shouting before punching someone!"

"Yeah," said another listener. "Books that sound this fierce are worth reading!"

Li Daoxuan couldn't help grinning. "Well, I'll be damned. Gao Sanwa, you sly little genius — you've hit the jackpot."

He recalled the deal between San Shier and Gao Sanwa — profits split fifty-fifty, half to the bookstore, half to the author. Judging by the crowd, several thousand copies were already out in the wild. Even if Sanwa earned just ten wen per copy, that was still tens of thousands of copper coins — and growing fast.

"And that's only the beginning," Li Daoxuan murmured. "Soon, readers from Chengcheng and Heyang will be lining up too. He's about to become filthy rich."

And with that realization came another.

"This sets a perfect example," he said, a grin tugging at his lips. "When people see an author actually getting rich from his craft, they'll start picking up brushes instead of hoes. That's how real art flourishes."

He could almost picture it — the dawn of a new creative age, ink-stained hands replacing calloused ones, literature booming under Dao Xuan Tianzun's watchful eye.

Meanwhile, miles away, Xing Honglang led her weary caravan of salt porters toward Gudu Ferry. Their faces were sunburnt, their clothes dust-streaked, and skepticism hung over them thicker than river fog.

Sure, Chief Xing seemed generous — bold voice, easy smile — but the porters had lived too long under false promises to believe any kindness at face value.

After years of scraping by, selling salt for two wen per jin, who could believe anyone would suddenly offer ten?

One porter finally blurted, "Chief Xing, Chief Tie, we've been walking over a hundred li now. How much farther? And about the wages—"

Xing Honglang just laughed, tossing her braid over her shoulder. "Relax! I'll pay half a jin of flour for every li you've walked. Sounds fair?"

The porter's eyes nearly popped. Half a jin per li? That meant fifty jin of flour for this trip alone!

He blinked rapidly. That can't be right. Nobody pays like that... right?

And just as doubt gnawed at their hearts, Xing Honglang raised an arm and pointed ahead.

"We're here!"

The porters looked up — and froze.

Before them stood a towering wooden fortress, braced with watchtowers and solid walls overlooking the Yellow River.

Their first thought: Imperial soldiers.

Bandits would never build something this proper, and salt smugglers sure wouldn't spend money on watchtowers.

Cold dread crept down their spines. If this was a government fortress, then they were done for. No one would believe the Commissioner had sent them. The moment they were caught, he'd deny everything and leave them to hang.

The porters exchanged anxious glances, the weight of flour promises suddenly feeling a lot heavier.

Chapter 437 The Salt Artisans' Decision

The salt wind from the Yellow River carried a faint tang of iron and smoke.

Xing Honglang strode ahead, the long hem of her cloak brushing against the dust. Behind her, the salt artisans trudged nervously, their carts creaking beneath the weight of coarse white salt.

"Don't be afraid," she said with an easy smile. "Keep moving forward. That stronghold up ahead— it's ours."

The salt artisans froze, stunned.

"Ours?" one man whispered. "Commander, we're just selling salt. Is it really necessary to build such a fortress?"

Xing Honglang only laughed and waved a hand, refusing to explain. Her calm confidence was more unsettling than reassurance.

Around the massive wooden walls, men were cleaning up the aftermath of a battle. Several bodies were being carried out, their wounds fresh and brutal. One corpse had bulging eyes, its face twisted in horror.

Xing Honglang frowned and called out to a sentry on the watchtower.

"What happened while I was gone?"

The sentry saluted. "Commander Xing, you're back! Earlier today, Old Zhang Fei—Bu Zhan Ni's fifth company leader—led a raid on the stronghold. These dead men were his."

Xing Honglang nodded slightly.

Behind her, the salt artisans gawked in disbelief.

Rebels had attacked this place? Was that even possible? Those men came in thousands, and yet this fortress of salt smugglers had survived? Their eyes darted toward Xing Honglang again, the image of a mere trader fading, replaced by something far more formidable.

Just then, the gates of the stronghold burst open.

"Honglang!"

"Chuwu!"

Gao Chuwu rushed out, spreading his arms wide. Xing Honglang mirrored him, and with a resounding thump, the two embraced in full view of everyone.

The salt artisans stood frozen.

The majestic "Commander Xing" image they had begun to form shattered instantly into a thousand glittering shards.

Old Nanfeng's voice rang out from the yard. "You lot, stop gawking! Bring those salt carts inside. Let the lovebirds breathe."

The salt workers traded looks but wisely said nothing. They pushed their carts through the gate, where rows of soldiers guided them toward the warehouse district.

Inside, they saw mountains of grain piled higher than men. The sight alone left them speechless.

Zao Ying shouted toward Gao Chuwu, still clinging to his wife, "Hey! Stop cuddling and start working! Your wife promised these porters fifty catties of flour each. They're waiting!"

Gao Chuwu laughed and finally let go of Xing Honglang.

"Right, right! You heard her—get a squad to weigh out the grain."

A team of soldiers hurried to the storerooms, pulling open sacks of flour, weighing fifty catties for each artisan, and handing them out one by one.

The salt workers could barely believe it. Fifty catties! It was heavy—backbreaking even—but no one complained. Each sack was like a promise of a new life.

A grey-bearded salt artisan clutched his reward, tears streaking down his face.

"When we worked for the officials, we'd labor a month and not see this much grain. I've decided—I'm not going back! I'll work for Commander Xing. I'll go make salt at Xiao Lake!"

The others murmured in agreement, their earlier doubts vanishing like mist. They would return home only to gather their families and then slip away forever from the villages that had starved them. Here, by the lake, there was work, food, and dignity.

As the men talked, the old artisan caught sight of a passing monk. His eyes widened in shock.

He hurried forward, grabbing the monk's robe.

"Master! Are you... the Man-Eating Salt Owl, He Ping, who ruled the jianghu twenty years ago? I once sold you illegal salt! I'm Zhao Xiaohei, from Xichai Village! You saved me back then—cut down thirteen government soldiers in one breath!"

The monk turned calmly, pressing his palms together. "Amitabha. Benefactor, you are mistaken. This poor monk's name is Zhan Seng. I've long been a resident monk of Pujiu Temple. How could I be some bloodthirsty Salt Owl? I am a man of peace."

Zhao Xiaohei blinked. "Oh... I see. My apologies, Master. You truly have the air of a kind soul. I must have been mistaken."

Zhan Seng smiled serenely. "It is well. May all beings be at peace."

The younger monks nearby exchanged glances, wiping sweat from their brows.

No, old man, they thought, you weren't mistaken. He just hasn't seen blood today.

Meanwhile, Xing Honglang gave a discreet order to her men:

"Let the salt artisans wander freely. Let them see everything."

So the salt workers explored.

They saw pastures filled with well-fed warhorses, lines of arquebusiers maintaining their matchlocks, and groups of elderly women and children preparing meals by vast steaming cauldrons. Down by the river, laborers hammered planks together to build a sturdy new dock.

This was no den of outlaws. It was a proper camp—disciplined, clean, and thriving.

The artisans were stunned.

Every soldier here spoke gently, calling them "uncle" and "elder brother."

One young militiaman even said with a grin, "Don't be afraid of us. Our parents are commoners too. We are the people's soldier-sons."

Those words pierced deeply. The salt workers had never heard such kindness from men in uniform. Government soldiers only cursed, extorted, and stole. But here, soldiers helped carry loads and fetched water for the old.

By the time the tour ended, their minds were made up.

A group of artisans gathered before Xing Honglang. Their leader stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"Commander Xing, we've discussed it. We've all decided to follow you from now on."

Xing Honglang smiled, her tone warm yet commanding. "Good. You'll be treated fairly here."

The spokesman hesitated, then added, "If we carry these fifty catties home, the officials will take ninety percent of it as tax or bribe. So... we'd like to leave the grain here for now. Once we return to fetch our families, could Commander Xing use some silver to bribe the guards and let us escape quietly? After that, we'll all come to Xiao Lake to make salt."

Xing Honglang nodded without hesitation.

"Agreed. A gentleman's word is as swift as a galloping horse. I'll send a cavalry squad to escort you home and have Tie Niaofei bribe the guards. Once your families are safe, come to Xiao Lake. Work honestly, and I'll never treat you unjustly."

Her words carried the weight of iron—and the promise of a new beginning.

Chapter 438 Zhao Sheng's Deployment Abroad

Xing Honglang, true to her word, sent out a squadron of cavalry to escort the salt artisans safely back to their villages. Tie Niaofei, ever efficient, followed up with a little silver for persuasion. The guards stationed at the village gate soon discovered that bribery had an excellent sedative effect—they "fell asleep" that night and awoke to find nearly the entire salt village empty. Only two bewildered souls remained to tell the tale.

In the Ming Dynasty, salt artisans fleeing their posts was as common as rain in spring. Underpaid, overworked, and treated worse than stray dogs, they often vanished into the wilderness. The Salt Administration Office didn't even bat an eye; they simply filed the report—'X number of artisan households have absconded from Y village'—and called it a day.

By dawn, the escapees had reached the desolate banks of Xiao Lake. There, they rebuilt their thatched huts, cooked the grain Xing Honglang had sent, and began digging salt ponds like ants reclaiming their hill. Water from the lake was channeled in, the sun did its work, and soon white crystals gleamed like scattered silver coins.

Had Old Zhang Fei still been alive, it would have been suicide to settle in such open country. But Zhang Fei had already been dispatched to his next life courtesy of Gudu Ferry, and the remaining bandits had fled north to regroup with Bu Zhan Ni's main force. For the first time in years, the salt artisans could work in peace.

At dawn, Gudu Ferry awoke.

The elderly and the children stirred the cooking fires; women carried water and kneaded dough. The young and able-bodied men, however, sat along the riverbank doing precisely nothing.

"Another day without work," one of them muttered, stretching.

"I'm getting twitchy," grumbled another. "Feels like my hands forgot how to carry a crate."

"The big cargo ship left days ago," said a dockworker, scanning the misty horizon. "Should be due back soon. When it docks, we'll have work again."

The unemployed lived on the knife's edge between hope and hunger. In this world, a man without work didn't just lose money—he risked starving. That quiet fear clung to them like damp river fog.

Then a shout came from the distance.

"They're here! The ships are back!"

All heads turned north. Three cargo ships trailed behind a grand warship, their sails cutting the current like wings. The crowd erupted.

"Work's here again!" someone yelled.

"That's at least three days of carrying—nine catties of flour earned!" another cheered.

They pressed forward, waving their arms at the ships as though their excitement could pull them to shore faster.

When the vessels finally docked, the crowd froze in surprise. Standing at the bow of the warship was a frail-looking scholar in a rumpled robe, holding a satchel and declaiming poetry into the wind:

"Behold the crossing, where sand is sifted—

how many souls have crossed this mortal stream?"

On the dock, Gao Chuwu, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, and Lao Nanfeng exchanged looks before bursting out laughing.

"Oh, heavens—Mr. Zhao? What brings you here?" Gao Chuwu called out.

Zhao Sheng—better known by his nickname, Dian Dengzi—lifted his chin proudly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun said I was a man of rare courage, so He has sent me on a mission to Shanxi—to oversee the construction of Gudu Ferry!"

Xing Honglang smiled. "That's true enough. This task needs someone bold. The other scholars in the village tremble at their own shadows."

"I didn't want to be courageous," Zhao Sheng sighed dramatically. "It was... thrust upon me."

A ladder thudded down the ship's side. Zhao Sheng began his descent, but by the time his shoes hit the dock, he was already wheezing.

"I... brought..." he panted, "Dao Xuan Tianzun's... hand-drawn... huff... Gudu Ferry... gasp... development plan..."

The leaders stared, half impressed, half alarmed.

"Sir," Xing Honglang said gently, "you shouldn't have made this trip yourself. You're in no shape to travel."

"It's fine, it's fine," Zhao Sheng said between breaths, rummaging in his robe. "I have medicine now... the doctor gave me this prescription—calls it Dingchuan Decoction. Take it long enough, and I'll be fit as a horse again!"

He held up the prescription triumphantly. The others leaned in to look.

"What in the world is this scribble?" Lao Nanfeng muttered.

"Looks like someone used a spider to write it," said Zao Ying.

"Forget the medicine," Xing Honglang said. "Show us the development plan."

They unrolled the document with reverence. It was a masterpiece—precise lines, elegant proportions, a divine order in every stroke.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun's own hand," Gao Chuwu murmured in awe. "Even the walls look blessed."

"The design includes cement houses," Gao observed, tracing a finger along the parchment. "But... we don't have cement in Shanxi."

Zhao Sheng brightened. "No problem! I brought a few of the Blue Hats with me. Dao Xuan Tianzun instructed that cement should be produced locally—it doesn't store or travel well. So wherever our reach extends, we build a cement workshop there."

Everyone nodded, suitably impressed.

Zhao Sheng frowned thoughtfully. "I just wonder if Gudu Ferry has enough hands for the job."

Xing Honglang grinned and gestured toward the dock, where hundreds of workers were already pressing forward eagerly. "Enough hands? Look at them! If you shout 'we're hiring,' half of them will faint from excitement. You'll have your workforce before you finish the sentence."

Zhao Sheng chuckled. "That makes things easy then. I'll go talk to them myself."

He tugged his robe and prepared to sprint off—only to be met with several horrified looks.

"Don't run!" Gao Chuwu barked. "You'll keel over!"

"But I'm in a hurry!" Zhao Sheng protested.

The group exchanged helpless sighs. Asthmatic and impatient—a combination truly blessed by the heavens.

Xing Honglang gave a subtle signal. Two Blue Hat technicians jumped down from the ship and, without hesitation, hoisted Zhao Sheng up—one by each arm.

"Hey! Hey! Put me down!" Zhao Sheng cried, flailing indignantly. "This is deeply undignified!"

The pair ignored him, carrying him toward the crowd like a ceremonial offering—or perhaps a particularly fussy noble being escorted to a picnic.

A moment later, cheers erupted among the workers.

"We've got work!" someone shouted.

"I'm signing up for the cement factory!"

"I know where there's clay—we'll dig it up!"

"Is it still three catties of flour a day?"

"What? Artisan wages for learning cement work? That's more than a porter! Count me in!"

Within hours, Gudu Ferry transformed into a whirlwind of industry—blueprints unfurled, shovels struck soil, and laughter mingled with the clamor of construction.

Later that afternoon, Zhao Sheng found Lao Nanfeng standing near the river, inspecting the new docks. He approached quietly and leaned close.

"The Heavenly—" He caught himself. "Dao Xuan Tianzun knows of your great achievements," he whispered. "He wishes to reward you. He said you seem quite fond of... the Flower World."

Lao Nanfeng's grin spread slowly. "After years on the frontier, I've learned to appreciate the pleasures of civilization."

Zhao Sheng beckoned. "Come with me. There's a special gift waiting in the warship's cabin—personally placed there by Dao Xuan Tianzun Himself."

Chapter 439 An Opportunity to Infiltrate the Ming Army

Lao Nanfeng nearly tripped over himself in excitement as Zhao Sheng led him into the warship's cabin. "A special reward," Zhao had said. Lao Nanfeng was already picturing barrels of fine wine or perhaps a divine blade forged by celestial hands.

Instead, he found... a square, glossy object lying on the table.

It was a smartwatch.

Li Daoxuan—Dao Xuan Tianzun to those within the box—had ordered it from the mystical realm known as the internet, that modern-day treasure bazaar called Huaqiangbei. It cost barely a hundred yuan, yet its high-definition screen gleamed with the arrogance of something far pricier.

To Lao Nanfeng, however, it wasn't a watch. It was a towering monolith of light. The screen itself was half his height, big enough to reflect his entire bewildered face.

He stared at it as though confronting a divine artifact. "What exactly is this thing?" he muttered, scratching his beard.

"Watch carefully," Zhao Sheng said with solemn importance. "I'll only show you once."

He swiped his hand across the black surface—and the device sprang to life.

"By the ancestors!" Lao Nanfeng gasped. "A Divine Mirror!"

Zhao Sheng, now acting like a seasoned technomancer, flicked through the icons with the grace of a bored deity. "Here's the Play function," he said, tapping a symbol. Dozens of shimmering images appeared. He chose one at random.

A burst of music filled the cabin.

It was an MTV of the pop star Cai Moulin's Love Love Love.

Lao Nanfeng froze. Then his jaw dropped. "An immortal maiden... she's dancing! Heaven above—her limbs are bare! Her arms! Her legs!"

Zhao Sheng immediately covered his eyes. "I'm not watching that. Nope. Not corrupting my spirit today. See no evil, hear no evil—good luck, old man."

As Zhao made his retreat, Lao Nanfeng was trembling, his eyes glued to the screen. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has granted me a celestial vision!" he cried in ecstasy. "Heavenly maidens singing and dancing through the Divine Mirror! Ahahaha! This outshines any show in the flower houses of Jiangnan!"

"Don't get too attached," Zhao Sheng warned from the door. "This divine mirror only lasts a couple of hours before it must be returned to Dao Xuan Tianzun for recharging his divine energy."

"Two hours?" Lao Nanfeng said, already drooling a little. "Two hours is a lifetime! I'll watch all the maidens' dances!"

Zhao Sheng just shook his head and left, hearing the man's off-key voice drift after him:

"A little ambiguous, secretly happy alone—lalalala~!"

Outside, Zhao Sheng chuckled. "Dao Xuan Tianzun truly knows how to motivate his followers."

Meanwhile, Dao Xuan Tianzun's focus had shifted hundreds of miles away—to Hancheng, a crucial stronghold in the Tongguan Circuit of Shaanxi.

The city was bristling with troops. Fifteen hundred Ming soldiers, led by Wang Cheng'en, the newly returned Commander-in-Chief of Shaanxi, now held the line there.

For Dao Xuan Tianzun, this was like changing channels on his cosmic television. He zoomed in on the main command tent, where Wang Cheng'en sat frowning over a stack of ledgers and empty grain sacks.

The man looked exhausted. Not from battle, but from bureaucracy.

"Tell me," he said to his aide, "how many days of rations do we have left?"

The aide bowed. "If we cut the men to half-rations, five days, General."

"Five?" Wang Cheng'en groaned. "Five days, and we're supposed to guard the Yellow River? The moment the bandits show their faces, half our troops will faint before the fight even begins."

The aide looked pained. "You're not like other generals, sir. You forbid plundering from the common people. That's why supplies are..."

"Short. I know." Wang rubbed his temples. "Can we borrow from neighboring counties?"

The aide grimaced. "North is Yichuan—Yansui territory. They won't lift a finger. South is Heyang, and their magistrate's been writing poetry about starvation. Remember Fan Shan Yao's rebellion? That magistrate begged for help, then sent the Governor a letter saying, 'No taxes—take my life instead.' He probably doesn't even have a grain of rice to lend."

Wang Cheng'en chuckled bitterly. "Ah yes, the famous Shaanxi policy: 'No food, no taxes, no shame.'"

He leaned back, staring at the tent roof. "Still... something doesn't add up."

He tapped the table. "Remember Chengcheng County? The night before we marched for the capital, Magistrate Liang treated us like honored guests—gave us potato and cured meat rice. My men were licking their bowls clean."

The aide blinked. "That's right! They don't seem short on grain at all."

"Exactly," Wang said slowly. "So why the poor-mouth routine with taxes? What game are they playing?"

The aide hesitated. "Shall I go investigate, sir? If they truly have stores, we might borrow some."

Wang Cheng'en nodded, eyes narrowing. "Do it. But carefully. If they're hoarding grain, I want to know why."

Outside the invisible barrier of space, Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly.

"Interesting," he murmured. "Looks like the Ming army's doors are about to open."

He leaned back in his realm of glass and circuitry. "Time to slip in unnoticed."

A new plan began to take shape—one that would turn the empire's hunger into his opportunity.

Chapter 440 Infiltrating Our People

The world was vast—so vast that even Dao Xuan Tianzun himself might sigh at the sheer inefficiency of conquest.

If Gao Family Village relied solely on its own manpower to expand, the world would have changed dynasties twice before they finished laying roads to the next province. To truly grow, they needed more people—and not just any people. They needed the right ones.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had long been mentally prepared for this: absorbing, co-opting, and reshaping other forces. Still, he wasn't about to invite just anyone to his divine banquet.

Bandit lords and lunatics like Wang Zuogua, Bu Zhan Ni, Fan Shan Yue, or that glorified guerrilla Li Ying? Absolutely not. Their resumes practically screamed "betrayal pending."

But those like Zhao Sheng, Xing Honglang, or even the dignified Wang Cheng'en—the Shaanxi Commander—now those were candidates worth cultivating.

Dao Xuan Tianzun folded his hands in thought, the corners of his mouth curling with amusement. "Time to expand the staff."

He shifted his divine focus to Gao Family Village.

Finding Gao Yiye this time was mercifully easy. The last time he'd searched for her, she had blended into the crowd so perfectly he'd almost filed a missing-persons report with Heaven's HR department. After that, he'd decreed that she wear white garments adorned with bright red embroidered patches.

Now, even amid a crowd, she was unmistakable—a walking festival lantern of virtue and visibility.

She was currently standing in line in front of a newly opened shop: The Dao Xuan Tianzun Cake House.

Dao Xuan Tianzun blinked. "They're using my name to sell pastries now?"

A quick scan revealed the truth—and a wave of reluctant pride. The shop sold "old-fashioned cakes," the same type of eggy pastry he'd once accidentally crushed during that infamous "cake rain" incident in Heyang County. Local bakers, those industrious devils, had reverse-engineered the recipe and turned it into a phenomenon.

The shop was packed. The line stretched down the street.

"Ah," Dao Xuan Tianzun murmured. "Accidental economic reform. You're welcome, Gao Family Village."

He watched Gao Yiye at the front of the queue buy three cakes—one for herself and one each for her secretaries, Qiu Ju and Dong Xue. The three nibbled delicately, smiling with that universal expression of bliss reserved for people eating something both sinful and socially acceptable.

He couldn't help but chuckle. Truly, nothing motivates mortals like sugar.

"Yiye," he called.

Her head shot up, eyes bright. "Dao Xuan Tianzun! You're here!"

Ever since the village had expanded, the divine presence above it had grown less constant. She often looked up and saw only empty sky. So, hearing his voice again filled her with warmth.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's tone was light, teasing. "I've been watching you for a while now—patiently queuing for cakes."

She flushed. "Ah? Why didn't you call sooner?"

He wisely kept the real answer to himself. Watching her fret over dessert was too entertaining.

"Listen," he said instead. "General Wang Cheng'en of Shaanxi will soon send someone to Chengcheng County to borrow grain. He'll likely go straight to Magistrate Liang Shixian, but since all that grain originates from our stores, it'll eventually lead to you."

Gao Yiye nodded earnestly. "Understood. We should give him some grain."

"No," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, smiling. "We don't give. We negotiate. Unless he agrees to certain... arrangements."

Gao Yiye blinked, lost.

Fortunately, her secretaries were far more worldly. Qiu Ju leaned in, whispering, "The Tianzun means we find his weakness and make him... cooperative."

Gao Yiye frowned. "But isn't that something bad people do?"

Dong Xue chuckled. "Not necessarily. Sometimes good people have to act bad just to keep worse people in line."

"Exactly," Qiu Ju added. "Merchants call it 'strategic partnership.'"

Gao Yiye thought for a moment, then asked, "So what do we want him to do?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun's grin turned sly. "Nothing too ambitious. He's broke, underfed, and overworked. All we need is for him to open a few military positions. We'll place our own people inside his ranks."

The two secretaries exchanged a knowing glance and stifled a laugh. "Dao Xuan Tianzun can be quite mischievous."

Gao Yiye still didn't fully grasp the scheme, but she trusted her advisors—and more importantly, she trusted him. "Understood! Then we'll head to Chengcheng County right away."

The electric train whistled like a mechanical dragon as it carried them the thirty li to Chengcheng County in what felt like a single blink.

When Gao Yiye arrived, dressed in white and framed by her red-stitched mantle, the entire town seemed to pause. People dropped to their knees. "Lady Saintess!" they cried.

Magistrate Liang Shixian practically sprinted out of his yamen, bowing so hard his hat nearly flew off. "Lady Saintess! If I'd known you were coming, I'd have met you at the station myself!"

Gao Yiye smiled politely. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has sent me with a decree. I've come to relay his divine instructions."

Liang Shixian immediately straightened, hands clasped. "Please, Lady Saintess."

"Soon," Gao Yiye said, "someone from Shaanxi General Wang Cheng'en's command will come to borrow grain. When that happens, do as follows..."

She explained the plan exactly as instructed.

By the time she finished, Liang Shixian's smile had evaporated. "Eh? Wait—what?"

The magistrate stared, mouth agape. "Dao Xuan Tianzun wants... people from Gao Family Village to take official positions in the Ming army?"

A chill ran down his spine. What exactly are we building here?

He forced a smile, bowing again—but his mind was racing.

No... this isn't just village business anymore. This is something far bigger.