

Great Ming 121

Chapter 121: The Woodcarver Arrived

Mr. Wang was rushing with pride: "Ah, you've come just in time. I was looking for you."

The poor man looked timid, as if he had never seen the world. Li Daoxuan could tell almost at a glance that he hadn't been in Gaojia Village for long; only a newcomer showed such mental state.

Mr. Wang spoke up: "I heard you are a woodcarver."

The poor man quickly bowed: "Yes, humble I am called Xiao Dazheng. My ancestors were woodcarvers for generations."

Mr. Wang added: "A permanent worker? A rotating worker?"

Xiao Dazheng said awkwardly: "A permanent worker... humble I lost my household registration and escaped. Now I am just a vagrant."

Mr. Wang sighed sympathetically: "A permanent worker, that must have been very tough for you. I heard you just arrived in Gaojia Village, haven't achieved any merit, and have eaten free food for days. You're probably feeling uneasy inside, right?"

That really nailed it. Xiao Dazheng came to Gaojia Village and immediately received "artisan treatment." Thirty-Two assigned him a home in the artisans' well, gave him rice, flour, salt, and oil, ensuring his life was worry-free.

But eating these things was unsettling.

Doing nothing while eating free food—how could he not feel anxious?

He was afraid one day, Clerk Tan Liwen would rush over and say: "You're absolutely useless; Gaojia Village doesn't want you."

Then it would be entirely over.

Therefore, Xiao Dazheng had been apprehensive these past days, asking everywhere about what he could do. Then, his good friend Luo Leg Hair recommended him to Mr. Wang.

Xiao Dazheng admitted: "Humble I is truly uneasy. Mr. Wang, please lead a way."

Mr. Wang declared: "Very well, I'll be blunt. My children have no books to read. In this whole Gaojia Village, only the few books I brought are available, forcing children to take turns flipping through them. Learning anything is extremely hard."

Xiao Dazheng understood right away: "Mr. Wang means... you want humble I to carve and print some books?"

Mr. Wang swayed his head with emphasis: "Exactly. Books for children are critically important; not one character can be wrong. I sought you because Luo Leg Hair spoke of your diligence and seriousness while working, your woodcarving never having an error."

Xiao Dazheng quickly said: "Humble I is most serious in tasks. Books carved by humble I will not have a single mistake."

Mr. Wang responded: "Good." Then he pulled out several handwritten pages: "This is the celestial language the Deity taught me, called 'Hanyu Pinyin'. I compiled it for you to carve and print into a book. Thus, you'll do something real for the Deity, and that food at home will feel less anxious to eat."

Xiao Dazheng was overjoyed: "Thank you, Deity! Thank you, Mr. Wang! I will fulfill this task without fail, carving and printing 'Hanyu Pinyin' perfectly."

Mr. Wang cautioned: "I must remind you: the b and d are easily confused, and the C and E also cause mistakes... here... here... these are error-prone spots. One wrong character corrupts the children's learning... hmph..."

Xiao Dazheng assured him: "Master, rest easy. If I miss one character, I'll twist off my head and kick it to the Deity like a ball."

Li Daoxuan overheard this with delight: Good! Good! With artisans arriving one after another, Gaojia Village was branching out in multiple directions. Once my translator and printer started, even reduced printing made items huge and inconvenient to handle.

But now, with a woodcarver, Gaojia Village could make its own paper and publish its own books, truly incubating the word “culture.”

Culture linked to ideas!

With ideas would come elevation and expansion into a new world.

He had just been pondering this issue when those two started moving.

Li Daoxuan’s face showed divine pleasure as he lowered his head: “Yiye, tell Thirty-Two that an artisan named Xiao Dazheng plans to carve and print books. Get Thirty-Two to spare no help in finishing this quickly. On the day the first ‘Hanyu Pinyin’ is printed, reward the woodcarver heavily.”

Gao Yiye responded: “I obey!”

She was still sitting with Thirty-Two, Madam Bai, Young Master Bai, and others, overhearing Madam Bai scold her ‘lazy, purpose-wasting’ son. It was making her head spin. Seizing the chance from the Deity’s command, she quickly pulled Thirty-Two away: “Third steward, the Deity has an order for you.”

Thirty-Two, also overwhelmed, seized the exit: “Well, Madam Bai, Young Master Bai, you continue chatting. I must take my leave.”

They swiftly ran aside. Gao Yiye relayed Li Daoxuan’s message, so Thirty-Two hastily pursued the task. He summoned his hired Clerk Tan Liwen and rushed toward the artisans’ well.

Gao Yiye glanced left and right. Seemingly nothing more for herself, and the Deity silent, free time had come.

Her eyeballs rolled twice as she bolted toward the study well. Inside, a group of youngsters had just finished reading the “Hundred Family Surnames” and sat down for homework.

Gao Yiye crouched, sneaked past Mr. Wang, and crept up to an eight- or nine-year-old boy, whispering: “Gao Sanwa, Gao Sanwa.”

The boy, named Gao Sanwa, turned and murmured: “Big sister Yiye, are we really going?”

Gao Yiye nodded: “Now is the best time.”

Gao Sanwa slid down from his desk, hunched over, and followed behind Gao Yiye. They stealthily slipped out of the study well as Mr. Wang turned his head.

Watching this, Li Daoxuan couldn’t help chuckling: What was this? Gao Yiye had lured a child to skip class. Grabbing a little boy—this Saint Lady image was abandoned! What exactly was she taking him to do?

Gao Yiye and Gao Sanwa threaded through the layered passages of the encircled home and soon reached outside Gaojia Fortress. Parked there were three vehicles: Solar Vehicle No. 1, Solar Vehicle No. 2, Solar Vehicle No. 3.

Small to large, they measured two zhang (about 6 meters), three-something zhang (about 10 meters), and nine-something zhang (about 28 meters).

Gao Yiye climbed into Solar Vehicle No. 1’s driver seat, gripped the steering plow, and grinned: “Gao Sanwa, all set?”

Gao Sanwa stationed himself for controlling the sunshade, murmuring: “Big sister Yiye, will this really not bring trouble? If the Deity catches us privately using the ‘Solar Vehicle’, we’ll be punished.”

Gao Yiye retorted: “The Deity told me ‘do what you like’.”

Gao Sanwa argued: “But doing what you like still shouldn’t cross the Deity’s decree.”

Gao Yiye reasoned: “The decree only allowed Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu to drive; it didn’t forbid others. Whatever he didn’t order ‘do not do’ is permitted.”

Gao Sanwa fell silent.

That logic appeared sound.

After all a child yet reasonably daring, Gao Sanwa accepted: “Very well, then I’ll help you.”

Observing this, Li Daoxuan broke into a smile: This little girl had learned wordplay loopholes. Haha, these recent days of reading and writing weren’t wasted.

Chapter 122: Heard There Are Labor Offenders Here

Gao Yiye said to Gao Sanwa, “Lift the sunshade just a little. Don’t pull it up too much. The Solar Vehicle goes faster the more sunlight it gets. I don’t want to end up like Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu—those fools crashed into a wall on their first drive.”

Gao Sanwa chuckled, “I don’t want to be a fool either. The Deity himself called them ‘two fools.’ Chuwu and Brother Daniu will never shake off that label now.”

Gao Yiye replied, “Exactly. Once labeled a fool, you’d have to pay double the bride price to find a wife.”

Gao Sanwa grinned, “Why pay a bride price? Wouldn’t it be better to keep the food for myself?”

Gao Yiye rolled her eyes. “What does a kid know? Alright, let’s go.”

Gao Sanwa gently lifted the sunshade just a crack.

Amid the severe drought, sunlight was never lacking. That cursed sun hung in the sky daily. As soon as the sunshade lifted, the Solar Vehicle gained power and slowly rolled forward.

The movement of the sun chariot was big news in Gaojia Village.

Villagers working in the autumn wheat fields turned to look. Labor offenders felling trees on the hillside, still crafting doors and furniture, also swiveled their heads.

Dozens of eyes locked onto the sun chariot.

They'd hoped to see whether the two fools would crash today, but instead spotted the Saint Lady in the driver's seat, with Gao Sanwa controlling the sunlight behind her.

Villagers gasped, "Whoa! What's happening? Isn't Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu driving today?"

"Why is the Saint Lady operating it?"

"Sanwa's up there too?" Gao San Niang scrambled onto the fortress wall, shouting, "Sanwa! What are you doing? Is this the Deity's decree?"

Gao Sanwa panicked, "Shh! Shh! Mom, don't yell! I'm supposed to be in class at the study well. If the teacher hears, he'll know I skipped!"

His reply echoed back—now the whole village knew he'd ditched school.

Gao San Niang fumed, nostrils flaring. She grabbed a rattan stick and charged out from the Fortress.

"Yiye-jie, I need to speed up!" Gao Sanwa cried, "Mom's coming!"

Gao Yiye laughed heartily, "I've learned how to steer. We can go faster now."

“Great! Escape then!” Gao Sanwa pulled the sunshade higher. Solar Vehicle No. 1 whooshed forward, carrying Gao Yiye and Gao Sanwa onto the sole cement road outside the village, racing toward Zhengjia Village.

Gao San Niang couldn’t possibly catch up. She stomped her feet, screaming, “You’ll come home tonight! Just wait till I serve you bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat!”

Gao Sanwa yelled back, “Meat tonight? Wow! Awesome! Mom, wait for me to eat—don’t finish it!”

The whole village burst into laughter.

The vehicle raced down the cement road. Solar Vehicle No. 1 was the crudest prototype—no cabin, not even a windshield. As it accelerated, the headwind swept Gao Yiye’s long hair behind her.

A rush of exhilaration surged through her, tempting her to shout with joy.

Too long restrained!

Yet I’ve always been the most mischievous girl in Gaojia Village—hahaha!

Watching the girl speed along, Li Daoxuan’s heart swelled with contentment. A smile touched his lips. So it seems what I truly crave is others’ happiness—not their sorrow.

Perhaps saving others isn’t just about rescuing them. Maybe I’m also saving myself—trapped in endless, joyless, high-speed modern life.

Could my own happiness be included in the Rescue Index too?

Li Daoxuan took a bite of his Leshan skewered chicken. Whoa! Spicier than expected. Lost in deep thoughts earlier—had to stop. Overthinking risks diving into philosophy, and philosophy is a sure path to madness.

To maintain one's mental health, it's best not to dwell too deeply on any matter.

Eat a skewer!

Just as he stuffed a chicken gizzard skewer into his mouth, he suddenly noticed a group of shabbily dressed people walking along the official road. They were coming from the southwest direction, and that direction led to the county town.

Li Daoxuan thought to himself: Could it be that new craftsmen had arrived? Hey, when it came to craftsmen, more was definitely better.

However, he soon realized he was mistaken. These people were clearly not craftsmen. They walked up to the gate of Gaojia Fortress, and no craftsmen from inside the fortress came out to greet them, meaning there was no introducer.

The sentinel on the fortress wall immediately focused on them: "Halt! Who are you?"

Currently, Gaojia Village would not casually allow strangers into the fortress. Wandering around the village was fine, but entering the fortress was not allowed.

At the sentinel's shout, the group immediately cowered into a frightened cluster and dared not move.

The one who seemed the youngest and bravest among them raised his hand and loudly said: "Excuse me, is this Li Family's Fortress of Gaojia Village?"

Everyone in the village had long been instructed by Thirty-Two that when facing unfamiliar strangers, they should refer to it as Li Family's Fortress. Therefore, the sentinel nodded and replied: "That's right, this is Gaojia Village, Lord Li's family fortress."

The newly arrived group immediately got excited: "We finally arrived!"

"We found it, Gaojia Village's Li Family Fortress."

“Great!”

The sentinel sensed something unusual; he stared wide-eyed at the group, not daring to look away, while another sentinel quickly ran off and called Thirty-Two over.

Thirty-Two peered over the wall: “Who are you? What brings you here? I am the steward of the Li Family. You can say anything to me.”

The group of shabbily dressed people raised their heads and started babbling all at once: “We are from Cao Village, Shi Village, and Dai Village near the county town. We suffered from a drought disaster and had no food, so we went to the county town to beg. But the gruel provided by the county magistrate was too thin; it was just enough to prevent starvation, yet we still couldn’t eat our fill. We heard from a candy-selling gentleman that Lord Li of Gaojia Village is a kind-hearted family...”

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan thought: So they came to beg for food.

Thirty-Two had the same thought. He was about to have the idle helpers bring some food for the group when he heard them continue:

“The candy-selling gentleman said that in Gaojia Village, there’s a type of long-term laborer called ‘labor offenders.’ As long as we work hard, we can eat our fill every day. So we came here. Please, Steward, take us on as labor offenders.”

Li Daoxuan: “Pfft!”

Thirty-Two froze.

Clerk Tan Liwen beside him, the two sentinels, and several idle helpers couldn’t hold it in and burst out laughing.

Seeing them laugh, the group below panicked, thinking they were being looked down upon by the Li Family’s servants.

“Lord Li might be a kind lord, but it’s easy to see the Yama Wang, yet the little demons are troublesome. Servants love to bully people; with them laughing like this, the job is probably doomed.”

The group hastily urged: “Steward, we work very efficiently and with all our strength. Whatever you assign us, we can get it done perfectly. How about letting us be ‘labor offenders’ for three days first as a trial? If you’re satisfied, then we can become long-term labor offenders.”

Li Daoxuan laughed so hard that the grilled chicken skewer fell out of his mouth, dirtying the floor. The mighty Deity, prostrating on the ground, used a paper napkin to wipe the floor, orz!

Chapter 123: Such a Pleasant Place

Thirty-Two stared down from the fortress wall at the crowd eagerly begging to become labor offenders. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Letting out a sigh, he tilted his head back and earnestly recalled how the Deity had always handled such situations in the past.

His course of action became clear.

He had the fort gate opened and walked out to stand before the group of people clad in rags. “Esteemed folks, you might not understand. A ‘labor offender’ refers to a criminal who must use labor to atone for their wrongdoing. They are all criminals.”

Hearing this, the group froze in stunned silence.

Several seconds later, metaphorical lightbulbs lit up above their heads as they grasped an idea.

A young man raised a stick. “Steward! If I beat you till your head’s bleeding right now, would that make me a criminal? Then I could atone through labor?”

Thirty-Two stumbled backward several steps. “What, are you fools? Stop! What I meant is—you upstanding civilians have no need to perform the tasks meant for criminals. I shall arrange different work for you.”

The crowd gasped in unison, “Ya!” Their faces lit up with joy.

Thirty-Two cleared his throat forcefully, “Cough! Cough! Cough!” to regain control of the situation. “Gaojia Village has plenty of work requiring physical labor. We need many short-term laborers. Since you wish to come here and work, of course, we have no reason to refuse you. Hmm... let’s settle the wages first, then discuss the tasks...”

Their eyes widened as one, faces brimming with anticipation.

Thirty-Two spoke first: “For starters, we will provide food and lodging.”

“BOOM!” The crowd cheered as one. “Food provided!”

Thirty-Two shook his head with a smile. “Look at you; how lacking in ambition. Getting so excited just hearing about food. Cough. Board and meals are the labor offenders’ terms. But you are not criminals; you are ordinary short-term laborers. So besides food and lodging, we must also pay you wages.”

The crowd cheered again: “Plus wages?!”

Thirty-Two added: “The wages won’t be high, mind you.”

The crowd chanted: “Low wages!”

Eh? Wait. That phrase wasn’t worthy of cheers.

The group froze mid-cheer. All celebrations ceased abruptly. Sheepish grins spread over their faces.

Thirty-Two announced: “The wages will amount to twenty pounds of flour, two pounds of pork, and two liang of salt per month.”

The crowd stared blankly once more: This is what he calls ‘not much’? Good grief! Isn’t this too much? Already more than I dare believe!

“BOOM!” Renewed cheering erupted: “Low wages are wonderful!”

“Lord Li is truly benevolent!”

“Such a good Steward!”

Thirty-Two shook his head, smiling. He turned his back to the refugees so they wouldn't see his face. His mouth involuntarily stretched wide into an ear-to-ear grin that he could barely suppress.

Back when he worked as secretary for Zhang Yaocai, the common folk always cursed him. He had wanted to help them but was powerless. Now, seeing a whole crowd celebrating with joy over just a few words from him—it felt genuinely wonderful.

Thanks to the Deity, giving me the confidence and the power to be a good man for once.

After finishing his silent laugh, Thirty-Two turned back around. He deliberately stretched his face long to project authority. “Wages settled, let's discuss the work.”

The crowd chorused: “We'll do any work. Absolutely any!”

Thirty-Two stated: “Good. Then it's cement mixing and cement road paving.”

A thick cloud of question marks floated above the crowd's heads: “??? ??? ???”

Thirty-Two beckoned: “Follow me. I shall teach you...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Tan Liwen's head popped out from behind him: “Dong Weng, minor tasks don't require a master's effort; leave such matters to me instead.”

Thirty-Two slapped his head, nearly forgetting that he wasn't the clerk but the one who had employed the clerk.

Hurriedly, he mumbled: "Clerk Tan, arrange food and lodging for these people. Teach them to mix cement for road paving. Make sure to handle it properly."

Tan Liwen bowed and then beckoned to the crowd: "All of you, come with me."

The group followed Tan Liwen and went away.

Thirty-Two grinned again: "Heh heh heh, ha ha ha, this is what we call 'every family has enough'."

Li Daoxuan shifted his gaze from Thirty-Two and began focusing on Tan Liwen.

Clerk Tan was arranging food and lodging for that group. Food was simple; just grabbing a bit of food from the warehouse on the watchtower's second floor was enough to fill them up. But lodging became a problem.

After all, they were newcomers without recommenders like the craftsmen had. Clerk Tan dared not let them live inside Gaojia Fortress, fearing that if a few unscrupulous types were among them, the fortress residents might be at risk.

He couldn't help glancing toward the plastic houses outside the fortress where the labor offenders lived, pondering: Should he house these temporary workers with the labor offenders? Yet that might not be wise either.

Li Daoxuan sensed his hesitation and thought to himself: Gaojia Village's reputation had spread. Future external exchanges would increase, and more people might volunteer for labor. If things continued this way, they really needed to consider accepting immigrants.

They must set up an area to absorb outside immigrants!

It couldn't be too far from the fortress, for that would hinder his observation.

Nor could they occupy the farmland around Gaojia Fortress.

He kept clicking “north, south, east, and west”, scanning within his line of sight for a suitable spot. He quickly found one: by the bamboo grove southwest of Gaojia Fortress, a rocky slope with thin soil unsuitable for farming. In the rock cracks, tender green grass shoots emerged, a gift from his “rain” days earlier.

“That’s the spot!”

Li Daoxuan took out a big sample box sent by Ningyang Toys, pulled out a dozen plastic houses, and positioned them toward that rocky slope...

In an instant, rows of colorful houses stood tall on the slope.

Villagers heard strange noises from that direction and turned to look. Thirty-Two and Clerk Tan saw the new houses and understood at once: the Deity was providing housing for the refugees.

“The Deity is benevolent!”

Everyone promptly bowed grandly to the sky.

Only the newcomers stood dumbfounded, unsure of what happened.

Though they couldn’t grasp it, they felt deeply impressed.

Clerk Tan chuckled: “After living here a few days, you’ll get it. Come with me, let’s sort out your new house assignments.”

As he walked, he instructed his assistant: “Head to the artisans’ well and tell the blacksmiths to make a few iron pots and kitchen knives for these newcomers, so they’ve got gear for cooking.”

“Also, swing by the bamboo weaver to fetch some bamboo baskets or bamboo baskets and the like for their use.”

“And visit the carpenter for some custom beds...”

Listening to his meticulous arrangements covering every detail, the refugees thought to themselves: They had truly come to the right place. At Gaojia Village, even folks like them were cared for so well — what a fine place indeed.

Chapter 124: A Celebration

Five days later!

Early in the morning, Li Daoxuan was already up.

Since obtaining the scenic box, his daily rhythm had started syncing up with the ancients. Rise with the sun, work with the sun, rest when the sun... cough, no! He'd still play until midnight before sleeping. Even if his body wanted rest, his mind would say “I'll just scroll two more minutes”. Even when his mind craved rest, his fingers would keep scrolling unconsciously.

Anyway, he could sleep whenever at night, but as soon as dawn broke, his biological clock would shake him awake.

He ordered pumpkin porridge takeout and, holding the bowl, blew on it vigorously to cool it down.

Just then, Bai Yuan arrived.

Riding a fine horse, accompanied by several servants, he came to Gaojia Village in high spirits. Before even entering the village, while still on horseback, he solemnly saluted towards the sky above Gaojia Village from afar, paying respects to the Deity.

Bai Yuan was particularly conscientious about the “Rites” aspect of the Six Arts of Gentlemen.

The sentinel on the watchtower shouted: “Lord Bai is here!”

So Thirty-Two, Gao Yiye, Madam Bai, Young Master Bai, and the others quickly came out to greet him. Even Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, Li Da, Gao Yiyi, and others came over to welcome Bai Yuan.

Everyone was happy to see Bai Yuan safe and sound.

Bai Yuan clasped his hands together with a smile, "Greetings to you all. I've come to Gaojia Village specifically to share good news and thank the Deity."

Gao Yiye smiled, "The Deity has already received your gratitude."

Bai Yuan bowed deep once more.

Thirty-Two said, "Mr. Bai, since you have left Bai Family Fortress to come to Gaojia Village, what if the bandits seize the chance to attack Bai Family Fortress?"

Bai Yuan laughed, "Hahaha, relax, relax. Those vermin have been utterly terrified by the Deity's magical missiles and wouldn't dare come near Bai Family Fortress again. Cheng Xu sent scouts to watch them; it seems they no longer dare to come down the northern slope of Bai Family Fortress. They've gone off in some other direction."

Hearing this, everyone finally felt reassured.

Bai Yuan turned to Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, "You two can go to Bai Family Fortress and retrieve the magical missiles."

The two simple strongmen responded, "Yes, sir!"

Bai Yuan then turned to Madam Bai and Young Master Bai, "You two can return with me to Bai Family Fortress."

Madam Bai was overjoyed, "Alright, I shall go pack our belongings immediately."

Young Master Bai, however, said, “Father, I wish to stay in Gaojia Village.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Madam Bai gave him a hard pinch on the arm, “Are you trying to escape my supervision of your studies?”

Young Master Bai covered his face, “Mother, at the study well in Gaojia Village, I learned divine language taught directly by the Deity. It’s called ‘Hanyu Pinyin’. It’s an incredibly profound study. I wouldn’t feel content leaving before fully mastering it.”

Hearing this, Madam Bai awkwardly hid the hand she had just used to pinch, “Ahem... so that’s the case... Your mother... I mean...”

She seemed like she wanted to apologize.

Bai Yuan didn’t hesitate, “If it’s a divine language personally taught by the Deity, then naturally, you should finish learning it. You can stay at Gaojia Village for now; your mother can go back.”

Madam Bai became very anxious, “My child is barely thirteen and a half! Leaving him here alone, how can I be at ease?”

Bai Yuan replied, “Under the Deity’s care in this place, what is there to worry about?”

Madam Bai stated, “I just am uneasy. I’m not going back. I’m staying here too. Otherwise, who will take care of the child?”

Bai Yuan: “...”

Young Master Bai spoke softly: “Mother, you should head back now. I’ll be fine here alone—”

Smack! Madam Bai delivered a firm pinch to Young Master Bai’s arm: “So eager to shoo your own mother away? Do you wish to disown me?”

A chill ran through the onlookers. They thought, With how often you resort to pinching, who wouldn't want you gone?

Li Daoxuan's gaze involuntarily shifted toward Bai Yuan. This man sends his wife to Gaojia Fortress at the first sign of trouble... Could it be...

Bai Yuan replied without a flicker of hesitation: "My wife, staying with our child is excellent. Truly excellent! This husband naturally supports it."

Li Daoxuan choked: Pfft! Knew it!

Bai Yuan waved his hand. A servant emerged from behind him, presenting a small crock jar. Bai Yuan smiled warmly: "To celebrate Bai Family Fortress repelling the bandits and securing total victory, I brought this jar of wine. Tonight, let's share this with Gaojia Village friends until each of us reaches our measure."

The crowd cheered: "Splendid!"

Gao Chuwu scratched his head doubtfully: "Such a tiny jar... how many sips will each person get? Won't even begin to satisfy the craving."

Zheng Daniu echoed: "Exactly! I could down half the jar in one gulp alone."

Bai Yuan flushed slightly awkward: "Three years of drought left Bai Family Fortress no surplus grain. We haven't brewed any wine in three years. This small jar was buried in my garden back when I made it five years ago and forgotten. Just days ago, dismantling a fake mountain to position the magical missiles unearthed it— that's when I remembered it existed."

He sighed wistfully: "Since the drought began, a single sip of wine became a distant wish. Only this small jar remains, no more. Let's share it modestly and just... seek a moment's joy."

Hearing their strained exchange, Li Daoxuan recalled: Oh, right. The severe drought slashed harvests. These little people haven't tasted wine for years. Naturally, they'd crave its warmth for celebration.

Good. Let's give them just a little.

Li Daoxuan went downstairs into the supermarket.

His small market stocked only modest wines— the kind priced between twenty to one hundred yuan. Since Li Daoxuan didn't drink, he barely knew good from bad. Just grab a recognizable brand, he decided. A small bottle of Wuliangye, 52 proof, one hundred twenty yuan.

Perhaps too strong for some tastes? He tossed in a bottle of Shuangqing beer— a few yuan cheap.

Grasping both bottles cheerfully, he returned to his diorama.

Inside, the little figures had set up a makeshift table in the watchtower's central courtyard. Only that single crock jar stood on it. As few shared what little wine remained, guilt tugged at them for excluding others.

Suddenly, Gao Yiye jumped up, radiant: "Prepare cups! Everyone! The Deity says he'll gift us divine wine from the heavens!"

Zheng Daniu— the most experienced recipient of celestial "happy fat water"— reacted faster than thought. He flashed home and back instantly, clutching a huge wooden basin.

A strange, transparent tube descended from above, hovering over Zheng Daniu's basin. Something squeezed...

Plop.

One shimmering, gigantic drop fell. The basin filled instantly.

Fragrant spirits splashed as rich winy steam saturated the air. Wuliangye's famed aroma truly impressed.

Bai Yuan's eyebrows lifted: "Superior wine."

Thirty-Two sniffed appreciatively: "So fragrant."

Gaojia's commoner-born folks, however, held no discernment for wine merit. Gao Chuwu grinned eagerly: "Divine wine! First scoop's mine!" Seizing a large bowl, he dunked it deep into Zheng Daniu's basin, raised it brimming high, and tossed it back toward his throat...

Chapter 125: The Battle of Fengyuan Town

Li Daoxuan knew at a glance that Gao Chuwu, this fool, was going to be in trouble.

This was 52-degree alcohol, 52 degrees!

Were you swallowing it with a bowl?

And pouring a whole bowl straight into your mouth?

He was almost ready to be dragged out and buried.

Sure enough, after downing that bowl, Gao Chuwu immediately felt strange, swayed left and right, and with a thud, he collapsed.

Ironically, a few people nearby didn't take it seriously; they were still clapping and laughing, "Hahaha, Gao Chuwu this idiot, who drinks like that?"

They had no sense of danger at all.

Li Daoxuan had to order, "Make him vomit and get the alcohol out."

Gao Yiye conveyed the Decree of the Deity, and only then did everyone realize how serious it was. They hurriedly picked Gao Chuwu up, jostled him this way and that, and after a long while, they made him vomit out that bowl of alcohol he had downed, and only then did they stop.

Gao Chuwu slept foolishly in a corner of the courtyard.

Li Daoxuan said, "This alcohol is strong; moderate your consumption."

Everyone hurriedly bowed, "Heavenly divine alcohol, mortals cannot gulp it down; we will remember." They glanced at Gao Chuwu, thinking: Gulping it down will make you like this fool; you can learn from anyone, but definitely not from Gao Chuwu.

Li Daoxuan took another mineral water bottle cap, filled it with beer, and slowly lowered it: "This is called beer; it's milder and suitable for most people. Those who can't handle the strong one should drink beer."

"Thank you, Deity!"

In an instant, there was plenty of alcohol.

It was no longer exclusive to just a few people; everyone could get a share.

Soon, all the blacksmiths, paper makers, road construction workers, women weaving cloth, along with the labor offenders cutting trees in Gaojia Village, temporarily put down their work.

They picked up their wine cups!

Clearly, it was just an ordinary day, not any important holiday, but they felt really happy and excited.

"Cheers!"

"Drink!"

“What exactly are we celebrating today?”

“Seems like we’re celebrating the Bai Family Fortress defeating the bandits.”

“That’s not that big a deal, is it? Last time, when Gaojia Village defeated the Supreme Bright King, we didn’t celebrate on such a large scale.”

“Who cares? If there’s alcohol to drink, why are you talking nonsense? Alcohol is brewed from grain; do you know what times we’re in? I haven’t smelled alcohol for three years.”

“The Deity’s divine alcohol smells so good, but it’s so strong; I can’t even finish one cup; just a small sip and my head is spinning.”

“Hahaha, otherwise, how could it be divine alcohol?”

“Cheers!”

Throughout Gaojia Village, there was joyous laughter everywhere...

...

Meanwhile, at Fengyuan Town in Chengcheng County.

“Bandits are coming! Bandits are coming!”

The scout roared himself hoarse as he charged through Fengyuan Town’s gate. The gate slammed shut behind him with a thunderous boom. Crowds of local gentry surged onto the wall tops, straining their eyes nervously towards the north.

Vast hordes of bandits had appeared on the yellow fields to the north. Among them fluttered two large banners—one emblazoned with the character “Ni,” the other with “Guazi.” This was indeed the army of Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi.

Seeing the overwhelming tide of bandits approach, the gentry, merchants, and militia instructors standing atop Fengyuan Town’s low wall, barely three meters tall, turned deathly pale.

Liang Shixian, the Chengcheng County Magistrate, stood among them. Fear gripped him too!

But he was the county magistrate. Even if afraid, he had to stand his ground. The magistrate’s duty was to protect the land and people of his county.

“The bandits did come to Fengyuan Town,” he thought. “They failed twice to breach the Bai Family Fortress, abandoned it, and detoured straight here for Fengyuan Town. Hmph, fortunately this official anticipated this and has been waiting here for some time.”

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, immediately activated his tactical analysis mode in his mind. Enemy numbers, formation, equipment, morale, path, flaws, vulnerabilities... this flood of data constantly rearranged itself in his thoughts, spinning like a carousel. Finally, with a “ding,” it froze on a single mental image.

That image bore four large words: This Official Cannot!

Liang Shixian panicked internally: “Trouble! Matters of warfare... they lie completely outside this official’s knowledge!”

“County Lord! Quickly order the archers to shoot!” The Fengyuan Town militia instructor jumped forward.

His shout snapped Liang Shixian back to reality slightly. He hastily commanded: “Loose arrows! Loose arrows!”

Though utterly inexperienced in warfare, his preparatory efforts had been solid. Large numbers of militia and local gentry lined the walls, drawing their longbows—bows made entirely of plastic.

Precisely!

The same bows Li Daoxuan had lent him.

Their performance was far inferior to the “Kaiyuan Bows” used by imperial forces. Yet, with arms half a zhang long (around 1.6 meters), they possessed a modicum of power, marginally stronger than the small bamboo bows used by hunters.

The militia and gentry drew back their large plastic bows, nocking crude, hastily made arrows with sharpened wooden tips. A chaotic flurry of arrows rained down onto the bandits outside the town.

Plastic bows coupled with sharpened wooden arrows meant pitifully low penetrating power.

But sheer volume compensated.

Five hundred plastic bows, even firing wildly inaccurate arrows, produced a visually terrifying spectacle.

Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi were caught completely off guard. What kind of sense did it make for a tiny, ramshackle town to field five hundred archers? This defied all logic!

The fierce bandits leading the charge started falling with thunk-thunk-thunk sounds as arrows struck them. While these shafts lacked the killing power of the imperial arrows that ravaged them earlier at Bai Family Fortress, the frontline raiders still suffered heavily. Many howled in agony.

Some collapsed. Others stumbled over fallen comrades. Some sheltered behind their own men, using comrades as human shields, sparking furious insults and arguments within their own ranks.

Instantly, the bandit army descended into chaos.

“Too many archers!”

“Fengyuan Town’s just a small place! Where’d they find so many archers?”

“We can’t charge through this!”

With the town unleashing a continuous flurry of arrows, the bandits couldn’t advance. Morale teetered on the brink of collapse. Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi both felt the urge to retreat blossom in their hearts.

Just then, a force emerged from the eastern gully. At its head stood Cheng Xu, the Inspector. He had been observing from the sidelines for quite some time, waiting precisely for the bandits’ momentum to wane, signaling the moment to turn the tide.

If a battle seemed certain defeat, Cheng Xu was more cowardly than anyone.

But for a sure victory, Cheng Xu was braver than the rest.

He let out a hearty laugh: “So you thought you’d attack Chengcheng County? Thought you’d pinch a soft target? Come on then! See if this old man feels soft to you!”

He thrust his hand forward and roared with all his might: “Men! Charge!”

Over a hundred officials surged forward, striking deep into the bandits’ flank.

Inside the town, Liang Shixian saw this: “Ha! Cheng Xu is here too! Heaven helps me! I need to think... what action must be taken now...”

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, immediately activated in his mind...

“Open the town gate! Charge out and attack!” The militia instructor beside him bellowed.

The town gates swung wide open. Nearly a thousand militia and local gentry uttered a unified battle cry and charged outwards.

Liang Shixian: "Ah? This official's mental carousel hasn't had time to start spinning!"

Cheng Xu's flank charge and the militia's frontal assault terrified Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi. They dared not engage the enemy. Wheeling around, they fled for their lives.

Chapter 126: A New Approach to Solving Problems

Early in the morning, just after Li Daoxuan got out of bed, he noticed an extra line of text on the box that read, "Wangjia Village."

Huh? When did this line appear?

Perhaps after last night's drunken revelry?

Yesterday, the entire Gaojia Village celebrated with drink, as festive as a holiday. Villagers who'd enjoyed their fill danced merrily, refusing to sleep even after dark. They lit a large bonfire outside the village, where a crowd of miniature figures danced awkwardly around it.

Li Daoxuan, never a drinker, couldn't help but pour himself a few glasses of beer to join the villagers in their merriment. After that fun, he grew curious about the taste of Wuliangye. One sip led to another, and he got thoroughly drunk, losing clear memory of the rest.

Only now, after crawling out of bed, did he notice that the Rescue Index had risen further, and the words "Wangjia Village" had appeared on the box.

It seemed his view had expanded several more miles overnight, incorporating Wangjia Village. Who got rescued? Not exactly sure. Whatever. As long as he ignored the Rescue Index, no one could pressure him into overexertion.

Li Daoxuan tapped his finger on the words “Wangjia Village,” and his perspective instantly shifted there. What greeted his eyes was a village twice the size of Gaojia Village, but most of thatched huts were burnt ruins. The entire place lay desolate.

Unlikely to be wrong, this must be the village where Wang Er led the uprising. Most of Wangjia Village’s inhabitants had followed Wang Er away, with only a few families relocating to Gaojia Village.

Li Daoxuan let out a long sigh. He took out his medical nebulizer, pointed it skyward over Wangjia Village, and began spraying.

Then, he ordered an oil tea delivery. After washing his face, rinsing his mouth, and going through his usual morning chores, the oil tea arrived. Holding the paper bowl, he sat down by the scenic box.

After half an hour of spraying, the land surface of Wangjia Village was thoroughly moistened, no longer a desolate expanse of cracked, parched earth.

He put away the nebulizer and switched the view back to Gaojia Village.

This dawn in Gaojia Village wasn’t as lively as usual, a sign that many were still nursing hangovers. The day after a wild celebration often brought exhaustion.

Yet, the “study well” operated normally, just like any other day.

The children had already completed their morning exercises, drunk goat milk, and were now seated in rows, beginning their recitations.

Even Young Master Bai had joined in. Although he’d long finished the basic primers, Hanyu Pinyin was entirely new to him. Thus, Mr. Wang had to give him special remedial lessons.

Li Daoxuan took out his phone, glanced at the prepared volumes of guiding ideological texts he had bookmarked, and sighed. Introducing these books to the kids now was too early. He still needed to wait; rushing wouldn’t help.

Just as he thought this, a craftsman hurried into the study well clutching some small wooden blocks. He called excitedly to Mr. Wang, “Sir, I’ve carved the Pinyin characters. May you please review them?”

Mr. Wang was overjoyed. “Show me.”

The craftsman was the woodcarver from before. What he held was precisely the woodblocks for printing.

During the Ming Dynasty, movable-type printing was already in use. Common Chinese characters were carved onto small wooden blocks. When needed, these blocks were arranged in a small wooden frame, pressed onto paper, and a page could be printed.

The woodcarver had now completed the Pinyin alphabet. He dipped a block in ink, pressed it forcefully onto paper with a thump, and a “a” appeared, stamped clearly like a seal.

Mr. Wang exclaimed delightedly, “Very good! This is ‘a’. And the others? Print them all out. I’ll check each one.”

The woodcarver picked up more blocks. With a series of click-clack sounds, he stamped every Pinyin letter onto the paper.

Mr. Wang examined each character meticulously, his excitement growing. “Excellent! Not a single error. You truly meant what you said about careful, detailed work.”

Praise visibly lit up the woodcarver’s face.

Mr. Wang asked, “Then, can we begin printing the divine book Hanyu Pinyin now?”

His heart stirred with excitement. This was the celestial language taught by the Deity. To print it into a book would grant him a heavenly text! Teaching it to other children constituted ‘transmitting the lost wisdom of past sages’ – a lifelong aspiration for any scholar.

The woodcarver shook his head with mild awkwardness. "Apologies, but with just these letters, printing a book is impossible. I still need to carve all the common characters."

His words jolted Mr. Wang awake.

In a city, a craftsman would only need to carve the Pinyin characters, pairing them with pre-made wooden blocks for common characters acquired from established printers. Print runs could start immediately. But Gaojia Village was virgin territory for publishing. Not only were completely new Pinyin blocks needed, but so was every single common character block. There simply was no quick way around this.

"Aiya!" Mr. Wang clutched his head, slightly frustrated. "With you being the one and only woodcarver, preparing all the common characters would take ages."

The woodcarver also felt uncomfortable. "There are too few in my trade... I can't find anyone to help share the load. Sincerely sorry. I need more time."

As they conversed, Young Master Bai, who'd been eavesdropping, suddenly stood up. "This matter is easily solved."

They both stared at him, startled.

Young Master Bai grinned. "Just send someone into the county town and buy Chengcheng Bookstore. Problem solved! Then we haul all their pre-carved common character blocks to Gaojia Village. Paired with this craftsman's fresh Pinyin blocks, we start printing that very instant."

Holy crap! That woke the dreamer!

Mr. Wang and the woodcarver froze simultaneously. This... was actually an option?

Li Daoxuan also couldn't help but chuckle silently. Exactly! Why hadn't anyone thought of this before? Ah! Got it! Most talents in Gaojia Village came from humble origins. The handful of educated individuals

like Thirty-Two, Mr. Wang, and Clerk Tan had climbed from poverty. Life circumstances hardened their problem-solving approach – “Grit my teeth and push harder” rather than “Just throw money at it.”

With Young Master Bai here, problem-solving just gained a whole new dimension.

Mr. Wang exclaimed happily, “Young Master Bai, this mission belongs to you alone!”

“Me? Impossible.” Young Master Bai spread his hands, expressing regret. “I’m thirteen years old. If I tried buying a bookstore, they’d slap me with a hard pinch and kick me out.”

Both listeners inwardly thought: You’re Young Master of Bai Family Fortress! Who besides your own mother would dare pinch your cheek?

Still, a half-grown child attempting to buy a bookstore was incredibly strange. Even if the owner wouldn’t physically pinch him, they’d likely refuse to take such a business proposition seriously. This needed a grown adult.

Young Master Bai clasped his hands towards Mr. Wang with a respectful bow. “Sir, you are a scholar. Surely you’ve bought books from Chengcheng Bookstore before. The owner must recognize you. If you casually claim you struck gold, arrived with coin in hand to purchase his business, it would be perfectly logical. With you negotiating, closing this deal would be effortless.”

Mr. Wang paused, his eyes widening slightly. “Ah... That makes excellent sense!”

Chapter 127: The Second Cement Road

Mr. Wang prepared to depart. He first borrowed a decent set of clothes from Thirty-Two, making himself appear less shabby. Packing several large silver balls into a bundle, he attempted to sling it over his back with flair but was immediately crushed to the ground by its weight, unable to move.

He cried out, “Help!”

Several people rushed over to lift the bundle off him, freeing him at last.

Gasping for breath, Mr. Wang wheezed, “Silver—such a love-hate affair.”

Thirty-Two chuckled, “Mr. Wang, as a scholar, how could you haul so much silver alone? Besides, traveling solo is unsafe. Take some young men with you. Have them pose as your servants so you resemble a wealthy man who can afford to buy a publishing house.”

So, the group was reorganized.

Gao Chuwu was still hungover and thus exempt. Zheng Daniu carried the silver-filled bundle, and a group of young men joined to form a “servant team,” creating quite a convincing display.

Mr. Wang concocted a story: he’d served as a tutor for a wealthy lord, received generous rewards, and now aimed to purchase a publishing house to preserve scholarly heritage.

With his story set, he led Zheng Daniu and the others toward the county town.

Meanwhile, Gaojia Village finally shook off its collective hangover. Villagers rose and stretched their limbs.

Li Daoxuan saw Gao Yiye awake and summoned her to gather the few remaining Wangjia Village villagers. He informed them rain had finally graced Wangjia Village.

Regrettably, it was already late November of Year Seven of Tianqi. Winter approached, and sowing crops now was futile.

Planting so late meant seedlings wouldn’t mature before the cold; they’d perish in the coming freeze.

Li Daoxuan briefly considered plastic greenhouses but dismissed the idea. Too soon—no need for such technological leaps yet.

Unlike him, the villagers weren’t disheartened. Rain in Wangjia Village alone was joyous news. They saw no urgency to plant: autumn wheat now would disrupt spring wheat later. With winter imminent, they’d wait until spring’s renewal to return and sow properly—the true way of farming.

One Wangjia Villager looked skyward and addressed the Deity, “Since we must wait for spring to plant, why not spend this winter extending the cement road to Wangjia Village? Come spring, we could ride the Solar Vehicle back to tend our fields. Would this work, Deity?”

Li Daoxuan smiled. Clever villager indeed.

“Yiye, tell Thirty-Two to allocate cement for Wangjia villagers. Arrange short-term laborers and labor offenders to help. Let’s build our second cement road—to Wangjia Village.”

Yiye relayed the message, and Wangjia villagers erupted in cheers.

Brimming with energy, they grabbed hoes and shovels, charging toward the official road to Wangjia Village to begin digging. Dust swirled as they worked...

Amid their enthusiastic digging, a tall horse appeared on the southwestern stretch of the road. Riding it was a man in official garments, followed by a retinue of yamen runners and porters guiding carts piled high with vividly colored longbows.

Liang Shixian had arrived!

He’d come to return the bows.

Liang Shixian considered himself an upright official. Having borrowed the Li Family’s property, he was duty-bound to return it.

Thus, escorted by runners and porters, he arrived at Gaojia Village with carts carrying five hundred longbows.

Nearing the village entrance, he noticed villagers digging fiercely beside the road, kicking up clouds of dust. A gust blew grit into his face before he could react, leaving him coughing violently.

The enraged runners shouted, “How dare you, insolent peasants! Assaulting the County Lord!”

Liang Shixian immediately silenced them. “Why scold them? They were digging long before my arrival. How is this assault?”

The runners sheepishly fell silent, their flattery having backfired.

Liang Shixian offered a warm smile. “Why dig here by the road?”

Cowed by the magistrate’s presence, the villagers huddled together. “We’re doing road construction—building a path from here to our village.”

Puzzled, Liang Shixian asked, “Isn’t there already an official road?”

A villager replied, “It’s too narrow and uneven. We’re widening it and paving it into a cement road.”

“Cement road?”

Knowledgeable in many matters, Liang Shixian mentally scoured his vast learning—rare artifacts, even strange machines brought by Westerners from distant lands flickered through his thoughts. Yet, only four characters materialized:

“No such thing found.”

Swallowing his pride, he inquired, “What is a cement road?”

The villagers pointed toward the opposite end of Gaojia Village. “See over there? That gray road leading to Zhengjia Village—that’s a cement road.”

Sitting tall on his horse, Liang Shixian peered into the distance. A gray ribbon indeed wound through the mountains like a hairtail fish, stretching far beyond sight.

“How peculiar. Why this color?”

He shelved his visit to Gaojia Fortress, heading toward the cement road with his scribe and runners instead. Staring down at its surface, he mused, “Why so flat? Riding upon it must be delightful.”

The scribe observed, “As if carved from a single giant stone.”

Liang Shixian frowned. “Who could shape stone so perfectly?”

“Beyond mortal skill,” the scribe admitted.

Liang Shixian clicked his tongue in awe. “Gaojia Village truly brims with marvels. Likely another of the Li Family’s creations.” Having intended to return the five hundred bows to the Li Family anyway, he added, “Perfect timing—I shall inquire about this cement road too.”

After adjusting his robes, he approached Gaojia Fortress. Thirty-Two, alerted by a sentinel, emerged to greet him.

Polite exchanges ensued. Finally, Liang Shixian began, “I’ve come to return the five hundred bows previously borrowed. Ahem...”

Though slightly sheepish, he continued. “Several dozen bowstrings broke under my men’s use. I shall compensate the Li Family for damages... in due course.”

Thirty-Two sounded surprised. “Returning the bows so soon? Does this mean the bandits won’t return?”

Rushing with pride, Liang Shixian happily confirmed, “Repeated defeats drove them back to Huanglong Mountain. Scouts report they’ve diverted westward—toward Luochuan County.”

Chapter 128: What Word is This

He went to Luochuan County, ah, Li Daoxuan thought: The people of Luochuan are suffering now.

However, he could only sigh about it, unable to help.

Liang Shixian's clerk and Thirty-Two's clerk Tan Liwen connected. The two clerks began to arrange their subordinates to carry the five hundred plastic great bows back to the watchtower.

The two leaders were relatively idle, so Liang Shixian brought up the topic of the cement road: "Thirty-Two, I saw that outside your fort's gate, there is a gray cement road extending out. This road is extremely flat, great for driving vehicles. How exactly was it made? Did you carve a whole giant stone flat and lay it on the ground?"

Thirty-Two shook his head: "That's not something humans can do. The so-called cement is a type of mud from the immortal realm. Stir it, spread it on the ground, and after it dries in the wind, it turns into such a road."

"Mud from the immortal realm?"

Liang Shixian was a bit confused.

Thirty-Two originally intended to bring out the name of Dao Xuan Deity to elaborate, but upon careful thought, Liang Shixian was a person from the government, and the government was still vigorously suppressing the White Lotus Sect. Regarding the matter of Dao Xuan Deity, it was better not to boast in front of him.

He changed his words: "Ahem, actually, it's a type of mud that my Lord Li obtained by chance."

This was much easier to accept. Liang Shixian: "Where did this mud come from? I too would like to..."

Thirty-Two shook his head: "Lord Liang, I have something to say, but I don't know if I should say it."

Liang Shixian: "With such an opening, it means whether it should be said or not, you will definitely say it. Then, please enlighten me."

Thirty-Two: "Shaanxi has suffered from drought for consecutive years, and the people are in dire straits. Given the current conditions of the people in Chengcheng, if you add corvee labor and make them build cement roads while hungry, I fear..."

Liang Shixian suddenly realized and hurriedly bowed deeply: "What you say is true, Thirty-Two. This official has been enlightened."

He turned his head and looked at the cement road outside the fort leading to Zhengjia Village. Deep down, he felt somewhat envious.

Building bridges and repairing roads have always been good deeds that last for generations. Deep in his heart, he still wanted to create several decent roads for the county under his jurisdiction, but... the current situation truly did not allow it.

Alas!

He also did not know when this cursed drought would finally end.

...

Capital city, imperial palace, Imperial Study.

Emperor Chongzhen Zhu Youjian was browsing through memorials.

The memorials from Shaanxi were becoming increasingly unbearable to look at. One message was worse than another. The memorial from Provincial Governor of Shaanxi Hu Tingyan said that the border pay for Lingong had been delayed for five or six years, amounting to over two hundred thousand taels of silver owed. Jinglu border fortress was short by two or three years respectively. Guzhenjingyun transport, from the forty-seventh year of Wanli to the sixth year of Tianqi, totaled a debt of one hundred fifty-nine thousand taels of silver...

Between the lines of this memorial, it radiated three words: "I want money!"

But where did Zhu Youjian have money for him?

Looking at the next memorial: Bu Zhan Ni plundered grain from wealthy families in Luochuan. The authorities pursued him urgently, and he gathered to become a bandit.

The next one: Zuo Guazi from Qingjian County gathered ten thousand thieves and rebelled at Long'erzui in Yichuan.

Wang Daliang from Hannan caused trouble with a force of four hundred men, proclaiming himself King of Daliang.

...

Throughout Shaanxi, rebellions were blooming everywhere.

Zhu Youjian was furious. With a thump, he threw out a thick pile of memorials. The eunuch beside him frantically picked them up from the floor.

"How unreasonable, utterly unreasonable."

The fury in Zhu Youjian flared. "Is there no normal report from Shaanxi? I want to hear good news, good news! Fetch me some good news immediately!"

An attendant cautiously pushed an urgent military dispatch from Chengcheng forward.

Zhu Youjian flipped it open. "Patrol Officer Cheng Xu of Chengcheng in Shaanxi? Reported by a ninth-rank military officer? Such a minor..." He had just begun to voice his disdain when his eyes scanned the contents. Delight washed over him. "Cheng Xu executed Bai Shui Wang Er, suppressed the banditry in Chengcheng, and also soundly defeated Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi?"

Zhu Youjian's mood soared as if he had boarded a jet plane.

Imperial joy radiated from him!

“Reward him! Reward him heavily!”

His trusted eunuch, Du Xun, whispered cautiously, “Your Majesty, this Cheng Xu... he belongs to Wei Zhongxian’s faction.”

At those words, Zhu Youjian’s face instantly darkened. His mood plummeted like a free-falling elevator.

Reward him? To hell with that!

Wei Zhongxian had already committed suicide by hanging in Fucheng County, Hejian Prefecture, on the sixth day of the eleventh month. This news was being suppressed by Zhu Youjian and was still known to very few.

He hadn’t yet moved against the Eunuch Party, but he was making his final preparations. Once everything was ready, he would have the civil ministerial group launch their assault on them. Seeing anyone associated with the Eunuch Party irritated him intensely at such a moment.

“Investigate this man named Cheng Xu. Verify every detail in his report: lies, mistakes, exaggerations – if there’s the slightest inaccuracy, note it down. When the time comes for me to deal with the Eunuch Party, he will be taken down along with them.”

“At your command, Your Majesty.”

...

Mr. Wang returned.

He returned triumphant.

His trip to Chengcheng County had been one long display of swagger. Leading Zheng Daniu and his band of imposing “bodyguards,” carrying a massive sack of silver, he had radiated arrogance.

Upon reaching the county seat, he headed straight for the bookstore.

Business at the Chengcheng Bookstore had been sluggish for the past three years. Printed books and novels of all kinds were hard to sell. The owner was at his wit’s end, unsure whether to keep struggling on.

Just then, Mr. Wang appeared with his heavy sack of silver, like a savior descending from heaven.

The bookstore owner didn’t hesitate. Sold!

Mr. Wang indulged his fantasy of “making a fortune,” became the new proprietor of the Chengcheng Bookstore, and promptly led Zheng Daniu and the others to the bookstore’s warehouse. He packed up every tool needed for movable type printing and carted it all away. Oh, and he also persuaded – one might say abducted – the two printing workers to come with them.

When they returned to Gaojia Village, each young man carried a large bundle filled with the movable type printing blocks.

“We’re back!” bellowed Zheng Daniu with a hearty laugh. “I carried back so many characters! Feels like I’ve never been this scholarly before.”

“Carrying characters doesn’t make you learned; you have to know the characters.” A villager retorted.

The surrounding villagers laughed.

Gao Sanwa dashed forward. “Let me see what characters you brought!” He casually pulled a wooden block from the bundle on Zheng Daniu’s back, wiped it on a piece of charcoal, and then – smack – pressed it right onto Zheng Daniu’s face.

A large, black character was left on the simpleton's face.

Everyone peered left and right. Okay, no one recognized it.

"Gao Sanwa, haven't you been learning characters lately? What character is this?" someone asked.

Gao Sanwa shook his head. "We haven't learned one that complicated yet."

Young Master Bai popped out from the side. "That's the character for 'fool'!"

Everyone: "..."

Zheng Daniu's face flushed crimson. He frantically rubbed his face, smearing the ink. The character was obliterated, but half his face was now covered in black smudges.

Furious, he yelled, "Gao Sanwa! You did that on purpose! You pressed that 'fool' character on my face! You're laughing at me!"

Gao Sanwa clutched his head and ran. "Whoa! No I didn't! I just grabbed one randomly!"

Chapter 129: The Book Gets Printed

Li Daoxuan set up his small stool, picked up the dry pot chicken offal delivered by a takeaway rider, and started eating while watching the craftsmen print books.

They first prepared a wooden frame as large as a "book page," then fitted small wooden blocks carved with reversed characters one by one into the frame, assembling them together until the entire frame was full.

Next, they smeared ink onto these wooden blocks, spreading it evenly.

Finally, they took out a piece of paper and slapped it down onto the blocks with a "whack."

When the paper was lifted off, a printed page appeared before them.

Scholar Wang darted over, grabbed that single page with both hands, and laughed out loud despite the ink not yet being dry: “Printed! Finally printed! The first page of Hanyu Pinyin! Amazing! Print quickly, quickly! Get the whole divine book printed out soon.”

The two printers recently recruited from the county town looked utterly confused. Their new Dong Weng seemed a bit crazy. But oh well, the pay was too good to refuse. They just needed to work their hardest for him.

Onward with the printing!

“Dong Weng, how many copies should we make of this page?”

The number of copies determined how many books could be published.

Mr. Wang began, “First, let’s print fifty copies...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Gao Yiye beside him spoke up: “The Deity has ordered. Print one thousand copies in the first batch.”

“Huh?” Mr. Wang startled and quickly bowed toward the sky: “Deity, the Study Well has fewer than twenty students right now. Fifty copies are more than enough. One thousand might be a bit too...”

Li Daoxuan asked: “After movable type finishes printing one page, you have to dismantle it and then reset the type for the second page’s layout, right?”

After Gao Yiye relayed this question, the two printers quickly answered: “Yes. We have limited character blocks, so we have to reuse them. Once we finish printing the first page, we must dismantle the movable type and rearrange it for the second page’s layout.”

Li Daoxuan declared: "Once the layout is dismantled, reprinting the first page would mean reassembling everything all over again. What a hassle. So print many copies the first time. Make all one thousand now. That way, if we run low later, we won't need to reassemble the type again."

The two printers didn't know who the Deity was, nor did they understand His penchant for large-scale approaches. Hearing Gao Yiye's relay, they couldn't help murmuring quietly: "Printing one thousand copies we can't use would waste so much paper and ink. Dong Weng could lose money."

Mr. Wang overheard their muttering and chuckled: "You two are actually worried about saving us money? Rest easy. The Deity never considers thriftiness. When He instructs, forget one thousand copies; even one hundred thousand should be printed without hesitation."

The two exchanged confused glances: "???"

Still baffled, they heard Gao Yiye speak again: "The Deity orders: Assign ten additional labor offenders to assist the paper makers. As for ink, the Deity shall bestow divine ink."

Everyone bowed reverently except the two new printers, who stood frozen, unsure what to do.

The woodcarver rushed into the courtyard and placed a large wooden basin on the ground, bigger than a bathtub. Then, a giant blob of black liquid suddenly dropped from the sky – duang duang duang – filling the basin to the brim.

The rich scent of ink immediately spread through the air.

Gao Yiye commanded: "Alright, start printing. One thousand copies!"

The two printers resigned: "..."

So they printed!

The two printers, receiving generous "craftsman's basic wages," set to working.

The first page was printed one thousand times. Then the movable type was dismantled. They searched for the right character blocks again, reset them to form the second page, and slapped down ink one thousand times to print that. They repeated this process tirelessly. Finally, after several days, all one thousand copies of the inner pages were printed.

They then dyed heavy paper blue to create book covers and stitched them together with cotton thread.

Jing jing – one thousand copies of Hanyu Pinyin were completed.

Holding a brand-new “divine book,” Mr. Wang felt triumphant and couldn’t help composing a poem:

> “A village elder spoke of divine books descending from above,

> Once clouds of crimson held aloft a jade tower from the Heavens.”

This poem, of course, was not written by him; it was a recitation of a poem written by someone else.

“Hahaha, let the children all come to get a copy, each one gets a copy, hahaha.”

Li Daoxuan found it amusing and couldn’t help but reach his hand into the box, holding it suspended in front of Gao Yiye: “Yiye, put a book on my hand.”

Gao Yiye promptly obeyed, took a copy of “Hanyu Pinyin”, stood on tiptoe, and carefully placed it on the tip of Li Daoxuan’s finger; when she set the book down, her small hand accidentally touched Li Daoxuan’s giant hand again, and she couldn’t help thinking to herself: Ah, I touched the Deity’s hand once more.

Recalling how she had once pretended to be “Madam Li”, her little face flushed red, and she silently scolded herself for being too disrespectful.

Li Daoxuan pulled his hand out and saw a tiny book on the tip of his finger.

It was just a few millimeters in size!

He didn't dare pick it up with his fingers, fearing he might crumple the paper if he pinched it.

He could only handle it carefully, laid his finger flat on the table, tilted it, and the book slid off the fingertip onto his computer desk; with his left hand, he picked up a magnifying glass, with his right hand, he grabbed the finest small tweezers, and he gently lifted the book cover with the tweezers and opened it...

Under the magnifying glass, the lines of Hanyu Pinyin annotations were utterly hilarious.

"This thing is too goofy," Li Daoxuan also laughed. "Alright, let's try selling it."

He took photos of himself using tweezers to turn pages and a magnifying glass to read the book, took several ultra-close-up high-definition macro shots of the small book, touched up the photos, uploaded them to an online shopping site, and wrote the caption: "The ultimate miniature craftsmanship, a 1:200 scale 'Hanyu Pinyin' primer, a micro-book that overturns your perception, with pages that can actually be turned..."

As for the price, he casually set it at 888888! He just loved the number eight a lot more.

After the gag, his attention turned back to the box.

At that moment, Thirty-Two was handing out hefty rewards to several artisans; he knew the Deity's temperament—whenever artisans completed some task, heavy rewards were always given, the really lavish kind, like right now.

Thirty-Two shook his head and declared aloud: "Paper maker Luo Leg Hair, for contributing to book printing, is rewarded fifty jin of pork, ten jin of sugar, and two jin of salt."

Luo Leg Hair was overjoyed: "Thank you, Deity."

“Woodcarver and printer, you are equally rewarded fifty jin of pork, ten jin of sugar, and two jin of salt.”

The two new printers heard such an astonishing reward for the first time; fifty jin of pork alone nearly made them faint with shock, and the next two items were even more terrifying—that was sugar and salt, rewards of ten jin and two jin? Oh my goodness.

“For the first time, I feel it’s truly great to be an artisan household.”

“With this, I can pay the artisan registration fee for several years now.”

“Working as an artisan here seems to have quite a bright future.”

“Ah, I really hope the Deity gives us something else to do soon.”

Li Daoxuan thought to himself: Wanting work isn’t complicated? I just worry you aren’t willing to work.

He smiled and opened his phone; on it were prepared various primary school textbooks, especially mathematics which was crucial, and now they could get started on it.

Chapter 130: The Spring Festival Is Approaching

Outside the window, raindrops pattered for three days and three nights, still dripping down steadily.

Shuangqing City was bathed in a drizzling winter rain, yet inside the box, not a single raindrop appeared.

Li Daoxuan calculated the time and decided it was about time to bring rain. He took out the medical nebulizer, aimed it at the fields beyond Gaojia Village, and made the rain fall.

It was already late December of Year Seven of Tianqi, and the Lunar New Year drew closer step by step.

The Spring Festival was the most important holiday in our dynasty, without exception.

The villagers inside the box had already begun preparing for the new year celebrations.

In previous years, due to the severe drought, no one could enjoy a peaceful New Year; even on Chinese New Year's Eve, people were still digging wild vegetables and peeling bark, worrying about survival day after day.

But this year was different!

Gao San Niang chased after Gao Sanwa all around the courtyard: "Sanwa, stop! Come quickly and put on the new cotton coat I wove for you."

Gao Sanwa was busy playing hide-and-seek with several other children. The Hakka roundhouse, with its nine halls and eighteen wells, was a natural giant maze, perfect for an excellent game of hide-and-seek.

"I'm not cold! Mother, don't call me—I'll get caught."

Gao Sanwa scurried away and vanished in an instant.

Gao San Niang couldn't help but shake her head: "In past years, he was freezing and had a runny nose, weeping to me daily about wanting a cotton coat. Now he has one, but he won't wear it."

Thirty-Two happened to walk past and chuckled: "Sanwa has eaten more meat now; his body has grown stronger, so naturally he's not as afraid of the cold as before. San Niang, you should worry less."

Outside the fortress gate...

Two young men climbed onto Solar Vehicle No. 2.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu also climbed up and stood beside them to instruct: "Listen well! This is called the steering plow. You turn left, and the vehicle turns left..."

The two young men quickly nodded: “We got it.”

Gao Chuwu grinned widely: “You must learn this as fast as possible. When spring comes, Wangjia Village will start the spring ploughing. Then one Solar Vehicle won’t be nearly enough; we’ll need several shuttling back and forth.”

Zheng Daniu followed up: “The Deity said Solar Vehicle No. 2 will be renamed ‘Public Solar Vehicle’ later. It’s specially meant to carry everyone back and forth between all the villages. Since we’ll be going to more and more villages, the public solar vehicle will be extremely busy.”

The two young men eagerly nodded and earnestly followed the lessons.

Solar Vehicle No. 2 lumbered along as it started to move...

The two “small villages” beside Gaojia Fortress, Short-term Workers Village and Labor Offenders Village, were bustling with excitement now too.

In Short-term Workers Village, the short-term workers were cutting paper flowers to prepare for the new year.

They hadn’t been in Gaojia Village for long and hadn’t received many rewards from the Deity yet, so they weren’t as wealthy as the original villagers. But they lived much better now than in their former homes, and they even had extra money to buy red paper for making flowers to paste on their doors—something unthinkable during the drought years.

The worst off were the labor offenders.

They only had the basic provisions without any extra rewards; they earned no additional income from working. At first, they were satisfied enough just to have food. But when they saw the newly arrived short-term workers becoming richer than they were, they suddenly realized that being a labor offender wasn’t a good thing.

Ah, if only possible, they wished they could repay their sins soon and move into that short-term workers village over there...

Li Daoxuan found it amusing like cola. He kept clicking the controls for north, south, east, and west, shifting his view to look around. Right then, he noticed a large group of people approaching from the eastern official road, numbering about thirty or forty.

The group wore sturdy travel clothes with ropes tied around their calves, obviously dressed for a long journey. Many carried heavy loads on shoulder poles that seemed packed with goods.

The leader was even riding a horse, carrying a bow and a waist knife, clearly a skilled fighter. Li Daoxuan glanced and thought something felt off, so he quickly grabbed his magnifying glass for a closer look. Only then did he realize the mounted leader wasn't a man but a woman.

She was burly, almost like an iron tower. Her appearance wasn't pretty—a bit... well... broad-faced and large.

Without the magnifying glass, Li Daoxuan truly couldn't tell she was a woman; he just sensed her figure was unusual.

Meeting such an odd person instantly ignited Li Daoxuan's interest. He locked his lens on the group, watching them meander over from the eastern official road.

The woman spoke, her voice rough: "Brothers, where are we?"

A man behind her whispered: "Boss, we should be only about thirty li away from Chengcheng County."

The woman chuckled: "Great! Little ones, move faster! We must get to the county by noon and ship a batch of goods during lunchtime."

As soon as she finished speaking, she suddenly added: "Huh? Up ahead, there's an enormous fortress and two small villages beside it."

Li Daoxuan thought: Did they see Gaojia Fortress?

The woman became rushing with pride: “Excellent! Such a big fortress must mean wealthy families live there, and the villages seem well-populated. Let’s hurry over; maybe we can sell a batch of goods.”

The group quickened their pace, almost flying toward Gaojia Village.

Li Daoxuan thought: From her words, she sounded like a merchant. Tsk, war-torn Shaanxi actually still had traders? And a woman at that! Even though you look odd, bandits wouldn’t care—aren’t you afraid they might treat you in eighteen ways?

Soon the woman led her caravan into Gaojia Village.

Standing at the village entrance, her face lit up joyfully: “This village is super wealthy, super rich! Look, it’s still raining here. The villagers have fields to farm, all smiling brightly. We’ll definitely sell a batch of goods here.”

The men behind her also brightened up: “Exactly right, boss! The villagers here appear well-off; our goods will surely sell well.”

The woman yelled at the top of her lungs toward Gaojia Village: “Selling salt! Top-notch goods! Cheaper than government salt by twenty percent! Hurry and buy now! Miss this village, and you won’t find this deal elsewhere.”

At that cry, Li Daoxuan understood: Salt smugglers!

“Indeed,” he thought, “in these chaotic times, ordinary proper merchants hide in county towns, trembling with fear. Only hardened salt smugglers still roamed all over.”

The fighting power of salt smugglers was definitely strong; they weren’t afraid as long as they didn’t run into a large bandit army.

“Selling salt!”

Her shout startled the villagers of Gaojia Village.

A large crowd of villagers turned their heads to stare at her with strange expressions. The sentinel on the fortress wall rested his chin in his hands, smirking faintly at her.

Seeing their reaction, the woman instantly sensed something wrong. She murmured: “Everyone be careful—this village seems odd. Their smiles are downright eerie.”

Several men behind her immediately moved their hands onto their blade handles.