

Great Ming 191

Chapter 191: Duel Tomorrow

The Shaanbei Diaoqu performance ended, and the audience dispersed.

The noisy, bustling crowd began to retreat.

Xing Honglang spent her days busy with running trade and rarely had time to sit and watch a play; this show made her quite happy, and she also threw a small ingot of silver onto the stage along with the crowd.

After it was over, she still felt somewhat unsatisfied.

She stood up to leave only to remember that Gao Chuwu was still sitting beside her; the two had actually sat shoulder-to-shoulder and watched an entire play together, making it seem like they were doing something...

Xing Honglang suddenly got angry: "I wasn't agreeing to that!"

Gao Chuwu asked: "What didn't you agree to?"

Xing Honglang snorted: "Hmph!"

After humming, she suddenly remembered something and unslung the thick-bladed large knife from her back: "This knife feels suitable for you, so I'm giving it to you."

"Oh?"

Gao Chuwu was overjoyed.

Xing Honglang raged again: "What are you happily imagining? This knife doesn't mean what you're thinking."

Gao Chuwu questioned: "Huh? What was I thinking about?"

Xing Honglang remained silent...

Embarrassment, an eerie embarrassment.

Several seconds later, Xing Honglang realized there was no need to be embarrassed at all; that simpleton hadn't misunderstood anything and didn't even notice her embarrassment, so there was no reason for it. She snorted and said: "This knife is a thank-you gift for helping me last time; there's absolutely no other meaning to it, understand?"

Gao Chuwu grinned: "Understood! But I can't take it."

Xing Honglang's anger instantly peaked: "Why won't you take my gift?"

Gao Chuwu explained: "When I gave you chocolate, you refused it, so now when you give me this big knife, I can't accept it either."

Xing Honglang cracked her knuckles: "Duel tomorrow; if I win, you take this knife, and if I lose, you pay for it."

Gao Chuwu was startled: "Aren't you still injured?"

Xing Honglang retorted: "My injury healed long ago; tomorrow is a fair duel."

Gao Chuwu agreed: "Alright!"

While those two were happily stirring up trouble over there, on the other side, Gao Yiye finished watching the play and was about to return to drawing her comic book when she suddenly heard the Deity's call: "Yiye!"

Gao Yiye swiftly looked up: “Deity, what do you command?”

Li Daoxuan instructed: “Follow the dispersing crowd; out on the street, two newcomers are lost and helpless, so find them and chat.”

Gao Yiye grinned: “Got it, I’ll go right away.”

She bounced and skipped through the scattering crowd.

Thirty-Two’s daughter was twelve years old and tagged along behind Gao Yiye like a shadow, skipping and running too; in the blink of an eye, the two girls reached the two craftsmen’s spot.

At that moment, Xu Dafu and the lamp maker were pitifully looking around, trying to find Xing Honglang in the crowd to ask her what to do next; little did they know Xing Honglang was ahead challenging Gao Chuwu to a duel and had no intention of coming back.

As the two felt utterly lost, they saw two girls—one bigger in front, one smaller behind—beaming as they ran up to the pair.

A girl with dark circles under her eyes, looking like she had stayed up several nights, said, “Found you.”

The two artisans pointed at their own noses and asked, “Miss, are you looking for us?”

Gao Yiye let out a big yawn and replied, “Yes, looking for you.”

The two artisans looked at her curiously. They started by examining her clothes; though not luxurious, they were cotton garments, far better than the burlap clothing worn by the poor. Her outfit was also clean and not muddy, showing that this girl didn’t need to do hard physical work.

At the very least, she must be from a wealthy family.

The two didn't dare be insolent, so they quickly bowed to Gao Yiye and asked, "Miss, what do you advise?"

Gao Yiye rubbed her dark circles and asked, "Is there a lamp maker among you?"

The lamp maker said in surprise, "This lowly one is the lamp maker. How did you... know?"

Gao Yiye answered, "Of course, the Deity told me."

The two artisans each thought to themselves: The Deity? That must be the same Deity who had just awarded the "Special Prize" to the three mortar makers. He seemed like a very, very, very wealthy lord. If he took notice of someone, they could become rich instantly.

Thinking of this, the lamp maker suddenly got joyful—I've been singled out, hahaha, I've been singled out! He hurriedly put on an ingratiating look and said, "Miss, what does the Deity command?"

Gao Yiye pointed at the Gaojia Business Circle and said, "You've seen how this street looks now, right? It is pitch black everywhere, without any nice lamps. The Deity needs a lot of lamps to light up this whole area."

The lamp maker perked up: So that was it, hehehe.

Gao Yiye tilted her ear to listen to the sound from above, then smiled and declared, "The Deity said, room and board included, three taels of silver per month, to make lamps for Gaojia Village. Are you willing?"

Three taels of silver!

When the lamp maker heard that wage, he almost knelt and kowtowed on the spot. He was just a simple lamp maker, handling bamboo and paper in a meager trade. Before, he had barely enough to eat and wore tattered clothes; when had he ever seen such a huge sum as three taels of silver?

Upon hearing the figure, he could scarcely believe his ears.

He dug hard inside his ear, pulling out a big chunk of earwax. Feeling his hearing clearer, he asked again, “Three taels? Truly three taels?”

Gao Yiye laughed and said, “How could I fool you? The artisans in our Gaojia Village have always earned decent pay. If you accept, go to Thirty-Two to check in.”

“Is Thirty-Two... the one who handed out the prize on the fortress wall earlier?”

“Yes!”

The lamp maker cheered and sprinted toward the main fortress, completely forgetting Xu Dafu.

Now, Xu Dafu felt embarrassed.

He didn't know whether to chase after the lamp maker or stay put to find Xing Honglang; he felt truly stuck.

Li Daoxuan, seeing this man's perplexed and helpless look, was slightly intrigued and said, “Yiye, ask him what he does.”

Gao Yiye relayed the question exactly.

When he was asked about his occupation, Xu Dafu grew a bit uneasy. He was a permanent worker, and in the gunpowder makers' branch, which the court strictly monitored. After the big explosion in the capital—those who worked with gunpowder had been guarded very closely by officials here. Would revealing his identity get him hauled off to the authorities?

Dealing with gunpowder made him habitually cautious and careful, so he really didn't dare state any details easily.

He hesitated for a while, mumbling incoherently.

Right then, Xing Honglang arrived with Gao Chuwu tagging along. Walking together, they debated loudly about the timing for their fight the next day.

Nearing Gao Yiye and Xu Dafu, Xing Honglang exclaimed, “Yi?” and slapped her forehead. “Oh! Xu Dafu, I forgot about the two of you staying here. Where is the lamp maker? Where did he run off to?”

Xu Dafu answered with a bitter laugh, “The lamp maker got hired and went to the main fortress to see Thirty-Two.”

Xing Honglang laughed and said, “Why the long face? No need to fret about finding work. You are the one the Deity specifically pointed out.”

Turning to Gao Yiye, she smiled and added, “Saint Lady, please tell the Deity that this man is a gunpowder maker—I brought him from Xi’an Prefecture.”

Li Daoxuan suddenly felt overjoyed on hearing this: So he is a gunpowder maker.

Chapter 192: Gaojia Village Firearms Bureau

The arrival of the gunpowder makers greatly lifted Li Daoxuan’s spirits.

Finally, the long-prepared firecrackers would be put to use.

“Yiye, have him stay at the artisans’ well. First, report him to Gao Yiyi. Assign him a temporary room according to the standard for artisans and let him rest well today. I’ll arrange work for him tomorrow,” ordered the Deity.

Gao Yiye acknowledged and led Xu Dafu towards the main fortress.

Xu Dafu felt a bit uneasy, but seeing they seemed willing to take him in, he felt a flicker of anticipation. Earlier, the lamp maker had received three taels of silver as wages, which gave Xu Dafu newfound confidence.

Soon, they reached the artisans' well.

The artisans' well was bustling during the day, filled with craftsmen working in the courtyard. However, it was late now, and most had gone to sleep. Only the blacksmith's shop still glowed with the furnace fire, where Li Da sat by the forge, frowning at a spring.

The scene cast a somewhat eerie atmosphere over the artisans' well.

Thirty-Two had just been there, bringing over the lamp maker. Artisan Master Gao Yiyi had just finished assigning the lamp maker a room when he turned and saw Gao Yiye bringing another person.

Gao Yiyi smiled, "Another craftsman? Who is this sir?"

Gao Yiye replied, "Gunpowder makers."

This startled Gao Yiyi. Simultaneously, inside the blacksmith's shop, Li Da jerked his head up to look over.

Gao Yiye continued, "The Deity ordered you to arrange a temporary room for him first."

Gao Yiyi was puzzled, "Temporary? Not letting him stay in the artisans' well?"

Li Da, nearby, spoke up, "I think I can roughly guess the Deity's intention... It's probably because... of the incident of the Great Explosion in the capital."

The people of Gaojia Village, isolated and poorly informed, didn't understand what "Great Explosion in the capital" meant. But Li Da, the former county blacksmith, knew. Xu Dafu, the gunpowder maker, was even more aware and wore a strange expression. "If I were to play with gunpowder here, it really wouldn't be very appropriate. This is the master's family Fortress, isn't it? If the gunpowder were to explode here... then that would..."

Gao Yiyi understood now. "Alright then, find a temporary room for him to stay in for now. We'll see how the Deity arranges things later."

He temporarily placed the gunpowder maker in a room next to the lamp maker's.

That night, both newly arrived craftsmen were incredibly excited. They gathered together and chatted incessantly for hours, too exhilarated to sleep. A completely new life had unfolded before them, and they faintly sensed this new life promised happiness thousands of times greater than their old lives.

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Early in the morning, Gao Yiye, sporting a pair of panda eyes, knocked on the door of the two craftsmen's room and was met by Xu Dafu, who also sported a pair of panda eyes.

Two sets of panda eyes stared wide at each other.

Gao Yiye asked, "Haven't had breakfast yet?"

Xu Dafu nodded pitifully. He had woken up a little while ago. The lamp maker had already been whisked away by Artisan Master Gao Yiyi to be assigned work. Xu Dafu had different arrangements and couldn't follow Gao Yiyi. He was hungry but dared not go out to ask for food, so he just waited stupidly on an empty stomach.

Gao Yiye smiled, "I haven't had breakfast either. I've been terribly busy lately, haven't cooked in days. I'll take you for some rice noodles, then wait for the Deity's decree."

Xu Dafu was very curious, "Rice noodles? What are those?"

Soon, he was led by Gao Yiye to "Laba Rice Noodles" in the business circle. Despite the early hour, business was booming. Gao Laba was busy running around, constantly adding noodles to the pot and taking them out.

Village Chief, Mr. Wang, and other “wealthy folks who didn’t want to cook themselves” were crowded in the shop. Some were already slurping their noodles, while others impatiently waited for theirs to be cooked.

Gao Yiye took out ten copper coins, paid for two bowls of noodles, and gestured for Xu Dafu to sit. “Seems you haven’t taken a wife either? When work gets busy later, you might not have time to cook. You can come to Uncle Laba to eat rice noodles. They are really delicious, a specialty from the south, I hear.”

Xu Dafu thought to himself: Five coppers a bowl? Where would I afford that? I can’t be so extravagant. Probably not many people in Xi’an Prefecture eat like this either. If it sold for one or two coppers, maybe some would be willing to try.

But what’s going on with this village? So many people can afford it?

He watched the small rice noodle shop packed to bursting, his mind full of questions.

As he and Gao Yiye slurped their noodles, Li Daoxuan was busy preparing for the “Gaojia Village Firearms Bureau”.

The Firearms Bureau would undoubtedly be a critical department for Gaojia Village in the future. Because he fully intended to phase out most melee weapons, arming all Gaojia villagers with firearms would mean the bureau would stockpile vast quantities of gunpowder. The safety of this stuff absolutely could not be overlooked.

A single slip could trigger a “Tianqi Grand Explosion.”

Therefore, the Gaojia Firearms Bureau must be situated a safe distance from the main fortress, the Labor Offenders Village, and the Short-term Workers Village. Ideally, it should be within a valley, forming its own isolated compound – much like the military bases often located in mountains in later generations.

Li Daoxuan tapped randomly on the outer regions of the box – north, south, east, and west. About two li (roughly 0.6 miles) northwest, he found a small valley. The valley was mostly bare rock with very few trees. It seemed an excellent location.

He took a metal scraper and swiped it back and forth several times between Gaojia Village and that valley. A basic yellow earth official road was swiftly scraped out. Villagers could be assigned to pave it with cement later.

Next was the main building for the Firearms Bureau.

Future military bases mostly used sturdy reinforced concrete structures. Li Daoxuan pondered this carefully. He ran to his balcony, grabbed a small, flat, oval-shaped stone vat he used for flowers – it was several centimeters long and made of thick stone.

He drilled four large openings along the rim for gateways: north, south, east, and west. Then he drilled a series of smaller openings for windows. Finally, he flipped the stone vat upside down and placed it... capsized it... onto the valley floor...

Done!

A gigantic, utterly bare, pure stone structure was born. It looked somewhat crude, just a plain outer shell devoid of any decoration.

Exactly right, he thought. Military buildings should be precisely this sparse and functional.

Just as Li Daoxuan finished these preparations...

...on the other side, Gao Yiye and Xu Dafu slurped their last noodle.

The two walked out of the business circle. At that moment, Li Daoxuan happened to shift his perspective back and looked down to instruct: “Yiye, take him out of the village, heading northwest. You’ll soon see a newly made road. Follow that road all the way.”

Gao Yiye promptly led the way.

As soon as Xu Dafu set foot on the “yellow earth official road,” he sensed something amiss. This road felt freshly made. The earth still radiated that raw, just-turned-over scent of soil. On the sides, he could see the marks of the earth that had recently been dug up.

Being cautious by nature, he didn’t dare ask questions and simply followed in Gao Yiye’s footsteps.

After walking two li (approx. 0.6 miles), a small valley appeared ahead. Inside the valley stood an enormous, stark, stone building. Its footprint was vast, its scale immense – nearly half the size of the Gaojia Fortress.

Chapter 193: The Boss Promised Future Treat

Gao Yiye smiled. “Uncle Xu, from now on, you will be in charge of this building.”

Xu Dafu glanced at the terrifyingly large stone house and jumped on the spot. “So big... For me to manage?”

Li Daoxuan offered no explanation. He took one firecracker from those bought for the Spring Festival, peeled off its outer paper casing, unwrapped it layer by layer, and spread out the gunpowder inside.

The gunpowder within firecrackers primarily consisted of ammonium nitrate, potassium nitrate, sulfur, and charcoal—essentially the same as Ming Dynasty’s black powder, though their proportions varied slightly; they were near-equivalent, with slight differences.

A single firecracker didn’t contain much gunpowder—just a tiny pinch. He wrapped the powder-laden paper into a cone, aimed it at the small window of the “firearms bureau,” and poured it in.

“Yiye, take Xu Dafu inside to have a look.”

Gao Yiye led Xu Dafu into the “firearms bureau.” The massive, upturned stone vat enclosed an enormous interior space.

The two stepping inside felt like entering a colossal sports arena. Standing amidst such vastness and looking around, one couldn't help but feel insignificant.

Naturally timid and cautious, Xu Dafou felt utterly dwarfed within the gigantic room, almost shrunk himself into a ball, too afraid to move freely.

Gao Yiye pointed to the pile of gunpowder by the window. "Look over there."

Following her finger, Xu Dafu gasped. "Ah? A huge pile of odd little balls."

Gao Yiye nodded. "This is the immortal realm's gunpowder provided by the Deity. Celestial objects are vast; we mortals cannot use them directly. That's why we need you to grind them into fine powder."

The talk of immortal realms confused Xu Dafu. He hurried over to the pile of gunpowder.

What seemed like a pinch from a tiny firecracker now appeared as a substantial heap before him. He scooped up a small sphere and sniffed it. "This is a sulfur ball..."

Picking up another, he took a whiff. "This is a charcoal ball."

"Niter..."

He quickly deduced the composition of these pellets, a puzzled expression spreading across his face. "This is essentially prepared gunpowder... except every particle is too large. Why make it this coarse and not grind it finer before mixing?"

Gao Yiye replied, "Isn't that precisely why you're here?"

Xu Dafu felt energy rushing with pride: Exactly! This brave woman brought me here precisely for this job. How foolish to ask such an obvious question!

He promptly offered a deep bow. “Saint Lady, I fully understand my duties now. I will grind these spherical gunpowder materials into fine powder and then proportionally mix them back into useable gunpowder.”

Gao Yiye added, “The Deity says one person isn’t enough; you must train apprentices. Otherwise, the production will never meet demand. Don’t fret about apprentices replacing masters either—later, you will be promoted to director of the firearms bureau, overseeing all gunpowder makers. Your pay will be higher than if you worked solo.”

Immense joy filled Xu Dafu’s heart: This Deity seems a very considerate wealthy lord indeed. He even understands the worry about “apprentices surpassing the master.” He gave me notice and a promise: becoming Bureau Director with increased pay!

Instantly, Xu Dafu brimmed with vigor.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan inwardly pondered: People of ancient times are so naive! Modern folk would immediately grow suspicious hearing promises of promotions and raises. Because, well... that’s what’s called “a boss’s promised future treat.” Who dares rely on that to stave off hunger?

Modern workers hardly need actual meals; bosses’ “future treats,” colleagues’ “gossip snacks,” and their own “work shirking fishes” satiate them fully.

Not wanting the innocent ancient to feel modern malice, I’ll be a good boss. Later, I’ll genuinely promote and raise his pay—no empty promises.

Gao Yiye continued, “Your firearms bureau stands empty right now—devoid of equipment, doors, or windows. You’ll require numerous tools and items. Don’t hesitate; report necessary supplies directly to Clerk Tan. Your bureau’s resources will be prioritized. You may also recruit some apprentices in Short-term Workers Village. Work swiftly to guarantee the firearms bureau becomes operational as soon as possible. The Deity has wanted gunpowder for a long time now.”

Xu Dafu hastily bowed again. “I fully understand. Rest assured, this humble servant will not disappoint the Deity’s trust.”

With the task assigned, they prepared to leave. The pair exited the stone vat and returned to the main fortress while Xu Dafu hurriedly searched for Tan Liwen.

Gao Yiye let out another enormous yawn. She made her way toward the watchtower.

She appeared thoroughly exhausted, teetering slightly as she walked. Mid-step, she suddenly dozed off, pitching forward and nearly collapsing. Thankfully, Li Daoxuan had sensed her fatigue. He swiftly extended a hand, placing a single upright index finger before her as a support.

Gao Yiye bumped into Li Daoxuan's finger and jolted awake. "Oh!" she yelped. She quickly pushed off his finger with both hands to steady herself, shuffling back two steps. Glancing up at his retreating hand, her cheeks flushed slightly pink. "Thank you, Deity."

"You've been staying up every night... drawing?" asked Li Daoxuan. "So, you finally hit your limit?"

Gao Yiye whispered in a small voice, "Mm-hmm."

Had Li Daoxuan pressed now—"Exactly what are you drawing?"—she wouldn't have concealed a thing, obediently submitting every detail.

But sensing her hesitation to volunteer the information herself, demanding an answer with his divine authority seemed... inappropriate. He suppressed the question.

He redirected instead: "How far along are you?"

Gao Yiye's face brightened with a delighted smile. "It's nearly completed! Once it's entirely finished, I'll show everyone and astonish them all."

"Falling apart from fatigue, just to shock everyone?" Li Daoxuan chuckled. "You really are the most mischievous girl in Gaojia Village, aren't you?"

Gao Yiye beamed. "Heh-heh."

“Alright, quickly get back to the watchtower for a nap.”

“But I can’t sleep,” Gao Yiye protested. “I need to remain awake to relay your divine decrees.”

“That’s unnecessary,” Li Daoxuan said gently. “If Gaojia Village grinds to a halt without my directives, that’s problematic in itself. What if I issue no commands at all for one day? Stop forcing all-night drawing sessions. Draw during the day; rest properly at night! I’ll still be eager to behold whatever marvelous thing you’re crafting.”

“Ye—yes!” Gao Yiye rubbed her dark under-eye circles. “Then I truly shall go rest now. Please, wake me if you do have any divine decree that needs my delivery.”

“Go on.”

The girl scurried back to the watchtower with hurried footsteps. She flopped onto her bed. Within moments, deep snores rose as she fell fast asleep.

Li Daoxuan truly intended to issue no further commandments. Until she awoke, his role was purely observant...

Just as he pondered this, movement caught his eye. An assembly of villagers gathered on Gaojia Fortress’s front grounds. At the center, Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang were cracking their knuckles, preparing for a duel.

Chapter 194: Someone Fell Into the Ravine

The duel was about to begin again!

The salt smugglers naturally joined Miss Xing’s cheer squad, while the villagers of Gaojia Village instinctively formed Gao Chuwu’s cheer squad.

However...

A portion of Gao Chuwu's cheer squad clearly defected, switching over to Miss Xing's side instead.

One salt smuggler felt something odd and looked back. Standing beside him, cheering for their leader, was actually a woman from Gaojia Village, holding a child by the hand.

The salt smuggler was baffled: "Sister, you're from Gaojia Village, right? Why are you supporting our boss instead of Gao Chuwu?"

The woman was Gao San Niang, holding her child Gao Sanwa. Though both were among Gaojia Village's original forty-two members, mother and son defected without hesitation.

Gao San Niang chuckled. "Miss Xing isn't an outsider anymore. I see her as one of us now. When two family members fight, I naturally cheer for the one I like more!"

Then she raised her voice and shouted: "Miss Xing, fight! Beat that oaf Gao Chuwu into submission! Let him learn who really runs the household from now on!"

The crowd sweated nervously!

The male villagers teased Gao Chuwu too: "Gao Chuwu, don't disgrace the men! Make sure you beat your wife into submission!"

Xing Honglang was furious: "Who's his wife?!"

Everyone hastily covered their mouths.

Madam Bai and Young Master Bai arrived at the edge of the circle. Just as the young master moved toward Gao Chuwu's side, Madam Bai pulled his sleeve. "We're cheering for Miss Xing."

Young Master Bai: "Huh? But I wanted to cheer for Brother Chuwu!"

Whap! Madam Bai gave him a hard pinch on the ear. "Ungrateful son! Opposing your own mother?"

Young Master Bai considered this seriously. Suddenly, whap! He gave himself a hard pinch. “Mother, you’re right. I am unfilial and need a wake-up call!”

Whap! He gave himself another hard pinch. “But after waking up, I still want to support Brother Chuwu... So I’ll let Mother pinch me again instead! Forgive me, Mother. I’m going!”

He quickly ducked into Gao Chuwu’s cheer squad.

Madam Bai: “Huh? Wha—?! Sons grow up and forget their mothers! Ahhhhh!”

Within thick layers of surrounding spectators...

The duel started!

Xing Honglang attacked first as always. Using the thirty-six strikes of Jin Hong Fist, her opening was ferocious. But Gao Chuwu was no longer the unskilled fool he’d once been. Executing Shaanxi’s Guanzhong Hong Fist thirty-six strikes—though still somewhat awkward—his sheer strength and agility made his movements convincing.

The two styles of Hong Fist were quite similar, differing only in minor details.

The fight resembled a senior sister sparring with a junior brother from the same school—a truly pleasing spectacle.

However...

Experience ultimately prevailed. After twenty-something exchanges, Gao Chuwu’s rhythm faltered while Xing Honglang remained rock steady. Not the slightest hint of disorder showed in her fists. Seizing his opening, she darted forward with a dizzying barrage of rapid strikes, each punch landing on Gao Chuwu’s vulnerable spots.

The figures suddenly separated. Gao Chuwu's bear-like frame slowly crumpled once more. Thud! Dust billowed as he hit the ground.

Xing Honglang brushed her hands together, took the thick-bladed large knife from an underling, and threw it beside Gao Chuwu: "Hmph! Take it!"

Everyone applauded: "Well fought, Miss Xing!"

The Gaojia villagers, who moments before had cheered for Gao Chuwu, instantly defected: "Hahaha! Chuwu got floored again! Hahaha! Too funny! Can't hold his head up at home anymore! Getting beaten by his wife daily! Hahahaha!"

Zheng Daniu squeezed through the crowd and helped Gao Chuwu up.

Ground Rabbit picked up the thick-bladed large knife, and the three quickly retreated.

Hearing the villagers' warm laughter, Xing Honglang truly felt she was seen as "one of them" here. A small smile touched her lips, and she waved to her subordinates: "Go! Open a jar of five-grain liquor! We celebrate today!"

Amid the lively uproar, a villager suddenly charged down the hillside, shouting: "Bad news! Bad news! Come help! Someone's hurt!"

Everyone froze.

Li Daoxuan also uttered a surprised "Huh?"

The villager looked frantic: "Zhang Laowu fell down the mountain gully! Come quickly!"

Hearing this, the crowd rushed toward the other side of the hill.

The messenger ran ahead, explaining as he went.

While the villagers watched Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang duel, another group hadn't been idle. They were still working on the northwest hillside, building a cement road toward Zhangjia Village.

Ten li from Gaojia Village, Zhangjia Village was another village within Li Daoxuan's observation sphere. Rain had been sent there too.

The Zhangjia villagers were hard at work constructing the cement road to their village.

But a man named Zhang Laowu slipped and stumbled while opening the path by digging rocks beside a ravine, toppling over the edge. The drop wasn't huge, only ten-some meters, but tumbling down that hillside severely injured him. He had no strength left to climb back up.

Only a few villagers were working nearby at the time. The remaining men lacked the means to rescue him and had to rush back for help.

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan quickly tapped the "Northwest" button outside the box...

Scanning along the road to Zhangjia Village, his view soon reached the ravine. Above, a group of villagers were shouting toward the bottom. Peering downward, he saw a middle-aged villager lying injured at the gully's base.

Immediately, Li Daoxuan's hand reached down toward the box, ready to pluck Zhang Laowu up like a tiny insect—a delicate task. Too much pressure would crush him.

His hand was halfway down when sudden commotion erupted. A man slid agilely down the slope, clearly skilled. He reached the bottom instantly, helped Zhang Laowu up, and slung him over his back. Then he looked up toward the ravine rim.

Looking skyward, Li Daoxuan saw his face and recognized him. This was one of the labor offenders named Zhong Gaoliang—a very distinctive name Li Daoxuan remembered clearly.

Using one hand to brace Zhang Laowu, Zhong Gaoliang used the other to grip vines and wooden stakes on the slope, hauling them both upward with immense effort.

Li Daoxuan positioned a hand silently behind Zhong Gaoliang, ready to catch both men if they slid back.

But Zhong Gaoliang was surprisingly adept. Carrying Zhang Laowu steadily, he climbed back to the top before long. Handing Zhang Laowu to the Zhangjia villagers, he collapsed onto the ground, gasping for breath.

Chapter 195: Freedom Restored

The injured Zhang Laowu was swiftly carried back to the village by the villagers. The Short-term Workers Village now had its own doctor, originally an itinerant physician. Yet once he wandered into Gaojia Village, he never left. Only a fool would willingly depart.

This doctor's skills were remarkable. He diagnosed ailments using traditional Chinese medicine methods. Once he identified the cause, he treated it with the "Divine Medicine" provided by Li Daoxuan. The efficacy was outstandingly good.

Minor illnesses and injuries were routinely cured completely at his hands.

After diagnosis, Zhang Laowu was found to only have flesh wounds. With some applied medicine and rest, he would recover. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

While others focused on Zhang Laowu, Li Daoxuan's attention was fixed on Zhong Gaoliang.

This labor offender, upon confirming Zhang Laowu was alright, exhaled deeply in relief. He clapped his hands and walked back towards the laborers' worksite. No one noticed him.

Those who did good deeds were always easily forgotten.

Li Daoxuan's brows furrowed slightly.

He felt somewhat like waking Gao Yiye to handle this matter...

Just then, a figure approached from the distance. It was Thirty-Two. Upon hearing Zhang Laowu's injuries weren't serious, he grabbed a villager from Zhangjia Village: "Who pulled Zhang Laowu out of the ditch?"

The villager replied, "Oh... seemed like a labor offender, a rather sturdy one. But as to exactly who... I didn't quite see clearly."

Thirty-Two frowned, "Heavens! How could you not see clearly?"

The villager explained, "Everyone was focused on Zhang Laowu at the time."

Thirty-Two urged, "Help me ask others. I'll ask around too. We must find out who it was that did the rescuing."

A faint smile slowly spread across Li Daoxuan's lips. Good, very good. So someone remembered to look for the doer of the good deed after all. Excellent. Continuously inviting talents from all walks to the village, wasn't it precisely so that someone would be there to handle any situation whenever needed?

Gao Yiye could sleep a little longer.

Thirty-Two asked around diligently among the crowd and finally got the name "Zhong Gaoliang". He vaguely remembered the name himself – it was far too distinctive.

That evening...

As the setting sun painted the sky, all the labor offenders trudged back to the Labor Offenders Village, bodies exhausted. They prepared to put down their tools, wash their faces, cook a meal, and then head to the Gaojia Business Circle to watch the "Shaanbei Diaoqu" opera.

This was their sole comfort after each grueling day of working.

Sadly, they had no income and couldn't tip the opera troupe – the labor offenders' greatest regret.

Zhong Gaoliang walked into the village alongside a few fellow workers, carrying hoes and engaging in awkward small talk, intending to head home to cook. Suddenly, they saw Thirty-Two, Clerk Tan, and several helpers enter the Labor Offenders Village together.

The helpers began loudly calling out, "All labor offenders, assemble! Third Manager has an important announcement to make!"

The labor offenders hurriedly gathered around. Zhong Gaoliang blended into the crowd, wearing an expression of someone anticipating an entertaining spectacle.

Once everyone was assembled, Thirty-Two cleared his throat and announced loudly, "I've come to the Labor Offenders Village today to speak about a significant event that occurred this afternoon..."

In a flash, Thirty-Two recounted the details of Zhang Laowu's injury and Zhong Gaoliang's rescue.

The labor offenders were now dispersed across different work sites. Many hadn't heard about the day's events. Listening to Thirty-Two, the crowd pushed Zhong Gaoliang to the front while many laughed and teased him, "Brother Gaoliang! So you did such a good deed today?"

"Brother Gaoliang is impressive! Carrying someone while climbing that steep slope!"

"Quite capable!"

Praised, Zhong Gaoliang chuckled happily. After all, being praised is naturally pleasing to anyone. He thought inwardly: Third Manager chose this moment to talk about it... could it mean extra food tonight? Maybe a piece of meat? That would really be nice.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, he heard Thirty-Two declare loudly, "Zhong Gaoliang disregarded his own safety and heroically rescued another. Saving one life brings greater merit than building a seven-stupa pagoda; it is a profound act of goodness, setting a crucial example. Great goodness can offset great evil. Therefore, guided by His Holiness the Deity's recent decree, I have decided to award Zhong Gaoliang a reduction of sentence."

The words struck all the labor offenders speechless.

Zhong Gaoliang was the most stunned. He had thought it was just about extra food for a meal. He never imagined Third Manager was here to announce a sentence reduction. This was truly astonishing.

Zhong Gaoliang asked in a trembling voice, "I... I wonder... how long is the reduction? A month? Two months?"

Thirty-Two responded, "You had half a year left in your sentence. However, Zhang Laowu's life is immensely precious. It amply offsets your remaining six months. Therefore, I now declare: Zhong Gaoliang is released from sentence immediately, his freedom restored!"

The words hit like five thunderbolts from heaven striking his crown.

Zhong Gaoliang stood frozen for thirteen blinks of an eye. Then, he roared with an explosive, "Wah!" – "I... I... I have my freedom back!"

The surrounding labor offenders cheered together, "Brother Gaoliang! Congratulations on your freedom!"

Zhong Gaoliang's body shook. "I... when working now... I can earn wages?"

Thirty-Two smiled, "Yes!"

Zhong Gaoliang continued shaking. "My... my farmlands in Zhuangjia Village... I can go back and work them?"

Thirty-Two continued smiling, "Yes! You may tend those lands anytime. The Deity has already invoked the Dragon King to send rain upon Zhuangjia Village. They've also dug a big pond for irrigation. The Deity performed magic to fill it full of water."

Overwhelmed with joy, Zhong Gaoliang suddenly took giant strides, sprinting madly in the direction of Zhuangjia Village. "I need to see my farmland! Hahaha! I can grow sorghum now! Hahaha! It's only March, there's still time! Still time to plant sorghum!"

The labor offenders watched the figure of Zhong Gaoliang recede into the distance, their expressions complex: envy, jealousy... but finally settling into aspiration.

Aspiration for the future!

Six more months, and they too could gain freedom like Zhong Gaoliang.

Perhaps less than six months. If they actively strove to be good, did good deeds, perhaps they too could earn a reduction.

Thirty-Two turned to the remaining labor offenders, a smile on his face. "Friends! I need say no more. Your expressions tell me you've grasped the point. The Deity is benevolent. Do not disappoint His generous heart."

The labor offenders bowed deeply in unison towards the sky. Then they clamored excitedly:

"Deity! Please witness my conduct!"

"Deity! This lowly one will strive not to fail your hopes!"

"Never again will I do wrong in this lifetime!"

Li Daoxuan revealed a warm, maternal aunt-type smile...

Excellent! Excellent!

This was the true meaning of rehabilitation. He hadn't said a word, yet his little people understood this point themselves. Truly immense progress.

Chapter 196: Go to Jiangxi

Just as Zhong Gaoliang was celebrating becoming a commoner once more,

In the north, in Qingjian County,

A scholar named Zhao Sheng was reading late into the night under the lamplight within Shiyou Temple.

Despite numerous attempts, Zhao Sheng had repeatedly failed the imperial examinations, unable to secure an official rank. However, he had good character. Whenever villagers nearby needed help writing a home letter or reading an official announcement, he assisted them.

In his spare time, he would also share stories from books with the nearby villagers, earning their great affection.

That night, he was utterly absorbed in his reading at Shiyou Temple when a little monk rushed in, urgently whispering, "Mr. Zhao! Run!"

Zhao Sheng: "?"

The little monk lowered his voice, "The authorities are coming to arrest you! Someone falsely spread rumors that you, lighting a lamp late at night in this lonely temple, were secretly compiling military texts and plotting rebellion, just like Huang Chao depicted in Xiang Ping's tales..."

Zhao Sheng was shocked: "How could such rumors arise?"

The little monk: "How it started doesn't matter now! Escape! The authorities will be here any moment."

Indeed, tensions ran high in Qingjian County at that time. Uprisings were breaking out across Shaanxi province, keeping the authorities on high alert. Any whisper of rebellion, regardless of its truth, prompted an immediate arrest. Suspects were often tortured until they confessed.

Zhao Sheng gritted his teeth. Damn it! All I want is to focus on my studies, pass the next imperial examinations, achieve success on the golden list, and bring honor to my ancestors. Why must they treat me this way?

He hurriedly gathered his books and fled through the temple's rear door.

He made his way to Jiejia Valley, but a large group of bailiffs pursued him closely.

Zhao Sheng was just a frail, bookish scholar, unused to physical exertion. He was no match for the bailiffs' pace. Just as he was about to be caught, thunderous cries erupted from the surrounding fields. A mass of common people surged forward, wielding pitchforks, wooden clubs, and other makeshift weapons.

"Damn the government! Don't lay a hand on Mr. Zhao!"

"Mr. Zhao is a good man! You arrest him without discerning right from wrong! Vilifying the innocent!"

"I've rebelled today!"

"Kill these damned bailiffs!"

A sea of commoners poured out, instantly crushing the bailiffs to dust.

...

Chongzhen Year One, Late April, Early Morning.

Li Da burst out of the blacksmith's shop. Clutching a small spring, he threw his head back and laughed boisterously, "HAHAHAHA! Finally! I've finally done it! Its springiness is restored! HAHAHAHA! I've succeeded!"

Li Daoxuan, who had just woken up and was sitting by a crate chewing a glutinous rice ball, was immediately drawn by the commotion and quickly looked over.

He saw Li Da sprint to the base of the watchtower. Not daring to go up, he craned his neck and shouted towards the third floor, "Saint Lady! Are you awake? Look, look at this!"

Seeing Gao Yiye lean out from her balcony,

Li Da immediately placed the spring between his palms, squeezed hard, and then let go. It sprang apart with a boing.

"See! I've succeeded! HAHAHA! I've succeeded!"

Gao Yiye no longer had dark circles. Li Daoxuan had recently tried not to call her too often during the day, giving her more time to paint, which allowed her to sleep well at night recently.

She watched Li Da's demonstration with a smile and then said, "Uncle Li, showing me this isn't much use. I don't understand it. But don't worry, the Deity has already seen it."

Li Da turned his face to the sky and called out loudly, "Deity! You saw? I... I've succeeded... I heated this thing red-hot, then plunged it quickly into cold water. It regained a bit of its spring! It's not as springy as before yet, but at least it doesn't flatten entirely under pressure now."

Li Daoxuan thought to himself: You accidentally discovered the "quenching method," good job.

However, his method was still crude. The quenching method had more detailed steps, which Li Daoxuan had long researched, but he wasn't in a hurry to provide them, wanting Li Da to think more on his own.

"Do you know why, after heating it until red-hot and then plunging it into cold water for rapid cooling, the spring regains some elasticity?"

"N... no, I don't." Li Da shook his head.

Li Daoxuan sighed inwardly: Just like most ancient technologies in our dynasty, they know the method but not the principle. Alas!

You know water turns to vapor when boiled, but you don't know that when water is heated, the thermal energy of its molecules increases, raising their average kinetic energy... So even if you know boiling water produces vapor, you still truly understand nothing.

You know heating a spring red-hot and quenching it restores its elasticity, but you don't realize the quenching method reduces atomic spacing and increases internal stress, thereby restoring the spring's resilience.

You think you understand, but you really don't.

All this is due to a lack of foundational science!

Li Daoxuan murmured softly, "Yiye, go summon Daoist Ma."

Not long after, Ma Tianzheng arrived. Unlike ordinary villagers, upon hearing the Deity's summons, he instantly beamed with excitement. Reaching the watchtower, he dropped to his knees in a grand Daoist salute: "Disciple Ma Tianzheng awaits your command."

Li Daoxuan: "Li Da, place the spring into Daoist Ma's hand. Also, fetch a bag of cement and give it to Daoist Ma."

Li Da hurriedly complied.

Ma Tianzheng held a bag of cement in one hand and a spring in the other, glancing left and right in utter bewilderment. "Deity, what is your instruction? This disciple... fails to perceive their significance."

"A glorious and arduous task awaits you." Li Daoxuan declared. "Take these two items to Waxi Paifangli in Fengxin County, Jiangxi. There, you'll find a scholar named Song Yingxing, who has repeatedly failed

the imperial exams and grown somewhat despondent. Place these items directly into his hands upon finding him. First, demonstrate the spring's regained elasticity. Then, teach him how to use the cement."

Ma Tianzheng responded, "A mere journey to Jiangxi poses no hardship, hardly qualifying as arduous. This disciple departs immediately."

Li Daoxuan: "Very well. Go swiftly. Travel safely."

Ma Tianzheng vowed, "This disciple would stake his very life to protect these divine artifacts."

Li Daoxuan shook his head. "Protect yourself. These items can be replaced from Gaojia Village if lost. Your life, once gone, is irrecoverable."

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Ma Tianzheng replied, "The Deity's benevolence knows no bounds. This humble disciple's flesh is of little worth."

He hastily packed his things, tightened his leg wraps, gathered provisions, and concealed the small bag of cement and the spring with great care. Only then did he depart Gaojia Village, setting his course for Jiangxi.

Li Daoxuan turned his attention back to Li Da. He rewarded him with a small silver ball first. "Your research on the spring is truly exceptional. Now, it's time to tackle the next challenge. While developing the new firearm, remember to train apprentices. Teach them to craft the firearms you've mastered. We now have gunpowder. It's time to produce a batch of transitional firearms."

Li Da eagerly accepted the order and joyfully returned to the artisans' well.

Just then, voices rose from the official road outside. Li Daoxuan turned and immediately spotted County Magistrate Liang Shixian and Patrol Officer Fang Wushang approaching, followed by a large contingent of yamen runners and soldiers.

Government officials had arrived for another visit.

Chapter 197: I Shall Leave Him Nothing Standing

Every time Liang Shixian came to Gaojia Village, it brought trouble.

He either came to borrow grain or to borrow bows.

This visit, his awkward smile signaled yet another request for supplies.

Thirty-Two rushed to greet him first. Gao Yiye hurried back to the lookout tower to change into her formal attire.

Li Daoxuan settled on a small stool with melon seeds and peanuts, preparing to watch the drama unfold.

Liang Shixian and Thirty-Two exchanged a dizzying stream of polite formalities. The chaotic small talk made Fang Wushang and even the observing Li Daoxuan above show expressions of impatience.

After what felt like ages, the two finally reached the core matter.

Liang Shixian spoke first, "This visit... ahem... is to borrow some bows once more..."

He trailed off, so embarrassed he wished to dig a hole and disappear.

Thirty-Two nodded, "Have the bandits returned?"

Liang Shixian sighed deeply. "Indeed. And it's our old acquaintance, Bu Zhan Ni of Luochuan."

Thirty-Two raised an eyebrow. "Oh? He suffered two defeats in our Chengcheng County. He dares show his face again?"

Liang Shixian replied gravely, "This requires an explanation of the northern situation..."

He proceeded to narrate the events.

Days earlier, Bai Shui Wang Er had marched north from Yijun County into Luochuan territory.

The Luochuan patrol officer led his troops against Wang Er, confident of victory. Yet they suffered a devastating defeat and retreated in disarray to the county seat.

This left the entire Luochuan County beyond government control.

Wang Er marched freely through Luochuan and continued northward.

Meanwhile, Bu Zhan Ni, emerging from Huanglong Mountain, seized his chance to regroup. Being a native of Luochuan with considerable influence, he rallied multiple rebel forces upon appearing, greatly swelling his ranks.

Now commanding a formidable host, Bu Zhan Ni led seven elite divisions:

First Team: Yan Qianer

Second Team: Dian Deng Zi (Zhao Sheng)

Third Team: Li Jin Wang

Fourth Team: Scorpion Block

Fifth Team: Old Zhang Fei

Sixth Team: King of Chaos

Seventh Team: Ye Bu Shou

Hearing this list, Li Daoxuan silently noted: Only seven teams now? Once the eighth joins... matters will turn truly dire.

For Bu Zhan Ni's Eighth Squad would become known by another name—Li Zicheng.

But for now, it remained vacant.

Liang Shixian continued, "Bu Zhan Ni rampages across Luochuan with growing power. His seven divisions advance along multiple routes. Two of them... are headed toward Chengcheng County."

Thirty-Two frowned, "Wouldn't uniting make them stronger? Why split their forces?"

Patrol Officer Fang Wushang snorted coldly, "If all seven divisions united, they'd number tens of thousands. How could plundered village grain sustain so many mouths? Unable to capture fortified towns, they must scatter to scavenge."

Only then did Thirty-Two understand, his face darkening, "This scattered pillaging... surely makes life even harder for the common people."

Liang Shixian sighed, "The Luochuan people suffer terribly. Alas, as Chengcheng County Magistrate, Luochuan lies beyond my authority. But here, I shall act against these bandits!"

He unfurled a detailed official map, pointing. "First Team: Yan Qianer will likely attack from Fengyuan Town. Second Team: Dian Deng Zi entered Huanglong Mountain, so they might strike from Bai Family Fortress."

Thirty-Two inquired, "What are Your Honor's intentions?"

Liang Shixian laid out his plan: "Both Fengyuan Town and Bai Family Fortress must be held. I shall lead the magistrates' troops and Fengyuan's militia against Yan Qianer. For Bai Family Fortress's front, its militia and Gaojia Village's shall jointly defend it."

Fang Wushang added, "I'll position troops between Fengyuan and the fortress. Whichever flank the bandits assault, I reinforce."

Li Daoxuan gave a slight nod; this strategy seemed sound.

Liang Shixian concluded, "Thus, I request Gaojia Village send its militia to Bai Family Fortress. Their militia instructor, Bai Yuan, comes from a kind-hearted family. Once I persuade him to house your men within the fortress, he will surely honor my request."

Just then, hoofbeats sounded. Several riders approached at speed.

Leading them, clad in white robes—Bai Yuan himself. Followed by retainers, he cut an imposing figure.

Entering Gaojia Village, Bai Yuan raised clasped fists skyward from horseback, offering ritual obeisance to the Deity—for propriety was his creed.

He galloped toward the fort, dismounted, and stood before Liang Shixian and Thirty-Two.

"Ah! County Lord? General Fang!" Bai Yuan bowed deeply with flawless courtesy. "What fortune brings us together!"

Liang Shixian smiled. "Master Bai! We were just speaking of you. Bu Zhan Ni splits his forces for another assault. I hoped Gaojia Village's militia might reinforce your position at Bai Family Fortress. And here you are!"

Bai Yuan replied, "I came precisely for this! Hunters brought word: bandits mass again on Huanglong Mountain. I came to warn Gaojia Village. Ahem..."

Coughing meaningfully, he pulled a book from his saddlebag—Elementary Math: Sixth Grade, Volume 2. Waving it triumphantly, he declared, "And to discipline my insolent son."

Seeing this, Li Daoxuan understood: Bai Yuan had completed all twelve volumes. The textbook was his trophy.

Liang Shixian asked curiously, "What book is this? Why discipline your son here?"

Bai Yuan laughed heartily. "Mathematics!"

Turning to the sentinel on the fort wall, he called, "Summon my unruly son! Tell him, his father challenges him to a math duel! This time... I shall leave him nothing standing!"

Liang Shixian raised an eyebrow. "Mathematics? Fascinating! I'm somewhat skilled myself."

Bai Yuan's eyes lit up. "Your Honor excels too? Excellent! Come! Solve this first: Pheasants and rabbits share one cage. Thirty-five heads, ninety-four legs. How many of each?"

Immediately, Liang Shixian's mind shifted into calculation. Flocks of pheasants and rabbits swirled before him—thirty-five heads and ninety-four legs whirling chaotically. Lines connected heads to legs, sketching phantom bodies. When the mental image cohered..."Ding!" The scene froze into clarity.

In his mind's suspended world, Liang Shixian pointed and counted meticulously. The result: twenty-three pheasants, twelve rabbits.

He announced proudly, "Twenty-three pheasants. Twelve rabbits."

Chapter 198: The Math Duel

Bai Yuan: "Oh? Never expected the County Lord to be a math expert too."

Liang Shixian smiled: "My learning may be miscellaneous, but all aimed at practical governance. Far superior to those who merely compose verses and moan without cause."

His boasting stirred Bai Yuan up.

Bai Yuan gripped his math textbook tighter, an invisible aura of competitiveness rising around him. Hmph, daring to boast about miscellaneous learning? Just how varied could yours be? How many of the Six Arts of Gentlemen have you mastered?

In classical texts like the Four Books and Five Classics or imperial exam material, Bai Yuan knew he couldn't rival a proper scholar-official. But challenging Bai Yuan in math? That was courting death. Hmph! Might as well settle scores with you alongside my rebellious boy.

"Excellent, County Lord!" said Bai Yuan, grinning broadly. "Since you're an expert yourself, how about we compete shortly?"

"Why not indeed?" Liang Shixian too grew eager. In this remote northwestern county, the academic atmosphere paled compared to Jiangnan's. Finding someone intellectually stimulating here was rare, and now Bai Yuan seemed formidable—no reason to decline.

Fang Wushang fumed: "Weren't we here to discuss military strategy? Why are you suddenly squabbling over math?"

Thirty-Two hurried over and pulled Fang Wushang aside: "Calm down, General Fang. Leave the bandit planning to me. I'll mobilize the militia to Bai Family Fortress. You focus on your garrison."

Fang Wushang gave a disdainful Hmph!. After all, the bandits wouldn't arrive for days. He had no patience for the scholars' game. Rallying his troops, he marched toward the border between Bai Family Fortress and Fengyuan Town.

Meanwhile, Bai Yuan and Liang Shixian entered Gaojia Fortress together.

For a scholarly duel, the Book Well was the natural setting.

Sitting inside its schoolhouse, surrounded by scrolls, desks, and writing tools, Liang Shixian felt serene—a true literatus, delighted by the ambiance. "This private school is remarkably well-run!"

Bai Yuan chuckled: "Not private at all. It's a public school, free for any child in this village who wishes to learn reading and writing."

Liang Shixian startled, then grew deeply moved: "A noble deed! Truly noble! I knew the Li Family was kind-hearted, but never imagined such charity."

Just then, Young Master Bai and Madam Bai arrived.

After initial pleasantries were briefly exchanged...

Hearing his father wanted another math duel, Young Master Bai grew rushing with pride: "Father! Since becoming Math Representative, I've devoted myself daily to math. My skills have soared. Though I respect you, I refuse to lose in this subject!"

Bai Yuan roared with laughter: "Enjoy your moment! Soon you'll learn why your father is always your father."

Liang Shixian interjected with a snort: "You father and son forgot me? With me here, you're both doomed to lose."

The trio clashed, none backing down.

Li Daoxuan, thoroughly amused, poured himself a cup of Mingqian Longjing tea. What a spectacle.

Bai Yuan gestured magnanimously: "County Lord, why not set the first problem?"

Liang Shixian nodded: "Agreed. Imagine a field twelve bu wide and fourteen bu long. How many square bu?"

He'd barely finished speaking...

Father and son answered almost simultaneously: "One hundred sixty-eight bu!"

Liang Shixian jolted: “That quickly?!”

Bai Yuan smiled thinly: “Just a two-digit multiplication problem? Were you holding back, County Magistrate?”

Young Master Bai grinned too: “Your question couldn’t stump even a second-year child, Lord Liang.”

Though unfamiliar with “second-year,” Liang Shixian knew it meant elementary—slightly nettled. “Oh? Then show me your problem.”

Bai Yuan smiled: “Fine, I’ll go next. Here is eighteen twelfths. When reduced, what does it become?”

Upon hearing this problem, Liang Shixian was delighted: Fractions?

Hah! Thinking you can stump this official with fractions? You underestimate me greatly.

Let this official ponder it carefully.

Liang Shixian, Knowledgeable in many matters, instantly activated his calculation mode. Images flashed through his mind like a spinning lantern – classic texts like Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art, Zhou Bi Suan Jing, and Wu Jing Suan Shu whirled past. Suddenly, a mental “Ding!” sound signaled it settling on the Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art.

The Grand Width technique in the Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art states: Multiply the denominator by its remainder, the numerator follows suit.

Liang Shixian laughed aloud: “Two-thirds!”

Only after he spoke did he notice that Young Master Bai beside him had already written “ $\frac{2}{3}$ ” on paper earlier. Young Master Bai’s calligraphy was quite good.

Liang Shixian was astonished: This child solved it faster than me? Impossible! This official's mental lantern wasn't spinning slowly at all. How could this child's mind work faster than this official's?

Young Master Bai chuckled: "You've both set problems, now it's my turn."

Young Master Bai swiftly drew a circle on the paper: "Given a circular field with a diameter of ten zhang, find its area."

Liang Shixian felt a jolt of panic. This problem was difficult! How could this little child pose such a difficult problem right away? This was a challenge to an adult! This was absolutely a challenge to an adult! This official will fight you with everything!

Liang Shixian, Knowledgeable in many matters, once more activated his calculation mode. All his learning, the various mathematical texts, spun through his mind like a lantern again. Suddenly, another mental "Ding!" sound signaled it settling on the Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art.

The Square Fields chapter in the Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art states: The area of a circle is found by multiplying its circumference and diameter together and taking one fourth.

Meaning: Multiply the circumference by the diameter, then divide by four, to get the area.

But, this child only stated the diameter was ten zhang! He didn't give the circumference!

Liang Shixian spoke up: "Is your problem incomplete? The circumference of the circular field..."

Before he could finish his sentence.

Bai Yuan beside him laughed: "The area of this field is 78.5 square zhang."

Liang Shixian: "!!!"

Why?!

How did Bai Yuan calculate it? The problem wasn't complete! How on earth did he manage it?

Just then, Bai Yuan actually continued posing another problem: "Given a circular barrel, its base diameter is one chi, its height is two chi. Find its volume."

The images flashed through Liang Shixian's mind... whoosh... whoosh... whoosh... spinning wildly for a long time. Spinning and spinning, but every panel of the lantern was utterly blank, showing nothing at all.

Thud! He collapsed face-first onto the table. "This official... concedes!"

Young Master Bai also paled visibly: "Volume of a cylinder?! Oh no! This... I haven't learned this yet."

Bai Yuan laughed heartily: "I win! I knew I could win! With the twelve heavenly books in hand, who in the 'Mathematics' art of the Six Arts of Gentlemen can rival me? Hah hah hah hah!"

Chapter 199: Keeping the Books

Bai Yuan had achieved a resounding victory, restoring his fatherly dignity by stepping on his own son, his satisfaction bubbling into a hearty laugh.

When he turned back after laughing, he saw Liang Shixian gazing at him with fervent eyes: "Mr. Bai, you mentioned 'Twelve Heavenly Books' earlier. What exactly are those?"

Bai Yuan intended to take out "Elementary Math," but a thought struck him: no, these texts were granted to him by the Deity. He couldn't casually share them without the Deity's permission.

Just as he hesitated, he spotted Gao Yiye step forward behind Liang Shixian and give him a subtle nod.

Bai Yuan understood: the Deity had conveyed his will through the Saint Lady. Relieved, he swiftly produced a volume of "Elementary Math," holding it out for Liang Shixian to see: "County Lord, this

book was bestowed upon me by a Deity from the heavens. There are twelve volumes in total. Every mathematical problem presented earlier can be found within these pages.”

Liang Shixian automatically filtered out the “bestowed by a Deity” part with selective hearing. As an intellectual adhering to “do not speak of extraordinary things” and “respect spirits but keep a distance,” pretending not to hear was the only respectable response.

But the book itself? That was definitely worth a closer look!

Taking “Elementary Math – Grade 1, Volume 1,” he flipped through it. Initially baffled by the Arabic numerals and symbols, this wasn’t a significant hurdle. Within the time it took half an incense stick to burn, he was rapidly turning pages. Finishing the first volume in quick succession, his spirits soared: “Mr. Bai, this is truly a divine book!”

Bai Yuan chuckled. “I did tell you it was given by a Deity.”

Liang Shixian: “Such an excellent book should be widely...”

He started to say “widely taught,” but his words froze mid-sentence. Excitement gave way to despondency: “Unfortunately, mathematics isn’t part of the imperial examinations. Most scholars look down on it, disdaining its study. Although my Clerk might find it quite interesting.”

Bai Yuan glanced at Gao Yiye, who was nodding vigorously again. Understanding, he pushed the entire twelve-volume set of “Elementary Math” towards Liang Shixian. “County Lord, regardless of whether it’s part of the examinations, if you deem it useful – or believe someone like your Clerk can make use of it – then there will surely be those willing to learn. Please accept this set of Heavenly Books. You may choose willing individuals to teach.”

Liang Shixian’s spirit surged anew. “Such a divine book... gifted to me?”

Bai Yuan: “Is there anything better than giving a prized book to one who appreciates its worth?”

Overflowing with joy, Liang Shixian hastily flipped up the hem of his official robe, using it to carefully wrap and bundle the twelve volumes. “Then, your humble servant accepts with deepest gratitude.”

Possessing this divine treasure, he could no longer concentrate on staying. Eager to delve into the texts and needing to organize the militia local gentry for Fengyuan Town's defense, he bowed to Bai Yuan. "Mr. Bai, since you are familiar with the Li Family, coordinating the militia resistance against the Huanglong Mountain bandits can be left to your arrangements. I shall return to the county seat now."

Bai Yuan cupped his fist in salute.

Joyfully carrying his divine books, Liang Shixian departed.

Bai Yuan and Thirty-Two saw him off. Only once he was out of sight did a peculiar look cross Bai Yuan's face. "I never imagined this Liang Shixian enjoys playing with numbers. Most officials I've met regard arithmetic as a minor path, unworthy of serious study."

Thirty-Two smiled faintly. "Among the officials I know, he is indeed unconventional. Think about it, had he not been rather unique, why else would he have been assigned to Chengcheng County at this specific time?"

Bai Yuan's heart clenched as he suddenly understood. The disastrous state Chengcheng County was in when Liang Shixian assumed office was obvious even to a blind man. Sending him into such a predicament clearly meant the Eunuch Party intended to bury him there!

Of course! It all made sense!

Thirty-Two: "The Deity bestowing the divine books upon Liang must be seeking to pass down practical knowledge for statecraft and governance through his hands, reaching more people."

Bai Yuan naturally grasped the Deity's intention and nodded. "It's a pity those willing to learn such miscellaneous knowledge grow ever fewer. Scholars obsess solely over the Four Books and Five Classics, dulling their minds into stupidity. Look to our ancient sages – the Six Arts of Gentlemen were all practical skills."

Thirty-Two cast a sidelong glance, initially tempted to retort. But upon reflection, Bai Yuan wasn't wrong – the Six Arts were practical skills – so he held his tongue this time.

Bai Yuan: "Alright, major business concluded. Now for some lesser chores. My visit to Gaojia Village this time was, again, to seek assistance..."

Thirty-Two gestured upwards with a smile: "Look to the heavens."

Lifting his head, Bai Yuan saw that chaotic equipment – the celestial catapult, Giant Crossbow Vehicle, and block missiles – was descending once more. Outside the fortress gate, Solar Vehicle No. 3, a massive cargo hauler, stood ready.

Additionally, over a hundred members of the Gaojia Village Militia were assembled and prepared for departure.

Leading them stood a masked militia instructor who seemed faintly familiar to Bai Yuan. Hadn't he seen this man somewhere before?

Puzzled, Bai Yuan inquired: "This person?"

Thirty-Two grinned. "In recent months, we've established our own militia. We can now send the Gaojia Village Militia to reinforce Bai Family Fortress. The instructor was personally appointed by the Deity. Should you face challenges during the battle, Mr. Bai, it would be wise to heed his counsel."

Bai Yuan nodded. "Since it's the Deity's choice, he must be a capable man. I'll seek his advice should difficulties arise."

Meanwhile, unaware of being discussed, Cheng Xu was bustling about, overseeing the militia's preparations. "Everyone, dawn your armor! Check your gear! Hand crossbows! Spears! Waist knives! Arrows! ...And that pouch of healing ointment specifically mentioned by the Deity! Forget one thing, and I'll make you run twenty laps around Bai Family Fortress!"

The hundred-plus militia members frantically inventoried their equipment.

Alongside them, a large group of labor offenders were busily loading supplies onto Solar Vehicle No. 3 – hand crossbows, arrows, spears, armor, flour, powdered milk, oil, salt, sugar, and more...

A quick glance made Bai Yuan start. “Good heavens! Smuggling these forbidden weapons and armor into Bai Family Fortress? I’m... a bit... concerned...”

Thirty-Two countered with a smile: “Fear not! The Deity has declared the authorities have no time to concern themselves with such matters.”

Bai Yuan considered this and agreed. Officials were overwhelmed dealing with bands of spreading bandits nationwide – how could they spare effort to police a militia’s use of forbidden gear?

He recalled the pirate troubles along the southern coast long ago, where local gentry privately forged firearms and rattan armor to defend themselves. The court initially cracked down hard on the most brazen offenders but soon realized – it was unmanageable. Utterly unmanageable!

Without arming themselves, coastal villagers faced certain death by pirate blades long before officials arrived for arrests. Under such dire circumstances, who cared if firearms and armor were illegal? Arm yourself first with illegal weapons to survive – you could always argue the nuances of “The Great Ming Code” later.

Once the court grasped this reality, it turned a blind eye. Even after the pirates were subdued and the court finally turned its attention back to illicit arms, private possession was already so widespread that authorities again adopted an approach of deliberate oversight.

And truth be told – forget ancient times! Even in the modern era, if zombies attacked? If Li Daoxuan could get his hands on a gun, he’d take it immediately, legality be damned!

Chapter 200: We Dont Prey On Decent Folks

Bai Yuan brought along a large bundle of Middle School Math, a complete six-book set.

This time, there were six fewer divine tomes. But flipping through them casually made his head spin, as these six volumes were vastly harder than the previous dozen. He no longer dared arrogantly ask for more copies.

He carefully hid away the math books and leaped onto his horse.

His servants also mounted their horses, falling in beside the sun chariots.

Several sun chariots started together.

Leading the procession was naturally the mightiest Solar Vehicle No. 3—a heavy-duty transport truck. Behind it came two public sun chariots, carrying over a hundred soldiers from the militia unit.

The convoy of carriages advanced together toward Bai Family Fortress.

Initially, the road leading out of Gaojia Village was decent, allowing slightly faster speed. But a short distance beyond, the path worsened. All sun chariots slowed to under thirty kilometers an hour, crawling forward like snails.

Noticing the newly arrived, masked militia instructor perched atop the heavy truck beside him, Bai Yuan couldn't resist striking up a conversation. "Instructor He? As in, Instructor He?"

Cheng Xu grunted an acknowledgment.

Bai Yuan smiled. "Which village did you serve as instructor in before? Your figure seems familiar, yet I can't recall where we've met."

Cheng Xu replied, "I'm from He Family Village, in that tiny valley at the southernmost tip of Chengcheng County."

Bai Yuan nodded, "Ah yes, Instructor He of He Family Village! Now I remember. We spoke in the county town—quite clearly etched in my memory."

Cheng Xu fell speechless inwardly. You remember that well? How I'd love to strike your face dead center with my fist.

Bai Yuan continued, “During my last visit to Gaojia Village, they still had no militia. Yet within months, everything is running impressively. Your abilities must be remarkable.”

Cheng Xu dismissed this, “Hah! Petty tricks. All this prosperity comes from the Deity’s generous supplies. If not... cough...”

He hastily cut himself off!

Such thoughts should stay buried—those old days when the court withheld pay, and I struggled to even train a hundred worthless troops...

Soon, Bai Family Fortress came into view.

Bai Yuan spurred ahead on horseback, immediately commanding his people to unload supplies. They swiftly erected catapults and Giant Crossbow Vehicles. Assembly of block missiles began with equal urgency. The fortress buzzed with intense activity.

Cheng Xu pointed to surplus hand crossbows, spears, and waist knives. “The Deity urged us to prepare extra weapons. Arm your militia with these. Proper armor will come later—still scarce for now.”

Overjoyed, Bai Yuan bowed deeply toward the sky. “Gratitude to the Deity!”

Weapons, sacks of rice and flour, barrels of oil and salt flowed steadily into Bai Family Fortress.

Thus, Bai Family Fortress stood vastly reinforced.

Bai Yuan swelled with confidence. Under the Deity’s protection, his fortress looked utterly unassailable.

Brigands, bring it on!



Deep within Huanglong Mountain, Captain Zhao Sheng—Dian Deng Zi, leader of Bu Zhan Ni's Second Team—trudged through dense woods with over three thousand men.

Zhao Sheng felt cursed by incredible misfortune. All he'd done was light a lamp to read at Shiyou Temple when accusations of rebellion flew at him. His lifeline became popular support earned from aiding Villagers. As constables closed in, masses of commoners swarmed forth, slew the officers, and freed him.

The crowd then hoisted him as their chieftain, unfurling their banner of revolt.

Zhao Sheng originally aspired to become an official through the imperial examinations. But with this turn of events, he was forced to rebel — he had no real choice but to become an outlaw.

As a bandit, he needed a bandit name to avoid bringing trouble upon his clan.

Because Zhao Sheng was falsely accused of rebellion for lighting a lamp, he named himself “Dian Deng Zi.” The common folk had saved him, so naturally, he couldn't abandon them. He fled south, leading three thousand villagers from Qingjian County.

Not long after, he joined forces with Bu Zhan Ni.

Being a novice in the world of rebellion, Zhao Sheng knew nothing. Upon meeting this seasoned veteran of the rebel life, he naturally hastened to seek guidance.

Bu Zhan Ni was greatly pleased to have a scholar willing to join, and promptly incorporated Dian Deng Zi into his army, appointing him as Captain of the Second Team.

Bu Zhan Ni then adopted a strategy of scattering out to forage for supplies, sending his seven captains off in seven different directions.

The captain of the First Team, Yan Qianer, headed toward Fengyuan Town.

The captain of the Second Team, Dian Deng Zi, entered Huanglong Mountain.

As for the other five teams, they were causing disturbances over in Luochuan County and Yijun County.

Zhao Sheng was exhausted!

He was just a frail scholar, not some fierce bandit leader. Walking dozens of miles along mountain trails in Huanglong Mountain was too much for him. Feeling utterly worn out, he turned to the villagers beside him and asked, "Brothers, where have we reached?"

"The southern ridge of Huanglong Mountain," reported one hunter who had returned. "Cross over from here, and we enter Chengcheng County territory."

Zhao Sheng exclaimed, "We're finally nearing inhabited land? That's wonderful news! We should be able to find food soon."

A villager moved closer and whispered, "Mr. Zhao, once we're in Chengcheng County, are we going to plunder everyone we meet, just like Bu Zhan Ni does?"

At this question, Zhao Sheng's face darkened.

The last thing he wanted to do was rob people!

He wasn't a hardened bandit, but a scholar, famous throughout the ten villages and hamlets around Qingjian County as a kind soul. He often helped villagers write letters home, read official proclamations, was always ready to assist others, and was trustworthy to the core.

He simply wasn't ruthless enough to consider robbing strangers.

But...

The villagers who had fled all the way from Qingjian County with him had run out of food. What was he supposed to do?

He was responsible for these villagers!

Zhao Sheng decided to make a speech. He chose a large, high boulder and clambered up. The rock was huge and slippery; he barely made it to the top, slipping several times during the climb. Once atop the stone, he couldn't help but think bitterly: Being a bandit leader isn't easy. Just climbing to a high spot to address your followers is hard work.

Standing on the rock, he cleared his throat: "Folks, I have something to say. We are starving, with no food. But we cannot rob every person we see, especially the poor villagers in those small mountain hamlets. They are people just like us! How could we harden our hearts enough to kill them and take their food?"

The crowd was silent.

Zhao Sheng continued: "We are not bad people. We are good people forced into rebellion by bad ones. So we must not turn our weapons on other good people. When we enter Chengcheng County, we will only rob the rich who are evil."

A villager asked, "How will we know if a rich person is evil or not?"

Zhao Sheng looked up, deep in thought for a long moment, then sighed. "I will speak with them. A few words of conversation should give me a fair idea of whether they are a good person or a bad one."

"Report!"

A fast-footed hunter hurried back from ahead: "Mr. Zhao! The foot of the mountain just ahead is Chengcheng County! At the foot of the mountain stands the Bai Family Fortress. It looks like the residence of a wealthy household."