

## Great Ming 171

### Chapter 171: It Must Have Been a Lie

Ma Tianzheng set out, heading towards Gaojia Village.

He was originally a wandering Taoist priest, and traveling the world had become his habit. Walking over thirty miles was nothing to him; he could start off right away.

He wanted to use his own eyes to confirm whether there really was a deity called Dao Xuan Deity that would manifest.

There probably shouldn't be one!

I grew up hearing stories from my master about Primordial Deity and other such beings; I'd heard them so often my ears were calloused, but I never saw them manifest.

This supposed Deity hadn't even been recorded in scriptures. It was even less likely to manifest.

Yes, there definitely couldn't be one—it must have been lying to me.

As he walked, the sky darkened!

He had been deep in thought when he left the county town and hadn't noticed the time; it turned out he had departed at dusk. After walking several miles, it became too dark to see the path.

He wanted to find some residential buildings to stay in overnight, but the villages he passed were all deserted and desolate.

The explanation was that people in villages near the county town had all gone to receive aid and food there, so no one was left to stay in their own villages.

Ma Tianzheng became even more skeptical. If the villages around Chengcheng County were already this abandoned, how much worse must a village over thirty miles away be?

Once I get there, let alone people, I probably won't even find a ghost. Could I truly witness a deity manifesting in such a remote, wild place?

Lying to me, it must have been lying to me.

Ma Tianzheng found a withered tree, lay down beneath it, ate half a dry biscuit, and slept in his clothes. He wasn't worried about wild animals snatching him at night because after three years of drought, no wild animals could be found.

Early the next morning, before dawn broke, Ma Tianzheng got up and continued his journey northeast.

As he walked, the sun rose. The warm winter sun was quite dazzling.

Suddenly, he spotted a strange gray road ahead, running parallel to the official road, and he didn't know where it led.

Ma Tianzheng hurried forward and stepped onto the strange gray road. It felt hard underfoot, as if made from a whole large stone that had been cut. This amazed him: Who could possess the strength to carve a large stone so smoothly and use it to pave a road?

This...

Could this be what they called supernatural craftsmanship!

Ma Tianzheng's mind immediately conjured a bizarre image: Primordial Deity, with a big axe in hand, chop chop chop, shaving a mountain-sized stone into thin slabs, laying them flat on the ground, stepping on them to test, clapping dust off his hands, then slinging the axe over his shoulder and walking off jauntily.

Ah! Ah! Ah!

How could I imagine Primordial Deity like that? What blatant disrespect!

Ma Tianzheng clutched his head in agony. “This humble Taoist is too insincere, always filling my mind with wild thoughts! My Taoist heart isn’t steadfast—that’s why the deities never manifest before me.”

Just as he had that thought, a strange sound came from up ahead, as if some huge object was moving along this road.

Ma Tianzheng looked forward and saw an enormous strange vehicle driving down the road. It was three zhang long, had an odd shape, had no oxen or horses pulling it, and he couldn’t fathom how it moved.

Surprisingly, the vehicle was packed full of farmers—someone’s hoe was sticking out of the window.

Several old farmers on board were singing a folk song: “Farming all day, drinking watery broth; Thatching tiles, living in grass houses; Weaving cloth, without clothes...”

Then everyone in the vehicle laughed uproariously. “That song is wrong! It describes things before the Deity came. After the Deity came, we have good food, houses, and fine clothes.”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

Ma Tianzheng stared in disbelief, his jaw nearly dropping as he frantically waved one hand toward the vehicle, “Stop... stop...”

The two novice drivers jolted in alarm, “Someone’s in the road ahead! Slow down, brake now.”

The driver controlling the sunshade hastily pulled down a panel, and the one steering the plow slammed on the brakes. Even so, the vehicle surged forward a considerable distance before jerking to a halt, barely stopping right in front of Ma Tianzheng.

Sweat broke out on the two novice drivers' brows. They leaned out the window, shouting angrily, "What's your problem, Taoist? Didn't you see this huge thing coming? Why didn't you get out of the way? We almost couldn't stop!"

Ma Tianzheng himself had been frightened stiff by the vehicle rushing toward him and stiffened, stammering, "Th-this humble Taoist... thought you could stop much quicker."

"Can something this big just stop on a dime?" yelled the drivers. "Even a small horse cart can't stop the moment you yank the reins! Don't you move aside when you see carts on the road?"

If Ma Tianzheng ever saw horse carts, ox carts, or donkey carts, he certainly would dodge them. He knew livestock were hard to control; failure to avoid them could mean a hoof in his face. But this metal beast had no animals pulling it—he couldn't begin to understand it, so...

Peaceful by nature, he bowed respectfully in apology. "This humble Taoist was at fault."

Seeing his humility, the drivers flustered—after all, he was a holy man. No one wanted to offend one in these times. Hurriedly, they too apologized, "Our fault too, Priest, for spotting you too late."

Ma Tianzheng brushed it off, his tone shifting to utter curiosity. "Fellow Villagers, this... this cart of yours? What is it? How is it moving so fast with no horses or oxen?"

This question made everyone aboard laugh.

"It's the Miao Ri Star Official's cart—loaned to us by the Deity."

"What?" Ma Tianzheng doubted his own ears. "The Miao Ri Star Official's cart?"

"Yes!" said one driver enthusiastically. "We didn't know what Miao Ri Star Official was either, till Lord Bai told us! Said he's a giant rooster deity high up in heaven, calling out 'cock-a-doodle-doo!' to wake the sun every dawn."

Ma Tianzheng pressed, perplexed, “So... how’s that related to your cart?”

“We’ll go!” answered the driver. “When the sun rises, this cart moves. And when the sun sets, it stops dead.”

Ma Tianzheng recoiled as if struck. “Truly?!”

The Villagers only grinned wider. “Don’t believe us? Hop up and see for yourself!”

Of course he’d look. Not only look, he’d watch with every fiber of his focus! He sprang onto the cart in one leap and squeezed in among the Villagers.

Lies. It must be lies!

The driver handling the sunshade pointed overhead. “See that panel covering the cart? The sunshade? Watch this—we shield the cart from the sun. Pull back the shade? Sunlight hits it? Then this thing just... takes off instantly.”

Ma Tianzheng twisted painfully to crane his neck out the window, his eyes bulging fiercely as he fixed his gaze upward, onto the sunshade.

The driver then gently drew the sunshade back—just a hair, a sliver.

The cart stirred and started creeping forward slowly.

Ma Tianzheng gasped, stunned silent. “!”

Chapter 172: Lets Have Fun

The cart moved. It really moved.

Ma Tianzheng watched as the curtain opened wider, and the cart accelerated the more it opened.

Did it move faster the brighter the sun shone?

They're deceiving me! This had to be a lie!

Ma Tianzheng roared, "Pull it shut!"

This was typical misguided shouting. Yet, new drivers learning to drive were so used to being yelled "Pull it shut!" abruptly by Zheng Daniu that they'd developed a conditioned reflex. The moment they heard "pull it shut," regardless of who shouted it, they yanked the curtain down instantly.

The cart's power immediately weakened. It coasted forward on momentum alone, then came to a stop.

The driver steering the plow looked back, "Hey, what's going on?"

The driver controlling the sunshade said sheepishly, "The priest suddenly yelled 'pull it shut,' I thought it was Daniu shouting, so I really did it."

Everyone: "..."

All eyes fixed on Ma Tianzheng.

Ma Tianzheng was still leaning out the window, craning his neck to stare at the sunshade on the rooftop. His face showed disbelief, "It's true. Once the curtain is closed, it stops. It really is like this."

"People from outside have no clue," the villagers shook their heads.

In the past, outsiders thought they were ignorant. Now, they thought outsiders were ignorant.

The driver pulled the sunshade open again. The cart started once more and moved forward along the cement road.

Soon, Wangjia Village came into view.

The villagers hopped off to begin working. The two drivers waved at them, "We'll be back to pick you up in an hour."

The villagers waved back, "Alright, one hour is enough!"

The cart rotated on a large circular concrete platform, turning around. Ma Tianzheng remained foolishly seated, refusing to get off.

Two villagers asked, "Priest, aren't you getting off?"

Ma Tianzheng pointed at the moist ground outside, the wild grasses sprouting everywhere around the village, the trees showing new leaves and tender buds. He exclaimed in astonishment, "What's happening with your village? Why is everything so lush?"

The two villagers chuckled, "That's because the Deity invited the Dragon King to send rain to our village."

"The Dragon King?"

Ma Tianzheng was stunned. He hadn't even processed the whole "Miao Ri Star Official" business, and now there was a Dragon King?

They're lying to me! They must be deceiving me!

The drivers said mysteriously, "The Saint Lady told us the Dragon King wasn't really willing to bring rain here. But the Deity grabbed him by the neck with one hand, hauled him to our village, and ordered him to bring rain. The Dragon King didn't dare resist. Held by the Deity like a little snake, he obeyed meekly. Ah, it's a pity none of us could see it. Only the Saint Lady witnessed the Deity manifesting."

Ma Tianzheng: They're lying! They have to be lying to me!

"Hey, priest, if you're not getting off, we're heading back to Gaojia Village now."

Ma Tianzheng: "Could this humble priest ride your cart to Gaojia Village?"

"Of course!" The two new drivers grinned. "Hold tight! Don't stick your head out the window again. You made us drive so cautiously, scared a tree by the roadside would knock your head clean off."

Ma Tianzheng pulled his head back inside. He stopped craning his neck; it was genuinely getting stiff, and he couldn't bear the strain much longer.

The vehicle finished turning around and drove toward Gaojia Village.

Ma Tianzheng's thoughts wandered aimlessly; he was completely unable to concentrate, his mind filled with random fantasies.

Since childhood, he had studied the Dao for forty years, but he had never witnessed a deity manifesting. In his youth, his faith in the Dao had been steadfast, yet as he grew older, he increasingly doubted that deities truly existed. But today...

Today! His faith in the Dao! That long-lost belief began to reawaken.

The vehicle quickly arrived outside Gaojia Village. The driver steering chuckled: "Look, the Dragon King! Priest, you're lucky; the Deity captured the Dragon King again to bring rain."

This startled Ma Tianzheng, instantly rousing him from his wandering thoughts. He leaned his head out of the car window and looked into the air; a low cloud hovered above Gaojia Village's farmland, and from it emerged a massive dragon's head. Opening its huge snarling maw, it sprayed a fine rain down...

"There really is a Dragon King!"

Ma Tianzheng roared: “There really is a Dragon King! This humble Daoist saw it, saw it with his own eyes. Forty years, a full forty years.”

As he roared, he began wailing: “My faith in the Dao had already started wavering; this humble Daoist almost quit believing that deities exist. Waking from midnight dreams, this humble Daoist often doubted all he’d learned in life, nearly becoming a heretic breaking from the Dao. Finally... finally, this humble Daoist beheld a divine visage...”

Li Daoxuan was just then holding a bowl of Hechuan lamb noodles, slurping joyfully. During rain-making, his gaze had to be there, as rain couldn’t fall where his sight wasn’t.

Just after he slurped an extra-long lamb noodle into his mouth, he spotted the public sun chariot return. Then a Daoist in Daoist robes, clutching a dust whisk, leapt swiftly off the chariot. Wailing tearfully, he dashed toward the rain-making spot.

“Eh?”

Li Daoxuan murmured: “Another wild figure has appeared, and it’s a Daoist.”

Actually, during the Ming Dynasty, many scholars favored Daoist robes, so wearing them didn’t necessarily denote a Daoist. But this person differed from scholars—he wore Daoist robes paired with multi-eared hemp shoes, had a Daoist bun on his head, carried a dust whisk, sported a tattered Bagua symbol on his vest, and yes, bore a three-foot Longsword on his back...

He was unmistakably a Daoist at first glance, a wandering one whose steps covered all corners of the realm.

Normally, when a wild figure arrived, Li Daoxuan wouldn’t interact directly right away. He’d observe first, gradually assess the wild figure’s character and traits before deciding whether to “manifest divinity.”

But since this was a Daoist, the situation changed.

Hey, this profession!

What would happen when a divine being encountered a “true deity”?

Li Daoxuan’s playful spirit surged instantly; he had to have some fun with this one.

Seeing the Daoist about to run directly beneath the “Dragon King,” Li Daoxuan abruptly switched off the medical nebulizer and yanked the dragon’s head out of the box.

As Ma Tianzheng kept sprinting, he watched the rain suddenly cease; the dragon’s head swiftly retracted into the cloud and vanished.

“Eh?”

Ma Tianzheng froze: why did the Dragon King leave as soon as I arrived?

Li Daoxuan plucked a “Nezha” figurine from his toy shelf, dipped it smoothly into the box, paused at the entry point, then swished it across the air...

Ma Tianzheng cried: “Prince Nezha! Ahhh, flying so fast! So fast!”

Swoosh, Prince Nezha orbited once and disappeared; then Li Daoxuan retrieved it from the box.

Ma Tianzheng stood dazed for a full five seconds before suddenly having an epiphany: “The Dragon King saw Prince Nezha coming and feared being attacked, so he fled.”

Chapter 173: Deities and Monsters Are Fighting

Ma Tianzheng’s mind hadn’t yet processed what was happening when Li Daoxuan picked up another figurine—a Supreme Treasure edition Sun Wukong—reached into the box, and swiftly swiped it across.

Ma Tianzheng: “!”

Li Daoxuan then grabbed a plastic dinosaur, inserted it into the box, and swiped it with a whoosh.

Ma Tianzheng: “!!”

Li Daoxuan lifted a lobster man figurine from Ultraman, reached into the box, and swept it across in a flash.

At this, Ma Tianzheng felt completely overwhelmed.

What was occurring in the sky?

What...

was happening?

All sorts of deities and bizarre monsters were darting chaotically through the air.

Ma Tianzheng panicked instantly. “When deities battle, mortals suffer! They might descend while fighting, leaving this village and its surroundings utterly devastated!”

Ma Tianzheng bellowed at the top of his lungs. “Everyone, run! Deities and monsters are fighting in the sky! Run, now!”

The villagers of Gaojia Village were diligently working. They were all busy; none had time to stare at the sky like Ma Tianzheng. When the chaotic equipment had flown overhead earlier, they were bent over their tasks, and Li Daoxuan’s swipe had been too fast. Thus, no villagers had witnessed those strange apparitions.

Hearing Ma Tianzheng’s shouts, everyone turned to glance at him with odd expressions, then looked away, ignoring him. The Deity was right in the sky! Hovering at a height of dozens of zhang was that distinctive low cloud symbolizing the Deity. What battle between deities and monsters? Pure nonsense!

Ma Tianzheng: “Why is no one afraid? Are you not scared of death?”

Still, no one paid him any heed.

Li Daoxuan was thoroughly amused. Seeing Ma Tianzheng utterly distraught delighted him. While the villagers looked down, he picked up a one-centimeter-tall Dao Xuan Deity Statue crafted for him by the sculptors, inserted it into the box, and swiftly swept it toward the small valley outside the village.

His statue was exceptionally crafted—enhancing his handsomeness by 32% and his majesty by 3200%. Robed like an immortal, radiating celestial grace, it soared across the sky... though it was rather small. At dozens of zhang high, Ma Tianzheng couldn't see it clearly...

Ma Tianzheng gasped in shock. “An immortal just flew past!”

He immediately sprinted toward the direction the immortal had gone...

Soon, he dashed out of the village and arrived in a desolate small mountain valley.

Suddenly, the roar of wind and thunder echoed from the sky, as if something was descending. Then came a thunderous boom—a gigantic lobster man landed right in front of him, snapping its massive claws with terrifying menace.

Ma Tianzheng recoiled in three tremendous leaps, wanting to flee. But the colossal lobster man flew toward him with blistering speed—far too fast for his legs to outrun.

Its head swaying, the lobster man advanced closer, its mouth opening and closing, its claws snapping together, its eyes flashing red.

Terrified out of his wits, Ma Tianzheng suddenly remembered he was a Taoist priest. In one fluid motion, he drew the three-foot green blade from his back. After forty years as a priest, reflexes took over; he instinctively invoked a demon-subduing Taoist art. Grasping the sword formula, he shouted, “By the decree of the Most High Lord Lao, swiftly as ordered—”

Clang!

The lobster monster's claw slammed against his blade. Crushing force surged through the impact, sending Ma Tianzheng's sword flying from his hand. His Taoist art proved utterly useless—

Aaaaaah! This poor Taoist is doomed!

Ma Tianzheng shrieked, certain of his death.

Li Daoxuan, seeing how ashen his face had become, decided he'd played enough. That moment when the lobster man's claw struck away the tiny man's sword had been dangerously close—almost crushing him. Another such stunt might not be so carefully executed, so it was time to stop.

He picked up one of the glass cups and lowered it over Ma Tianzheng.

Ma Tianzheng braced for the lobster man's crushing claws, only to feel something descending around him on all sides—a boom—though nothing seemed visible.

He stared intently and finally saw: he was surrounded by a circle of transparent walls...

What is this?

Has it encased me protectively?

The lobster man circled the transparent barrier twice, seeming unable to find a way in. It rammed its enormous head against the invisible walls twice, producing loud, jarring thumps. Ma Tianzheng covered his ears, enduring the assault.

Fortunately, the lobster man ultimately failed to breach the glass wall. It reared back, then soared upward, vanishing into the clouds in an instant.

Finally exhaling in relief, Ma Tianzheng understood: that invisible wall had been a magical artifact lowered by a celestial being to save his life.

Which deity had saved him? He'd just seen the Dragon King, Prince Nezha (the Third Lotus Prince), the Victorious Fighting Buddha Sun Wukong, and an unidentified deity. Could it be one of them?

Gingerly, Ma Tianzheng touched one wall, then another—all cold, hard, and transparent. Impossible to break through.

He wanted out, but couldn't escape!

Disaster! Trapped within this strange magical artifact, in a secluded little valley... and no one even knew he was here. No one could rescue him.

Just then, he saw a young maiden flying toward him—really flying! Gliding smoothly through the air, she floated down from the direction of the village.

Arriving outside the invisible barrier, she slowed, descending until, near the ground, she gave a little hop as if stepping down from an unseen perch before landing steadily on her feet.

She stood outside the transparent wall, facing Ma Tianzheng through its barrier.

The maiden's attire wasn't lavish, yet it was neat and tidy, conveying an aura of dignity.

Then, she reached out and lightly knocked on the transparent surface—like knocking on a door. Instantly, the glass barrier ascended into the clouds and vanished.

The maiden then spoke. "The Dao Xuan Deity saved your life, Taoist priest. Yet you stand there dumbfounded? Shouldn't you bow and thank His Divinity?"

Ma Tianzheng's mind raced, recalling what the two drivers had said earlier. The woman's identity became immediately clear. "Saint Lady?"

Gao Yiye maintained her poised expression. “Hmm!”

Had Ma Tianzheng encountered anyone claiming to be a Saint Lady before, he would’ve dismissed them as a White Lotus pretender. But after that relentless stream of bewildering events, in a state of overwhelming awe, he prostrated himself before Gao Yiye in a full bow. “Benefactor Saint Lady! Enlighten this humble Taoist! What exactly happened earlier? My Taoist heart has become chaotic unto shattering.”

Gao Yiye had moments before received the Deity’s command: Maintain dignity for now. So she strove for composure, her expression lightly impassive. “What happened was beyond mortal comprehension, yes. But as a Taoist priest, even you fail to grasp its meaning? What Tao have you been cultivating, truly?”

Chapter 174: This Person Will Be Useful

Ma Tianzheng inwardly started. He hastily went over everything that had just happened in his mind, and suddenly, understanding dawned. “Just now, a demon descended to wreak havoc upon the mortal world. Heavenly soldiers and generals were dispatched to capture it. A large lobster monster fell to this place and nearly took my life. Luckily, you intervened and saved me?”

Gao Yiye: “How could someone like me possess the virtue or ability to save you? The one who truly saved you was the Dao Xuan Deity.”

Ma Tianzheng’s heart jolted again. His mind, already muddled, became even more so. Following her lead, he immediately addressed the sky, “Thank you, Dao Xuan Deity, for your life-saving grace!”

Gao Yiye: “Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your purpose?”

Ma Tianzheng hastily clasped his hands in a Taoist salute. “This humble Taoist is of the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect, a disciple of the esteemed Master Wang Changyue. My name is Ma Tianzheng. I wander the world solely in search of immortals to validate the true path.”

“Oh? An itinerant Taoist,” Gao Yiye said. “Then you must have traveled many roads and seen many things?”

Ma Tianzheng: "I dare not claim much! This humble Taoist has roamed the world for over twenty years, journeying north and south. I have gained some small measure of worldly experience, but I would never presume to be boastful."

"Hmm, good," Gao Yiye smiled. "The Deity says a person like you is useful."

Ma Tianzheng: "???"

He looked left, then right. "The Deity spoke? Where is the Deity? I didn't hear anything."

Gao Yiye: "Only I can see the Deity."

Ma Tianzheng's expression became puzzled. An inner voice shouted: She's lying to me! She must be lying! I don't know how many fellow practitioners have used this exact script before.

Just as that thought crossed his mind—BANG!—the invisible walls descended once more, trapping him inside again.

Ma Tianzheng: "!!!"

Li Daoxuan, seeing the slightest flicker of doubt in his eyes, immediately lowered the glass cup over him, giving him no time to think.

Ma Tianzheng was terrified. I merely harbored a suspicion, a fleeting thought in my mind, and I was trapped again? What exactly is this thing trapping me?

Gao Yiye reached out her hand and gently tapped on the glass wall, like knocking on a door. Instantly, the four glass panels snapped up and flew back into the sky.

Ma Tianzheng was flustered. "Saint Lady, what just—"

Gao Yiye: "The Deity says this Taoist... has problems."

Li Daoxuan's words were a classic, generic reprimand – perfectly applicable anywhere. A single “you have problems” throws the spotlight back on the person, forcing them to search within for flaws that fit the accusation.

Sure enough, Ma Tianzheng immediately applied it to himself. I have problems. I truly do. For several years now, I haven't been a devout Taoist. My heart has been in turmoil. I've been plagued with doubts about the existence of deities. My conviction in the Dao is nearly shattered. He sees right through me!

“Deity!” Ma Tianzheng spoke urgently, “This disciple is but dabbling in Taoism! I haven't fully mastered the Taoist classics. Previously, I had never heard of the revered title ‘Dao Xuan Deity,’ hence my repeated rudeness towards you. But now this disciple knows! I beg you, grant me a chance to make amends!”

Gao Yiye: “Hmm. The Deity says your attitude of admitting fault seems sincere enough, so he won't hold it against you.”

Ma Tianzheng heaved a huge sigh of relief. “This disciple cultivated the Dao since childhood. I spent the first two decades practicing under Master Wang at the Quanzhen Dragon Gate sect. The next twenty years I wandered the world, seeking immortals and inquiring about the path. Yet, I had shallow blessings. In over forty years, I never once met a true immortal... A few days ago, I heard tales of Your Lordship and sought out the City God Temple in Chengcheng County. Guided by a lay practitioner, I came to Gaojia Village... I never dreamed this disciple would actually witness the Deity manifesting in person. This truly is my profound fortune!”

Plonk! He knelt down and kowtowed deeply. “Your disciple Ma Tianzheng pays respects to the Dao Xuan Deity!”

Ma Tianzheng was thrilled, his body trembling with excitement.

He had been ready to abandon his faith entirely. Who would have thought that now, his conviction in the Dao had become firmer than ever before?

He had finally found a true immortal! This was something even his revered teacher Master Wang had never achieved.

From this day forth, he need never again doubt whether immortals existed in the world. No—more accurately, he need never again feel guilty when lecturing scriptures to others, ashamed that he was teaching them something he himself didn't truly believe.

His inner guilt vanished. It felt as if his very soul had been cleansed.

Gao Yiye: "You came here solely to find a true immortal?"

"Yes!" Ma Tianzheng declared. "This disciple traversed the world solely to catch a glimpse of a true immortal!"

"Now you've seen one," Gao Yiye said. "What do you intend to do next?"

Ma Tianzheng was momentarily stunned. That's right... what comes next?

Gao Yiye smiled. "It seems you haven't figured that out yet either. Well, take your time to ponder it. The Deity commands: think it through clearly, then return and speak to me."

With that, Gao Yiye turned around. The Deity's hand was already resting on the ground, waiting. She gently climbed onto the Deity's palm and sat down, a blissful, proud smile spreading across her face.

Li Daoxuan's hand moved horizontally, carrying her over valleys, through the sky, back towards Gaojia Fortress.

Ma Tianzheng watched the Saint Lady fly away, a tumult of emotions churning within him. After a long while, he finally came back to his senses. He picked up his Green Edge Sword, sheathed it on his back, and scanned the ground around him. There were huge footprints left by the lobster monster, and large crater-like depressions like rings from the Deity's transparent magical artifact.

He knew now: everything he had seen was no hallucination. It had truly happened.

Suddenly, his spirits soared!

I've found a true immortal! What is there left to fear?

Haha!

From now on, I can preach scriptures and the Dao to others with firm conviction! I'm not lying! I'm NOT lying! Hahaha! Hahaha!

Swinging his arms wildly in exhilaration, he dashed towards Gaojia Village!

Meanwhile, Gao Yiye was sitting on Li Daoxuan's palm, flying slowly back towards the village. Li Daoxuan didn't dare move his hand too fast. Because even a ten-centimeter movement of his hand translated to twenty meters within the box world. If he moved just a fraction too quickly, the speed would be unbearable for Gao Yiye. So, slowly it was, carrying her on a smooth glide.

Gao Yiye tilted her head back curiously. "Deity, why did we have to tease that Taoist so much? He didn't seem like a bad person."

"Because he himself doesn't know if he's a good person or not."

"Ah? Why is that?"

Li Daoxuan didn't explain. He just smiled.

An itinerant Taoist who had traveled every corner of the world... that was incredibly useful. Li Daoxuan had an idea. Handing this task to anyone else felt unreliable. But someone like Ma Tianzheng, a widely traveled Taoist, he was just the person who could do it.

I'll observe him for a few more days, once he's truly become one of my little people, I'll entrust him with that honorable and challenging task.

Li Daoxuan opened his phone and looked at a name he had researched long ago: Song Yingxing. The premier scientist of the late Ming Dynasty. Hehehe. Song was far away. Reeling him in through normal means was impossible. An itinerant Taoist was the perfect solution.

Chapter 175: This is Clearly an Illustrated Book

In the third month of spring, all things awakened, and it was a perfect season for sowing—except that Heaven failed to provide rain.

Fortunately, though Heaven withheld the rain, the Deity bestowed it.

Gao Yiye secretly told the villagers that the Deity had grabbed the Dragon King by the neck again, dragging him over to produce rain.

The villagers of Wangjia Village began sowing kaoliang.

It was only then that Li Daoxuan understood how the farmers in nearby villages lived during normal years. Originally, they usually sowed kaoliang in the third month, harvested it in autumn, then planted autumn wheat in the ninth month, harvesting that wheat in the fifth or sixth month of the following year.

If the wheat harvest was late, the time for sowing kaoliang would be pushed back to the sixth month...

The farmers had their own rhythm, constantly adjusting their timing to plant crops most suited to the season.

This matter was as simple as it sounded, yet also complex. For village children, it was as easy as eating or drinking. But for a city kid like Li Daoxuan, staring at it might not bring understanding.

If he couldn't understand, he could simply chuckle foolishly and follow the little people's joy.

Xing Honglang's injuries had also healed. Just as Li Daoxuan predicted, with bandits causing trouble in Heyang County, Xing Honglang couldn't return east to Shanxi to do business. She had to go west instead, to Xi'an Prefecture.

Gao Chuwu saw her off to the village entrance but didn't dare say much. He was still drowning in guilt over "taking advantage of her injury to hit her" and hadn't managed to move past it yet.

This meant that the Deity, who loved gossip, had failed to properly cultivate any juicy tidbits recently, leaving him rather frustrated.

Oh well. Xing Honglang would use Gaojia Village as her long-term base of operations from now on. She'd go out for a turn and come back. This love story still had more to watch.

These past few days in Gaojia Village, there was a very obvious attention seeker—Ma Tianzheng.

This Taoist roamed the village every day.

He didn't seek work. Every day, he just collected his aid and food supplies, then wandered around the village, looking left and right, paying special attention to all kinds of "divine artifacts."

For instance, the sun chariot. This contraption occupied the Taoist every single day, but based on his knowledge, no matter how he studied it, he remained convinced it was the chariot of the Miao Ri Star Official—undoubtedly.

He also studied the millstone-sized giant rice. The result of his study was, unsurprisingly, rice from the immortal realm.

However, after studying this "rice from the immortal realm," he suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

Li Daoxuan saw him grab an Old Villager from Gaojia Village, one of the original forty-two—Gao Laba. Gao Laba excelled at making clay pots and moonlighted as a sentinel patrolling the wall. He often spun with a bow on the ramparts. Back when Ground Rabbit first arrived in Gaojia Village, it was Gao Laba who greeted him.

Come to think of it, Gao Laba was also the one who greeted Xing Honglang when she visited Gaojia Village for the first time.

He was a genuine social butterfly!

Today wasn't his shift, so he was sprawled at home resting. As a result, he got pestered by Ma Tianzheng. After all, Ma Tianzheng preferred talking to social butterflies too, and wasn't fond of chatting with taciturn types.

Ma Tianzheng said, "Kind donor, how did you consume the divine rice from the immortal realm back then? Such huge grains—you couldn't cook them whole, could you?"

Gao Laba chuckled foolishly. "Of course we used chisels to break it! We'd chisel off a piece and boil it in water to make porridge."

Ma Tianzheng was agonized. "Such a waste! Such a sacred object, how can it be consumed so carelessly?"

Gao Laba asked curiously, "Then how would you do it?"

Ma Tianzheng said, "In my travels south, I was fortunate enough to learn a method for processing rice. Southerners soak, steam, and press rice strips to make a food called rice noodles. This method is perfectly suited for this giant immortal rice. This humble Taoist shall just teach it to you."

Gao Laba became quite interested and went along with Ma Tianzheng's plan.

Li Daoxuan was also amused: Rice noodles? Fun! I usually just order takeout noodles to eat, never knowing how they're made. Perfect time to watch.

But it turned out that the first step—washing and soaking the rice—would take a long time. Li Daoxuan didn't want to watch a static scene, so he looked elsewhere and forgot about this matter entirely.

A few days later...

The first store opened on Gaojia Village's commercial street.

A bookstore!

With Thirty-Two personally acting as the temporary shopkeeper, he also hired two clerks to help. They decorated with red banners and streamers and prepared for a grand opening.

As soon as this bookstore opened, the villagers of Gaojia Village became happy.

What kind of place was this?

It was a gathering ground for illiterates. Though the population had already reached over a thousand, those with reading and writing skills numbered fewer than a hundred. Opening a bookstore in such a place—what exactly were they trying to do?

The villagers didn't understand.

But not understanding didn't stop them from coming to gaze at the spectacle.

On the day of the bookstore's opening, outside the door was filled with onlookers, packed in layers. Nearly all of the original forty-two inhabitants of Gaojia Village arrived, the immigrants from Wangjia Village, Zhengjia Village, and Zhuangjia Village all showed up, and the workers from Short-term Workers Village gathered in a large crowd too.

Everyone was whispering to each other: "This bookstore will close in just a few days, right?"

"There are only a few educated people and a dozen-odd children with reading and writing skills, but the children's books are provided by the Deity, so they don't need to buy books at all."

"What exactly is Thirty-Two playing at?"

Amid the discussion, Mr. Wang stood out. The thin and frail Mr. Wang was usually low-key, almost never leaving the study well, spending all his time reading apart from teaching children reading and writing.

So people often overlooked his presence; unexpectedly, today Mr. Wang changed his usual low-key manner, stood at the front, waved to the murmuring crowd, and said loudly: "All shut up."

The crowd still respected scholars. At his shout, they immediately stopped talking and watched him with odd eyes.

Mr. Wang: "Because you can't understand books, are you here to mock the bookstore? Humph! Without books, there would be no culture passed on, and the world would be ruined. Thirty-Two founding this bookstore is for inheriting the lost knowledge of the sages; I will give my complete support. In a moment when the bookstore opens, I'll be the first to go in and buy books, to lend my feeble help, and definitely not let it close."

Hearing him speak this way, the crowd felt deeply respectful and truly dared not predict doom for the bookstore.

The door of the bookstore opened, and Thirty-Two walked out beaming with smiles. He said loudly: "The lucky hour has come; I declare the Gaojia Village bookstore officially open. Here, I proudly unveil the first book printed by this bookstore..."

The crowd cheered!

Mr. Wang was extremely excited: "What good book is it? I'll order one set now."

Thirty-Two raised a book with both hands. It had a blue cover printed with a military general on horseback wielding a spear, and beside it was a vertical line of printed words—the title of the book.

The commoners couldn't read; staring at the title, they were baffled.

Mr. Wang recognized the title at one glance: "Yang Family Generals, a good book, so good!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Thirty-Two faced everyone and turned to the first page.

No words were there, not a single character—just a picture. He turned another page, and another picture appeared. He turned yet another page, and it was still a picture...

Mr. Wang: “!!!”

The commoners: “Wow, we get it! The Yang Family Generals are killing Liao soldiers—good book, such a good book!”

Mr. Wang: “Ah ah ah, this isn’t a book at all; it’s clearly just a picture book!”

Chapter 176: Is There That Kind of Book?

The Ming Dynasty actually already had many picture books published, especially in the prosperous Jiangnan Region, with all kinds of books displayed like a dazzling array; these books were very exquisite, with high printing quality, and could even be called artworks.

Mr. Wang actually liked picture books too, but he only preferred those exceptionally beautiful ones that could be called art.

But what was this thing that Thirty-Two held in his hand? The printing quality was poor, with no coloring at all—it was entirely black-and-white drawings, and the images utterly lacked elegance; at a glance, it was no masterpiece by a famous artist.

His picture book was like the level of a child’s scribble.

And he was actually selling this?

Mr. Wang was very angry; just moments ago he had said he would buy one to support him, but now he was so angry his moustache seemed to puff up.

However, he didn’t like it, but the villagers beside him loved it.

“This picture book is telling a story.”

“Yes, each page has continuous pictures; I understood it at a glance.”

A craftsman who had listened to dramas in the county town said: “There are three characters beside it; I can guess it says Yang Liulang, right?”

Thirty-Two smiled: “Yes, Yang Liulang.”

The craftsman exclaimed joyfully: “Hahaha, I never imagined I would recognize words one day; I saw this drawing and immediately knew these three characters spelled Yang Liulang. I’ve heard this drama; this is depicting Yang Liulang’s story.”

The villagers were quite pleased: “This book is rare.”

“This book is interesting.”

“Clatter!” A handful of copper coins was thrown onto the counter. The crowd turned and saw that the one who threw out the money was actually the Old Village Chief of Gaojia Village—an old man who had made a fortune selling chocolate, a standard old illiterate who never had anything to do with “books.” Yet now, he spent with extravagance: “I want to buy one copy, haha, I’ll take it back to look at slowly.”

The Old Village Chief set a good example. A group of Old Villagers from Gaojia Village all reached into their pockets.

That little comic book, just like a toy, sold dozens of copies in an instant.

Mr. Wang was stunned; properly serious books weren’t bought by these guys, but they were frantically buying poor-quality picture books?

Thirty-Two walked up to him and patted his shoulder: “Mr. Wang, won’t you take a copy?”

Mr. Wang shook his head like a rattle-drum: “No, no! I only want exquisite picture books; I absolutely don’t want this kind of messily printed black-and-white drawing.”

Thirty-Two laughed: “Mr. Wang, haven’t you realized it yet? Those exquisite picture books have no storyline, but this set of ‘comic book’ in my hand has a plot—it’s been telling a story all along.”

Mr. Wang exclaimed: “!”

Thirty-Two continued: “For common citizens, image quality isn’t as important as how thrilling the story is.”

Mr. Wang suddenly understood something: “Eh, eh? This might... be a way for people who haven’t studied to learn something too.”

Noticing his insight, Thirty-Two said no more. He chuckled as he circled past Mr. Wang and declared loudly: “Everyone, don’t rush. This is only the first volume. We’ll print the second and third volumes in a few days... When the whole set is printed, it’ll be a complete story of ‘Yang Family Generals.’ Patient ones can wait to buy it all later, while those eager can chase each new release. This is called [everyone gets what they need].”

The Village Chief of Gaojia Village yelled: “Release faster! Speed it up!”

Gao Sanwa clutched his mother’s arm and shook it vigorously: “Mother, I want a set, I want the whole collection...”

Gao San Niang replied: “Buy, buy, buy! I’ve stitched several sets of cotton armor for the village; our family isn’t short on money. Buy, buy, just buy it.”

Gao Sanwa cried out happily: “Mother, you’re so great!”

Seeing Gao Sanwa got what he wanted, Young Master Bai quickly turned to Madam Bai and said: “Mother, your child wants that too...”

“Slap!” Madam Bai gave him a hard pinch: “How many times have you read the text version of ‘Yang Family Generals’? And you still want to look at this kind of worn-out picture?”

Young Master Bai covered his face: “Gao Sanwa has one...”

Madam Bai glanced sidelong: “Gao Sanwa also often eats bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat; do you want to try that too?”

Young Master Bai pointed at his face reddened from the hard pinch: “I’ll offset it with this against his bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat, but for the ‘Yang Family Generals’ picture album, your child has nothing else to trade.”

Madam Bai thought carefully and suddenly broke out in a sweat; oh no, she said to herself silently, I secretly mocked Gao San Niang’s rough teaching ways for frequently giving the child bamboo shoots stir-fried with meat, yet I’m doing the same thing to my child, aah, I need to compensate him: “Buy! Buy! Your mother will get it for you.”

Young Master Bai exclaimed joyfully: “Wow, mother loves me so much.”

At that moment, one person in the crowd crept over softly to Thirty-Two and whispered: “Third Manager, is there a kind of book you could print?”

Thirty-Two was very surprised. Turning, he saw it was Ground Rabbit—this fellow had improved since joining the militia: his income had risen, the clothes on his body turned into neat cotton clothes, his ancestral rusty sword was polished bright, and he’d paid a labor offender to help make a scabbard during break time. Now he looked quite respectable.

Except, the way he asked was strange; such a sneaky approach felt wrong.

Thirty-Two instantly realized something and whispered back: “What kind do you want?”

Ground Rabbit replied: “That kind... you know.”

Thirty-Two snickered, his voice revealing a tone only men would understand: “I get it, spring... that... art, right?”

Ground Rabbit exclaimed: "Pfft! What nonsense are you spouting? Mr. Rabbit here is shameless like that? I absolutely don't want that worn-out picture book."

Thirty-Two flushed red immediately: "Oh, not that? Then say it clearly! What exactly do you want?"

Ground Rabbit whispered: "Do you have sword mastery manuals?"

Thirty-Two retorted grumpily: "Are those two things so disgraceful? You have to come whispering secretly to me, making me misunderstand your meaning."

Ground Rabbit countered: "I know secret manuals aren't sold openly; otherwise, how could they be secrets? They must be sold discreetly, so I asked discreetly."

There was no point reasoning with this frivolous rabbit; Thirty-Two shook his head: "No, no, absolutely impossible."

Ground Rabbit sighed heavily: "Ah, no? Your printing house doesn't even have this; it'll go bust sooner or later."

Thirty-Two snapped angrily: "Get lost! Get lost right now!"

Ground Rabbit protested: "Hey? Why so angry? Even if the deal's off, goodwill remains."

Thirty-Two yelled angrily: "What goodwill with a guy like you? Say one more word, and I'll call Instructor He to grab you and turn you into braised rabbit head!"

Ground Rabbit was startled stiff; in Gaojia Village, he feared only two people—Saint Lady and Instructor He. He instantly dashed away, vanishing in a flash into the distance.

Thirty-Two shook his head with a mix of tears and laughter: "That guy! What in the world is he thinking in his head all day?"

## Chapter 177: Immortal Fist Fighting

After watching Ground Rabbit's performance, Li Daoxuan recalled something. The "Army Combat Techniques" videos—dozens of gigabytes sought from the military history forum—had been downloaded long ago, but he hadn't found a suitable chance to teach them to the little people.

Cheng Xu had recently been instructing the militia on formations, spear arrays, crossbows, and other chaotic equipment—basic military knowledge like camping. In his spare time, he would guide everyone in Guanzhong Hong Fist.

Frankly, the schedule was packed tight.

The militia soldiers were exhausted from daily training. Observing this, Li Daoxuan temporarily set aside the Army Combat Techniques without immediately adding them. He planned to incorporate it once they had a solid foundation.

But seeing Ground Rabbit's "eager for skills" demeanor stirred him a bit.

Perhaps it was just him thinking they were tired, while they themselves might crave desperately learning more.

In the end, he decided to provide it to them and let them choose whether to practice or not. If afraid of fatigue, then skip it; if unafraid, then practice—each took charge of their own life.

But how to teach them?

The best way was surely to hand it off to Cheng Xu for him to digest thoroughly before teaching other soldiers. Yet that didn't seem amusing—he wondered if there was a funnier method, a more interesting approach?

Instantly, Li Daoxuan transformed from the "Nanny Deity" to the "Pranks Deity." Alright, time to start some mischief.

Wasn't there a scene in Mr. Jin Yong's novel? In Wuliang Mountain stood the Wuliang Jade Wall. At moonrise, the fortunate could witness immortals practicing swords on the mountain face...

Hehehe!

He'd borrow this little tale for a playful prank.

That same night...

The moon was brilliant and stars sparse!

Gaojia Village was deep in slumber, with only two patrolling troops circling the city walls.

Dragging his weary body, Ground Rabbit climbed into bed.

A day spent drilling in formations and Hong Fist, plus several Thought Lessons, left him physically and mentally drained. But his spirits were high—he'd long aspired to be a mighty general, yet never found his way before.

Now in the militia, training daily under Instructor He, he felt much nearer to his dream.

Reflecting on this, he impulsively threw a punch at the ceiling: "Hei!"

"Did I land this Hong Fist strike perfectly?"

"Happy!"

"Too bad I couldn't find any secret manuals better than Hong Fist... Sigh... Hong Fist was decent, but a widely available boxing style—mastering it wouldn't make him outstanding.

"If only he could get a rare manual, hehe..."

Just then, Li Daoxuan took a thin toothpick and lightly tapped Ground Rabbit's window.

Hearing a "dong" from the window, Ground Rabbit started, flipping upright instantly: "Who's there?"

No one replied!

Ground Rabbit dashed a swift step to the window, pried it slightly open to peer out. Beyond lay the quiet, peaceful Short-term Workers Village...

Though he'd joined the militia, his character evaluation remained incomplete. Thus, he lacked permission to live in the main fortress and stayed in a separate plastic house in the Short-term Workers Village.

He scanned outside from the window for ages—nobody out there.

"Perhaps a wild bird or such bumped the window, whatever—back to sleep."

He went back to bed and had just lain down. "Thump," the window made a sound again.

Ground Rabbit sprang up quickly, grabbing the ancestral long sword by the pillow, and darted to the window. He looked out once more, still seeing no one outside...

Really, what the hell!

Li Daoxuan picked up a pre-prepared small black plastic soldier, tied it with a fishing line, and put it in a box. From above the roof opposite Ground Rabbit, he pulled it swiftly, and it drifted by with a swish...

Ground Rabbit saw it this time: "Who?"

He pushed open the window and jumped out with a swish.

He was just about to sound a loud alarm when he suddenly discovered the figure on the opposite roof had disappeared. He thought to himself: What if it was just my eyes playing tricks? If I sound the alarm and alert everyone, after they search for ages and find nothing, they'd surely beat me up and mock me for being paranoid. I need to confirm clearly.

He quickly opened the door, squeezed out, and headed toward where the figure disappeared earlier to search.

After looking for a long time without finding anything, he spotted another figure sway near a distant field ridge, flying swiftly toward the faraway valley with a swish.

Ground Rabbit commented: "Huh? That's the valley Daoist Ma mentioned, where immortals and monsters fight."

He hurriedly ran toward it, moving farther and farther from the village.

Soon, he arrived at the valley.

It was quiet here, with nothing at all.

Ground Rabbit rubbed his eyes. Could it really be that I saw something wrong?

Just then, he suddenly noticed a blurry figure on one side of the valley wall, striking punches...

What a massive figure, as large as the entire cliff face. That definitely wasn't human—human shadows don't get that big. This had to be an immortal, for only immortals possess such majestic and grand bodies.

That immortal punched and kicked, appearing fierce and powerful, full of momentum, brimming with killing intent. His movements were clean and purposeful, with no wasted effort.

Each move was deadly!

“Wow!”

Ground Rabbit was utterly mesmerized: “This... this... what an amazingly powerful immortal boxing art... It’s not the same style as Guanzhong Hong Fist. I... I must learn it... I must follow along...”

He swished swish swish, mimicking a couple of punches, but suddenly snapped awake: “No, I shouldn’t learn it alone. I should share this excellent thing with the militia brothers. If only I learn it, I’d betray my brotherhood, with no loyalty in jianghu.”

Ground Rabbit felt conflicted inside: I should go call them, but what if this boxing ends while I’m on my way? How about when I return and can’t see it anymore?

It was a tough call, the most difficult choice Mr. Rabbit had ever faced.

Mr. Rabbit! You had to make the right decision.

Would you learn alone or bring your brothers to enjoy together?

Are you... a real man?

Aahh!

Ground Rabbit plopped to the ground with a thud, orz. After one second, he pushed off with both palms on the ground and sprang up with a swish—his leaping ability astonishing, no surprise as a rabbit—and roared: “Immortal, please wait for Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Rabbit will be right back.”

He stretched his legs and bolted with all his might toward Gaojia Fortress. Reaching the fortress wall, he pounded the fortress door frantically: “Quick, let Mr. Rabbit in! Mr. Rabbit needs to find Instructor He, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu... and all the militia brothers! Hurry, hurry, let Mr. Rabbit in... no time left...”

Li Daoxuan silently watched this performance, and a curve couldn't help but form at the corner of his mouth. This rabbit wasn't bad, actually thinking of others. Truthfully, if you hadn't called them, he'd have found another prank move to teach them. But with your call, he'd regard you more highly from now on.

## Chapter 178: Ghostly Boxing

The entire militia group arrived at the small mountain valley.

It was still the middle of the night!

Everyone had been awakened by Ground Rabbit, and they were very unhappy, especially Cheng Xu, who had been a legitimate ninth-rank military officer of the court with an official title. Although he had recently mended his ways, some of his old temper remained.

While walking, he lashed out at Ground Rabbit: "Kid, waking me up in the middle of the night... cough... this instructor. If we don't see the Immortal boxing soon, I'll hang you on a tree for everyone to practice punches on."

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were still half-asleep: "Mr. Rabbit, don't mess around. If you trick us, we hit hard and it hurts."

Ground Rabbit raised his sword: "I swear on my ancestral sword, everything I say is true. There really was an Immortal boxing on the mountain wall. Run faster, everyone—don't be slow. I'm so anxious!"

"Fine, fine, fine!" The militia group kept walking drowsily, one after another, listless as ghosts floating in the night.

"It's here! We've arrived." Ground Rabbit pointed at the huge mountain wall ahead: "Right here—it happened right here just now, with a massive figure, as big as the wall itself, boxing high up..."

The group stared hard: Where? It was just a dark mountain slab.

"Hey, Mr. Rabbit!"

"Where's the Immortal boxing?"

Cheng Xu was the first to rage; his veins bulged: “Hang that rabbit on the tree for me.”

Everyone chimed: “Yes, sir!”

Several men sprang into action, tying Ground Rabbit to a withered tree.

Cheng Xu clenched his fist; his knuckles cracked: “Which way should I start pounding you?”

Ground Rabbit was so aggrieved he wanted to cry: “Everyone, trust me. There really was an Immortal boxing here earlier. I... I didn’t keep it secret; I ran back desperately to tell you... I truly—”

Li Daoxuan observed the scene; he felt it was about time.

He deliberately held back to let everyone misunderstand Ground Rabbit, so when the confusion cleared later, they’d grasp his loyalty.

Heh!

He reached into the chest and tapped on the smartphone screen...

It turned out he had hung the smartphone on that mountain wall beforehand, covered the screen with a thin cloth, and dimmed the brightness to make the image murky and shadowy. It seemed as though it appeared directly on the wall.

His finger tapped; the video started.

Over here, Cheng Xu was ready to deal with Ground Rabbit when he sensed a sudden light behind him. He whipped around and saw a giant figure emerge on the mountain wall...

The image was blurred, obscuring the face, but from an upright stance, it suddenly swayed violently and began boxing. The motions were fierce and sharp, overwhelming to watch.

Cheng Xu exclaimed: “Whoa!”

The whole militia group gasped: “Wow!”

Ground Rabbit beamed with joy: “It’s back! The Immortal has started boxing again. Mr. Rabbit didn’t lie, right? Didn’t lie to you.”

The figure leaped and spun, unleashing a flurry of moves, each saturated with killing intent.

Cheng Xu watched, his jaw nearly dropping: “Such vicious boxing—every blow aims to kill.”

The Army Combat Techniques truly were moves meant to end lives, stressing “efficiency”—taking down foes in seconds—without any showmanship.

The militia men might not grasp it, but Cheng Xu watched each strike, gasping like inhaling cold air. He thought: If I faced that brawler, just a slip of focus would snap my neck. Damn, that’s brutal.

Taking advantage of the pause in the figure’s boxing, Cheng Xu turned and gave Ground Rabbit a sharp rap on the head with a “thump.”

Ground Rabbit: “Huh? Why hit me?”

Cheng Xu snorted: “This isn’t an immortal boxing at all. It’s a ghost doing the boxing.”

Those words startled the entire group: “A ghost?”

Cheng Xu said: “Only a vicious ghost would box in such a ferocious style.”

The crowd: "Huh? Then... can we learn it?"

Cheng Xu burst into loud laughter before suddenly straightening his face and speaking gravely: "Nonsense! Such a great chance must be learned. On the battlefield fighting for your life, you damn well have to turn yourself into a ghost. If you go into battle trying to be a saint like Thirty-Two—sparing this one, forgiving that one—what the hell kind of fight is that?"

The crowd replied awkwardly: "Instructor He, it's not good to speak ill of Thirty-Two behind his back. He's quite decent."

Cheng Xu snorted: "He is decent, but he can't hold his own on the battlefield. You all will fight enemies in combat someday. Remember, don't follow his example."

Ground Rabbit called out: "It's starting again. The immortal's beginning the second set of moves."

Cheng Xu waved a hand: "Everyone, stay alert! Watch closely without missing a single stance. Master the Guanzhong Hong Fist well, and master this ghost's lethal boxing too..."

The crowd responded in unison: "Yes, sir."

Over a hundred people sat in rows, fixing their eyes on the mountain wall while occasionally mimicking the moves with swings of their fists and feet.

Only Ground Rabbit remained tied to the tree, shouting urgently: "Hey hey hey, you forgot to untie me! Quick, get me down!"

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu came over to free Ground Rabbit, and everyone focused on learning boxing together.

Among the large crowd, Cheng Xu learned the fastest, having the strongest foundation.

After observing for an hour, he had already grasped several moves almost entirely.

Li Daoxuan put away his phone. Enough for now—no sense letting them stay here all night. Today's lesson would last just an hour; they'd continue tomorrow.

Seeing the "ghost" stop boxing, the opposite mountain wall darkened.

The militia members refused to leave, staring foolishly at the mountain wall instead. After waiting a long while and seeing no sign of the wall lighting up again, Cheng Xu sighed: "Such a pity. We only learned a few moves today. Who knows if that ghost will box here tomorrow."

Ground Rabbit declared: "I'll guard this place again tomorrow night. Maybe we'll learn more."

Cheng Xu shot back: "Of course! Tomorrow night, we'll all come guard this spot. If the ghost returns to teach boxing, we'll learn. If not... sigh... we'll just perfect today's handful of moves and use them as a trump card."

Everyone responded together: "Yes, sir."

Cheng Xu led the militia back, and each of them returned to their own rooms.

But Ground Rabbit had no desire to sleep. His brain was too excited to rest, and besides, he didn't live in the main fortress anyway—he was staying in Short-term Workers Village, where he had more freedom to move around.

He dashed alone to an open space outside the village, struck the opening pose of the "ghost boxing style," and started practicing: "Hah! Ha! Hah! Ha!"

Even though he'd only picked up a few moves, he trained with blazing determination.

Chapter 179: Laba Rice Noodles

Early in the morning, the villagers of Wangjia Village once again rode their sun chariots out to plant sorghum.

The nearest surrounding villages—Zhuangjia Village, Zhangjia Village, and Li Family Village—had already received rain from the Dragon King. Now that conditions allowed for farming, the villagers, though temporarily without buses to ride, were in high spirits as a cement road was under construction. Hoisting their hoes, they cheerfully set off toward their own fields.

The militia, who usually trained early at dawn, were unexpectedly late today. Cheng Xu had postponed their assembly by two hours, allowing everyone ample rest before commencing their drills once re-energized.

Li Daoxuan followed his usual routine. He rose early, holding a colossal steamed bun stuffed with braised meat. He'd take a bite of the bun, then a sip of soybean milk.

The Old Village Chief of Gaojia Village lay reclining in his hand-woven bamboo chair, engrossed in a comic book titled Yang Family Generals.

“This book... truly wonderful! Heh...” The Old Village Chief squinted, beaming with delight. “Thrilling! So thrilling!”

Back in his youth, the old man had frequently traveled to and from the county seat. There, he'd listened to storytellers recount tales of the Yang Family Generals and snuck glimpses of the troupe performances on stages. Yet, lacking money for tipping, he'd been too ashamed to get closer.

Thus, his knowledge of the Yang family's saga remained fragmented, lacking a coherent structure.

With his very own comic book now at hand, the story instantly flowed seamlessly. He devoured it with boundless delight, utterly captivated.

He hadn't even prepared breakfast, choosing to hunger while rereading the book a good ten times instead.

Just then, his stomach let out a loud grumble, seemingly protesting its neglect.

Right at that moment, a shout sounded nearby: “Rice noodles for sale! Southern delicacy! Rice noodles! Hehe—anyone care to try? Only five coppers a bowl!”

The Old Village Chief froze in surprise.

Li Daoxuan also froze in surprise.

Someone was selling that here in Gaojia Village?

Li Daoxuan followed the sound and spotted Gao Laba. Oh, Laba! A few days prior, Daoist Ma Tianzheng had taught Gao Laba how to make southern rice noodles. Li Daoxuan had watched out of curiosity but, finding the rice soaking step too time-consuming and disliking “static scenes,” had shifted his focus elsewhere. Now, unexpectedly, the venture had already reached the sales phase.

Gao Laba embodied the perfect vendor, carrying a small shoulder pole across the Hakka roundhouse courtyards of Gaojia’s Main Fortress, calling out, “Rice noodles for sale!”

The Old Village Chief yelled out, “Laba! You selling noodles? Come over here!”

Laba couldn’t see him but recognized the chief’s voice. Winding through corridors and making a few turns, he swiftly appeared before the Old Village Chief. Setting his load down, he cheerfully greeted the elder. “Village Chief! Care for a bowl?”

The elder chuckled. “I’ll take one! Got lost in this book, too lazy to cook myself. Let’s taste what this ‘rice noodle’ business is all about!”

Laba’s shoulder pole held a large earthenware pot. Lifting the lid revealed steaming hot, freshly boiled rice noodles. Ladling out a portion, he sprinkled a few grains of salt and passed it to the chief.

The Old Village Chief slurped a mouthful. Instantly, his face brightened. “Huh? That’s... unexpectedly delicious!”

Gao Laba grinned. “Daoist Ma taught me. Southerners came up with this. They’ve got loads of tricks with rice—tricks we northerners hardly know!”

Thoroughly pleased by the taste, the Old Chief began pondering. At five copper pieces a bowl, eating one daily until his dying day wouldn’t even dent his savings. Why cook himself daily? His limbs, old and weary, lacked a spouse for support; cooking solo was just exhausting.

“Laba, bring me a bowl every morning from now on,” the chief declared.

Gao Laba was overjoyed. “Sure thing!” A splendid start! His confidence soaring, Laba hoisted his load and trotted through the entire fortress. Within moments, he’d sold dozens of bowls. After all, the main fortress housed “Old Villagers”—each comfortably rich. Spending a mere five coppers on a novel bite was absolutely trivial.

Even Gao Sanwa got a bowl! Cradling it, he slurped-slurped-slurped with pure bliss.

Boasting a successful launch and a completely emptied pot, Gao Laba’s confidence peaked. Privately, he planned: Tomorrow, I’ll prepare more noodles. Earn a bit more...

But...

Rice noodles, once prepared in bulk, risk turning mushy if not sold quickly. So, how to handle that problem?

Gao Laba sought out Ma Tianzheng, sharing his fresh dilemma.

Ma Tianzheng chuckled. “Set up a shop. Wait for customers to walk in. When they order, then boil a bowl for them. That’s how southern rice noodle shops operate!”

Gao Laba had an epiphany: “Of course! But how do I get a shop? Building a place costs an arm and a leg!”

Ma Tianzheng pointed toward the hill's plastic houses—the “Gaojia Business Circle.” Numerous brightly colored structures stood vacant. “Isn't that the Grand Marketplace placed by our Deity? Plenty of empty spots. Go consult the Saint Lady. See if you can obtain the Deity's grace, rent one of those unused huts.”

Watching this unfold, Li Daoxuan inwardly rejoiced: Excellent! A promising start. The bud sprouting from Gaojia's commerce—absolutely must be nurtured. But... those darned plastic houses... open fire inside won't do. Those plastic houses would be a disaster if caught alight. Must get Laba to build his own stove for fire.

Swiftly, Li Daoxuan's command flowed downwards through Gao Yiye:

Special policy for Gao Laba: zero rent for three months. Starting the fourth month: just a token fifty copper coppers per month. Incremental hikes to follow later.

Originally, Li Daoxuan had surmised that building a stove would be burdensome for the man—yet, he hadn't anticipated:

Most ancients dwelt in wooden abodes—far more fire-susceptible than sturdy plastic. Hence, from childhood, natives mastered stove-building techniques for flammable surroundings. Using earth and stones fetched nearby, Laba swiftly constructed a humble hearth. Now, within this stove, regardless of the flames danced, the plastic house remained untouchable.

After completion, Gaojia Business Circle welcomed its second establishment: “Laba Rice Noodles,” inaugurated beside Thirty-Two's “Gaojia Bookstore.”

Villagers purchasing comic books would carry their finds to the neighboring rice noodle shop. Settled there, book open, they'd call out to Gao Laba: “Boss! One bowl of noodles, please.”

“Sure thing!” Laba would respond. Grabbing a handful of noodles, he'd toss them into the boiling water. A mere few minutes later, he'd scoop them up, scatter a few salt grains, and hand the customer their bowl.

The customer's left hand flipped their comic book pages. The right held chopsticks. With a slurp—the noodles entered their mouth. Ahh... feeling like an immortal.

Chapter 180: Shaanbei Diaoqu

Chengcheng County...

At the edge of the county town, there was a small Diaoqu troupe. Since the troupe leader's surname was Zhang, it was called the Zhang Family Troupe.

The Zhang Family Troupe consisted of two singers, four dancers, and four musicians—a total of ten members.

In better years, the Zhang Family Troupe had enjoyed great fame. Whenever they set up to perform, crowds would gather in thick layers. After each Diaoqu show, they always collected a fair amount of copper coins.

The troupe members never worried about survival.

But following three years of severe drought, life for the Zhang Family Troupe grew increasingly difficult.

By this year, their performances had completely stopped drawing audiences.

Each time they staged a show, only a handful of spectators showed up, offering barely any coins. Unable to fill their stomachs, the Zhang Family Troupe joined ordinary refugees at County Magistrate Liang Shixian's Charity Platform to scavenge for bowls of noodle soup.

There seemed no end in sight to such days.

Just when despair loomed, Master Zhang bumped into an old acquaintance, Tan Liwen, at the aid and food distribution site.

Tan Liwen had been a loyal spectator. In the past, he never missed any performance, even during the worst drought. But for months now, he'd vanished.

The moment Master Zhang spotted Tan Liwen, tears welled up. “Mr. Tan, it’s been so long. When every curtain rose, you were there to cheer us on. But these past months, fearing something had happened to you.”

Tan Liwen sighed. “Thank you for your concern, Master Zhang. After failing imperial exams repeatedly, I realized my limitations. Months ago, I abandoned the scholar’s dream and went to Gaojia Village. Steward Thirty-Two became my Dong Weng, and I now serve as his advisor. Busy with village affairs, I simply couldn’t return to see your Diaoqu.”

Master Zhang responded, “Gaojia Village? Lately, that name’s on everyone’s lips. Many are flocking there for work. Sounds like a wealthy clan’s large-scale construction.”

Tan Liwen smiled. “Exactly that Gaojia Village. Master Zhang, I returned specifically to find you. I ask you to visit Gaojia Village and perform your Shaanbei Diaoqu.”

Master Zhang paused, thinking: Troupes like ours only thrive in bustling towns. In some remote village? Who’d attend unless a wealthy lord hosted some occasion—covering our fees...

Baffled, he asked, “Which wealthy lord invited us?”

Tan Liwen teased, “Wouldn’t you rather learn upon arrival? Don’t worry—you’ll be paid. Surely you trust me, Tan Liwen?”

Master Zhang lowered his gaze to the noodle soup in his hand, sighing softly. Fine. Even in this county, we’re starving refugees. Performing for a wealthy lord would fill our bellies for two whole days.

Mr. Tan is an honorable man. He won’t trick a humble troupe like ours.

“In that case, we’ll go.”

Thus, the Zhang Family Troupe gathered their instruments, costumes, and props. Their small party trekked alongside Tan Liwen, embarking on an improbable adventure.

Setting out at noon and marching till dusk, they finally reached Gaojia Village.

Master Zhang's eyes locked onto Gaojia Fortress—majestic and imposing—surrounded by cluttered, brightly colored small houses. Sunset fell, closing the road construction sites. Farmers rested. Even labor offenders paused duties during free time. Work had halted everywhere.

Across Gaojia Fortress, laborers streamed home, filling the area with vibrant chaos.

Startled, Master Zhang gasped, "This Gaojia Village dazzles like a bustling town!"

Tan Liwen chuckled. "Ordinary townsfolk lack our villagers' wealth. Come—I'll take you to the stage."

He led them into the Gaojia Business Circle. There stood a plastic stage mimicking ancient architecture—a strikingly luxurious, elegant structure.

As mere itinerant players (their name 'Zhang Family Troupe' signaled lowly status), they'd only performed on crude wooden platforms. Never before had they encountered a proper, grand stage.

Terrified, the ten members trembled. "This... stage... us performing here?"

Tan Liwen nodded. "It's the only stage in Gaojia Village."

Master Zhang stammered timidly, "It's beneath us... We shouldn't..."

Tan Liwen retorted, "Hah! I've watched your shows countless times. You deserve it. On my recommendation, the Deity personally summoned you. Don't behave like cowards! If you miss a note and embarrass me before the Deity..."

Master Zhang straightened his spine. "Thank you for your trust, Mr. Tan. But... this 'Deity'?"

Tan Liwen answered, “You’ll understand soon. Focus now—deliver your finest Diaoqu play tonight for His Reverence.”

Master Zhang glanced at the fading sun. “But night falls soon. Audiences would be asleep once we prepare.”

“Not an issue!” Yiye suddenly popped out, beaming. “The Deity just decreed—ignore darkness. He yearns for liveliness above. Prepare for Shaanbei Diaoqu immediately.”

Indeed, Li Daoxuan felt utterly bored. The miniature world offered daytime fascination, but when night came and villagers rested, everything stilled.

As a modern man, he rarely slept before midnight—leaving hours of utter monotony. The troupe’s arrival thrilled him immensely.

Especially since Shaanbei Diaoqu represented local culture—a genre Li Daoxuan had never witnessed before.

“Yiye, announce the Diaoqu show.”

Yiye bounced away excitedly. Watching Diaoqu enchanted her too—since childhood tales, she hadn’t witnessed one firsthand. Skips and jumps marked her steps. “A performance! How splendid!”

Tan Liwen grinned at Master Zhang. “The Saint Lady looks ecstatic. Prepare quickly now!”