

Great Ming 221

Chapter 221: This Bowl of Noodles Is Really Delicious

The wheat fields of Gaojia Village had a bountiful harvest.

When the villagers weighed the harvested wheat, they realized this year's yield was astonishingly high.

In previous years, one mu of wheat yielded at most one or two dan, and that only in a year with favorable weather conditions. But this year, each mu yielded two to three dan.

Every household looked at their barns filled with wheat and were overjoyed, unable to close their mouths with joy.

"This must be due to the 'celestial fertilizer' provided by the Deity."

"Yes, definitely the merit of the celestial fertilizer. Anyway, it couldn't be because I weeded well."

"After using the celestial fertilizer this year, not only did the crops grow well, but even the weeds in the fields grew more wildly than before. I had to weed constantly, otherwise, I couldn't keep up with the crazy growth rate of the weeds."

"The Deity bless us."

"Last year, in the Dao Xuan Deity Cave, I made a wish, asking the Deity to bless us with favorable weather and abundant harvests this year. This year, we indeed had a bountiful harvest, so I must repay the vow to the Deity."

At these words, another villager spoke up:

"Yes! Over this past half a year, we have received many benefits from the Deity, but we haven't done anything for the Deity yet."

“Previously, everything we ate and used was bestowed by the Deity. We shouldn’t offer back what the Deity gave us to honor the Deity. But this time, we produced grain ourselves, so we can use the grain we grew to honor the Deity.”

“Good!”

All the villagers who had grown wheat came to a consensus.

“Since we are making an offering with wheat, naturally, we should make Chengcheng County’s specialty traditional delicacy, hand-pulled noodles.”

This proposal was immediately agreed upon by everyone.

Hand-pulled noodles are a specialty delicacy of Chengcheng County. Simply put, it means not using a rolling pin, not using a knife, not using any tools—completely handmade noodle making.

By offering something that is purely hand-crafted to the Deity, they could show their sincerity to the greatest extent.

The Old Village Chief spoke up:

“The Deity is a giant divine being; when he spreads his palms, they are ten zhang long. If the hand-pulled noodles we offer are too small, the Deity won’t be able to enjoy them. Therefore, we have to make a very huge bowl of hand-pulled noodles.”

“At least as big as the red pool that the Deity lowered when giving us the happy fat water.”

Gao Chuwu’s father said:

“If each family contributes a few dou of wheat and combines them, we can make a huge bowl of noodles.”

Zheng Daniu's father said:

"But for such a large pool-sized noodles, we don't have a pot big enough to cook it."

"Let's cook them separately. Each household prepares an oversized wooden bathtub and cooks only one enormous noodle per tub. Then, each family brings their one noodle, and we put them together to form a large bowl of hand-pulled noodles."

"Good idea!"

The villagers of Gaojia Village and Zhengjia Village immediately started taking action...

At noon...

Li Daoxuan sat in front of the computer, slurping Guangxi Luosifen. The smell of the sour beans was indescribable, but it tasted quite delicious.

He was happily slurping away when he suddenly noticed that the village seemed unusually bustling. All the villagers seemed to be busy with the same thing—setting up a large bathtub in their own courtyards and heating water.

"Why is everyone suddenly taking baths?"

Li Daoxuan sensed an unusual atmosphere. He left the computer and sat in front of the box, watching the show intently.

While the bathtubs were being heated, the villagers started kneading dough. With large bags of flour and large basins of water, they formed a huge, enormous dough ball. The villagers found it quite taxing to knead such a large dough ball.

The men of the household used all their strength to knead the dough. They kneaded while standing on stools, they jumped to knead, or they first divided it into several lumps to knead each one, and after kneading, they mixed them together and kneaded them again.

After kneading, they stretched the enormous dough by hand—lengthening, thinning and stretching it... until it formed a noodle strip at least over ten centimeters long...

Considering these little people stood barely one centimeter tall themselves, crafting noodles over ten centimeters long was astonishingly large. A single person couldn't possibly lift it. They had to hire several laborers from Short-term Workers Village who could manage heavy tasks. Together, they hoisted the giant noodle onto their shoulders as if carrying an enormous serpent.

Chanting work songs, the crowd slowly lowered the giant noodle into a massive wooden bucket of boiling water.

This wasn't only happening in one household. Every villager who harvested wheat was engaged in this labor. Their progress was deliberately synchronized, ensuring all families' noodles would be cooked simultaneously.

Li Daoxuan watched, utterly bewildered, "What on earth are they trying to do?"

The enormous noodle churned inside the bucket. The Old Village Chief of Gaojia Village was in charge of timing. After some time, the old man's white eyebrows lifted as he gave a loud command, "Time's up! Assemble quickly!"

A large group of pre-hired short-term workers then lifted the big wooden buckets and swiftly converged on the village center.

At the heart of the village stood a large red plastic pool. That's right—it was a mineral water bottle lid.

One by one, the villagers poured their own cooked noodle into the mineral water bottle lid. One strip, another strip, then another...

Soon, dozens of noodle strips filled the lid. The Village Chief picked up a huge basin of pre-prepared seasoning—containing salt, sugar, and some strangely unidentifiable plants—and poured it into the lid. Then Gao Chuwu stepped forward, stirring the mixture inside the mineral water bottle lid with an enormous wooden stick.

Only at this moment did Li Daoxuan understand: they were making a whole pool of noodles for him.

Could it be?

He couldn't possibly be right?

He was correct!

After Gao Chuwu finished stirring, all the villagers from Gaojia Village and Zhengjia Village faced the sky simultaneously and declared loudly, "We thank the Deity for blessing us with a bountiful harvest. We offer this Chengcheng hand-pulled noodles to the Deity."

"The Deity is benevolent!"

"Long life and great blessings!"

The villagers roared in unison before bowing deeply together.

Something tender welled up in Li Daoxuan's heart. Why could these tiny beings move him so profoundly, hitting his tear ducts and stirring such deep emotion?

He reached out his hand towards the small mineral water bottle lid.

Gao Yiye, seeing this, shouted, "The Deity reaches for the hand-pulled noodles! The Deity is taking it!"

The villagers were overcome with joy, cheering ecstatically, "The Deity is accepting the offering!"

They danced wildly, roared with exhilaration, watching as the large red pool ascended into the sky, disappearing into the low clouds.

Li Daoxuan took the mineral water bottle lid out of the box and gazed at it intently.

Despite the villagers' immense effort, the resulting noodles amounted to only half a lid's worth.

So adorable!

He felt reluctant to eat it... but eat it he must.

Tilting his head back, he poured the noodles from the lid into his mouth. The noodles, thick like pythons to the miniature villagers, were exceedingly fine strands to Li Daoxuan. He couldn't bear to swallow them hastily, so he chewed slowly, savoring every bit. Though lacking the rich modern array of seasonings, this bowl of noodles tasted truly delicious.

Chapter 222: Sold

Just as Li Daoxuan was savoring the fine noodles offered by the little figures...

At the Micro-sculpting Art Exhibition in Magic City.

A large crowd gathered around a display booth, discussing animatedly.

At the center of the booth sat a miniature Taoist temple, only as big as a fist, tiny and adorable.

An old, wealthy man who enjoyed collecting micro-sculptures passed by, noticing the crowd, and couldn't help but squeeze through. "Everyone, what are you looking at? Such a commotion?"

Most of the onlookers recognized the old man and greeted him warmly. "Old Li! You're here for the art exhibition too? We're admiring a fascinating piece. Why not join us for a closer look?"

Old Li chuckled cheerfully. "Anything drawing such a large crowd must be extraordinary. I definitely need a good look."

He glanced briefly at the small temple in the booth's center. Its plaque read "Dao Xuan Deity Cave." He couldn't help but ponder for a few seconds. "Who is this Dao Xuan Deity? I've never heard of this deity."

Others around laughed. "None of us have either. Probably just a randomly made-up name. That's not the important part. Check out the craftsmanship of this temple instead."

Old Li looked more closely. What he hadn't noticed before now startled him.

The technique of this temple was intriguing.

Old Li exclaimed, "Usually, miniature stone carvings are carved from a single block of stone. But this small temple has a foundation built from tiny pebbles, even using small rocks and wood sticks. Good heavens... this... this technique..."

Someone beside him added, "Yes, the upper wooden section isn't carved from a large block either. It's assembled from countless small wooden sticks and chips. The method used is incredibly intricate, absolutely dazzling."

Old Li took out a magnifying glass for a closer inspection. "Through the windows, you can see a statue inside. The craftsmanship of this statue is extraordinary too! So detailed, even strands of hair are rendered."

"The tables, chairs, and benches inside are all meticulously carved. The tiny patterns on them are detailed to a breathtaking degree."

"Look at this amusing detail," Old Li laughed, pointing. "On the table inside the temple, there's even a miniature book. Its cover says 'Hanyu Pinyin'. Hahaha, killing me with laughter!"

He hadn't mentioned it before, but now someone asked, "Could the pages actually be turned? Are there characters written inside each page?"

No one dared to try flipping its pages; it was an exhibition piece. Only a fool would actually touch the displayed objects. However, peering through a magnifying glass revealed the tiny book indeed had separate pages—layers of paper stacked to form a book.

“Incredible skill!” Old Li sighed in admiration. “This work is excellent. Not only is the technique first-rate, but it’s bold and expressive, carrying the distinct, playful mischievousness of a young artist. Who is the creator?”

Circling the booth, he found the artist’s introduction: “Li Daoxuan, male, from Shuangqing City, 22 years old. Occupation: freelance designer.”

Below was a contact number, not Li Daoxuan’s, but his agent Cai Xinzi’s.

Old Li immediately dialed. “Hello? Are you Mr. Cai, agent of the new generation micro-sculpting master Li Daoxuan? I wish to inquire if his Dao Xuan Deity Cave is for sale.”

Cai Xinzi replied, “We are just participating in the exhibition, not intending to sell.”

“Not selling?” Old Li grew instantly anxious. “Ten million! I offer ten million!”

Cai Xinzi’s jaw nearly hit the floor. “You... you... just a moment... I need to process this...”

...

Li Daoxuan was busy digesting gourd-shaped chicken, a renowned dish of Shaanxi cuisine. He had finally managed to order it from a delivery platform. Gripping a chicken leg, he dipped it in chili flakes and gnawed happily.

Inside the crate, things were bustling these days!

The “Gaojia Business Circle,” barren for a long time, was finally beginning to thrive.

The catalyst for this vitality was undoubtedly the newly arrived 3,000 refugees from Qingjian County.

These 3,000 newcomers had arrived empty-handed. Apart from the small bundles carried during their uprising and the hoes they held as weapons, they possessed nothing.

Though Li Daoxuan had arranged plastic houses for them, these houses were empty. They needed to acquire too many things.

Those Qingjian County refugees doing “daily-paid” jobs, upon completing their work and receiving their wages, promptly spent their pay on necessities.

They went to carpenters for wooden basins and buckets; to elders for bamboo baskets and hampers; to the Gaojia Village official warehouse for bolts of cotton cloth; to the artisans’ well for kitchen knives...

This flurry of commercial transactions quickly alerted the more enterprising minds. Since you need these items, why wait for you to come to me?

The Old Village Chief from Gaojia was the first to react. Carrying many bamboo baskets and hampers he had woven, he set up a small stall in the “food market” section of the Gaojia Business Circle, laying out an assortment of bamboo products.

His initiative drew in numerous elders from Short-term Workers Village, and even elders who’d come from Qingjian County, everyone starting to sell.

Then, other artisans caught on and followed suit. They moved into the marketplace, occupied spots, and started setting up stalls.

Thus, the Gaojia Village business circle became truly alive. After finishing a day’s work, the little figures would head to the Gaojia Business Circle in the evening, browsing the stalls, looking for anything they needed.

Initially, they engaged in barter trade, but quickly found it too cumbersome. Currency was much better for transactions. Soon, copper coins and pieces of silver began circulating...

More agile minds started considering renting larger shops to run bigger businesses.

The doctor from Short-term Workers Village, who had treated Zhang Laowu, quickly rented the medical clinic in the business circle. The “Gaojia Clinic” was born.

Next, a villager opened a noodle shop selling “hand-pulled noodles.”

Led by Artisan Master Gao Yiyi and using the “official status” of the artisans’ well, they established a “village-run blacksmith’s shop” within the marketplace, selling kitchen knives, sickles, hoes, and more.

The concept of “village-run” stores quickly caught on. Paper makers rented a shop to sell paper; a lamp maker opened a shop to sell lamps...

Guided by Li Daoxuan, the income from these village-run stores flowed into the village treasury, but the artisans received a share based on sales, significantly boosting their incomes again.

Women also wanted to start businesses but felt shy about appearing in public. They pooled their money to buy cotton from the village treasury, spun it into cloth, gathered the cloth, and handed it over to the Saint Lady. Opening a “Saint Lady Cotton Cloth Store” under Gao Yiye’s name.

The tiny Gaojia Village was thriving brilliantly, vibrant and bustling.

Li Daoxuan was watching this unfold with great satisfaction when his phone rang. As soon as he answered, Cai Xinzi’s frantic voice erupted on the other end: “There’s an old rich guy offering ten million yuan for your little temple! My god, do we sell? Do we actually sell? I’m absolutely freaking out!”

Li Daoxuan responded: “Holy shit! Sold!”

Chapter 223: The Thanos Hand

Chongzhen Year One, July, Beijing.

The young emperor Zhu Youjian was reviewing memorials.

His trusted high-ranking eunuch Cao Huachun approached quietly and whispered: “Your Majesty, after over half a year of purges, the Eunuch Party has been completely eradicated.”

Cao Huachun had originally served under Wang An, the Director of Ceremonial, accompanying the fifth imperial grandson Zhu Youjian since childhood. Extremely favored by Zhu Youjian, he fell victim to Wei Zhongxian’s political maneuvers when Wei eliminated Wang An. As a member of Wang An’s faction, Cao Huachun was stripped of all ranks and exiled to Nanjing.

After ascending the throne, Zhu Youjian immediately recalled Cao Huachun, his lifelong companion.

Having personal grievances against the Eunuch Party, Cao Huachun now reported their eradication with uplifted brows, visibly pleased.

“Well done! Without the Eunuch Party seizing power, I can finally show my capabilities. To the memorials! More memorials!”

Zhu Youjian’s spirits soared like a jet engine.

Freed from the Eunuch Party, he felt invigorated even when reviewing petitions. He could issue decrees freely—no high-ranking eunuch would ever obstruct his orders again. Ha!

His hand casually flipped to a memorial from Shaanxi Inspector Li Yingqi. Focusing, he read: “From Fenghanxing’an through Yanqing and Pingliang to Xi’an, Your Majesty, I witnessed five months without rain, extending into autumn. The midsummer drought withered all crops. Red earth stretched barren, wild grass broke off in flames. Refugees flood every road I travel.

Hundreds gather along highways at each stop, pleading for relief. Now, regions surrounding Yan’an like Yichuan and Luochuan, along with Xi’an territories such as Hancheng, report marauders rallying by the hundreds. They beat drums, wave banners, plundering openly by daylight—the strong devouring the weak. Starvation presses the desperate to extremes. Better to loot for survival than starve awaiting death.”

Zhu Youjian frowned darkly. “This man always comes begging for gold.”

Cao Huachun murmured: “We must allocate silver to Shaanxi.”

Zhu Youjian pondered: Perhaps they could tighten budgets to scrape together funds?

Weighed by these thoughts, he opened the next memorial.

“Garrison troops at Jimen rioted for unpaid wages amid hunger. They torched and looted gunpowder depots. After extensive negotiations, they disbanded.”

Zhu Youjian’s heart plummeted like an elevator in freefall.

A curse nearly escaped his lips. But as emperor, he maintained decorum—vulgarity must never be uttered. He swallowed the words forcefully.

Shaanxi demanded silver. Now Jimen demanded soldiers’ pay?

Where could such funds come from?

No need to deliberate further. Zhu Youjian tossed Li Yingqi’s memorial aside. Out of sight, out of mind. He’d seen nothing at all.

...

Early in the morning, Li Daoxuan received a parcel.

His ordered “Thanos Gloves” had finally arrived. Gold-painted alloy shells embedded with “Infinity Stones” encased his hands, transforming his delicate fingers with +32,000% fierceness.

He couldn’t resist slipping them on, striking Thanos’ signature pose—fist clenched.

Be gone, half of humanity.

Ding-dong!

The doorbell rang. Li Daoxuan startled, forgetting to remove the glove as he flung the door open. Outside stood a young courier, whistling while awaiting the recipient.

Instead of a person, the door revealed a Thanos fist.

The courier froze mid-whistle, leaping two meters backward. Only seeing a regular young man's face emerge did he exhale: "Boss... that glove freaked me out!"

Li Daoxuan scratched his head: "Ah, apologies! Just messing around."

A courier handed over a huge box: "Please sign and accept it."

Li Daoxuan opened it and saw that inside the box was a 1:200 scale model of his alma mater, Thirty-Two Middle School. Well, the custom-made school model from Cai Xinzi's shop assistant was finally ready.

He signed his name and told the courier, "Thanks for your hard work," then carried the model of his alma mater back to the front of the box.

He earnestly glanced at his alma mater and instantly recalled the agonizing days of his college entrance exam years, feeling a strong urge to burn it. Deep down, he was grateful for the countless knowledge it taught him, but even so, he still wanted to burn it.

Learning truly was such a love-hate thing!

He looked inside the box again; it was early morning at that time. The small study well was crammed with children, and many who couldn't find seats spilled outside it, cramming into another courtyard and even filling several outer pathways...

But despite that, the space was still insufficient.

Mr. Wang was sweaty and overwhelmed by the increasing number of students. About seven or eight teachers, recently “lured” by Tan Liwen, also assisted in and around the study well, busily circulating to tend to the students.

Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng was among them too. That scholar had already abandoned any thought of “succeeding in the imperial exam”; with nowhere to use his hard-earned knowledge, he simply became a teacher to pass it on to the children.

Li Daoxuan smiled: “Yiye, go to the study well and inform everyone that I’ll prepare a school for them. From now on, the study well will move out of the main fortress and relocate to the new school.”

Gao Yiye hurried off to deliver the message.

So, all the teachers and students from the study well followed Gao Yiye out of the main fortress to an open area outside. They stood there baffled, gazing up at the sky.

Li Daoxuan had already chosen a location, just outside the bamboo forest southwest of the main fortress. There, a patch of rocky ground was useless for farming, so he decided to build the school there. Nestled beside the bamboo forest, the spot carried a poetic charm.

He was about to take off his Thanos Gloves and grab a metal scraper to “level the ground,” when he suddenly remembered: before, no one could see his hand reaching into the box, but now with the Thanos Gloves on, would they spot it?

He might as well test it out!

Anyhow, in Gaojia Village, nobody would be alarmed if he tried this.

His right hand clad in the Thanos Gloves reached into the box...

Mr. Wang, Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng, the new teachers, and a group of children were still craning their necks skyward when suddenly they witnessed a golden, gleaming giant hand emerge from among a low cloud.

“Wow! It’s a golden-armored deity!”

“A golden-armored divine warrior!”

“No, not that! That’s the Deity’s hand.”

“Look—it’s covered in multicolored gems, all flashy and bright, totally the Deity’s style. Other deities never get so showy.”

Li Daoxuan: “...”

Well, they could see the gloves, but his reputation was unfairly tarnished yet again.

Whatever—so he was maligned. But to have such a cool glove criticized as gaudy? It genuinely infuriated the old man.

Li Daoxuan slammed his palm down onto the rocky beach...

Chapter 224: The Deity’s Story

In the eyes of the little people, the gigantic golden palm inlaid with colorful gems smashed down onto the rocky beach with an earth-shattering boom.

The sheer power of this strike was utterly terrifying.

The ground instantly caved inward, forming a massive depression.

Next, the colossal golden palm swept left and right, leveling every uneven surface until the ground was perfectly flat.

The crowd gasped in unison: “The Deity’s divine work! Truly magnificent!”

Once smoothed, the giant palm pressed down firmly, seeming to compress the earth, then withdrew into the clouds. When it reappeared, it carried a massive structure, lowering it slowly from the heavens.

This structure was as vast as “Gaojia Fortress,” occupying immense space. Not only was there a main building, but also wings; several buildings encircled a huge central field, resembling a parade ground for soldiers to train with weapons.

It descended steadily onto the clearing prepared by the golden palm, planting itself firmly. The palm pressed the structure down once more, tamping the soil beneath any uneven edges. Then, the giant hand retracted into the clouds.

The Old Villagers were accustomed to such sights, beyond amazement, they merely watched calmly. But Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng and the newly arrived teachers stood dumbstruck.

Several dropped to their knees immediately, kowtowing frantically toward the sky.

At this moment, Gao Yiye spoke: “The Deity says, what he has just granted us is called a ‘school.’ It is a place for our children’s education. Teachers, please take the children inside.”

The kneeling men scrambled to their feet, ushering their students toward the building.

Vast grounds, orderly classrooms—stepping inside, each rectangular room shone spotlessly bright. Teachers and pupils alike swelled with glee.

Then Li Daoxuan realized a problem!

When little people moved within old, one-or-two-story small houses, he could glimpse them through windows. But modern multi-story complexes were different. This five-floor teaching building’s intricate layout blocked his view.

While they trod the first-floor corridor flanked by classrooms, Li Daoxuan saw only those inside rooms through windows—not the corridor’s inhabitants.

This was inconvenient. Erecting more such structures would hinder his protection of the little people.

Just as the thought arose, the box flashed brilliantly...

Then, inexplicably, he could peer through walls.

Not quite seeing-through walls. He could adjust his “focus.” When concentrating on the school hallway, an arcane force from the box pierced the barriers. Suddenly, he could observe souls within that corridor—even fine-tuning hearing specifically to that space alone.

“Tsk!” Li Daoxuan instinctively glanced at the Rescue Index. Qingjian County’s 3,000 newcomers had boosted the Index significantly. The box had unlocked new functions.

Truly handy.

Usage scope included—yet wasn’t limited to—peeking... cough...

Clearly, this feature required “self-discipline” from him. A gentleman sees nothing unbecoming, hears nothing improper.

While not as eccentric as Bai Yuan, Li Daoxuan strove to uphold such principles—it honored one’s soul.

He shifted focus back into the box, directing it toward the school hallway...

“Each classroom can hold at least fifty children,” Mr. Wang calculated with his fingers. “With over four hundred pupils now, under ten rooms suffice—yet this edifice has five floors, each with ten rooms. Thousands more could enroll without straining capacity. Astounding! A heavenly school indeed.”

Zhao Sheng panted heavily: “Huff... huff... it’s just... climbing... exhausting... cough... five whole stories... so many stairs... endless corridors...why so vast...?”

The crowd fell silent.

Mr. Wang patted his shoulder. “Mr. Zhao, from today onward, perform two sets of calisthenics daily. Frankly, you need them more than the kids.”

Wiping sweat, Zhao Sheng nodded: “Agreed... I... cough... must exercise... cough...”

Others anxiously urged: “Rest before speaking. Your breathlessness worries us.”

Mr. Wang declared: “Let us go at once to the artisans’ well. We need carpenters to craft desks and chairs. First batch—ten classrooms, five hundred sets. This demands a massive project—requiring an artisan master to lead, recruiting innumerable carpenters, apprentices, even labor offenders. Only thus can our school function swiftly.”

Watching the bustling teachers glide along, Li Daoxuan mused overhead: Excellent. With such drive, operation begins soon. Appoint Mr. Wang as principal. Zhao Sheng for gym teacher...? Heh—too devious? Pffft... hahaha.

Fine, assign phys-ed teaching to another. Zhao Sheng can handle vice-principal duties.

Absorbed in school-planning thoughts, he suddenly saw Thirty-Two dart into the building—ogling structures in awe—then approach Gao Yiye softly: “Saint Lady, the comic book you commissioned for publishing is complete.”

Gao Yiye beamed: “Ah! Is it? Quick—show me!”

Thirty-Two scanned the touring teachers and children, whispering: “But you must relay the Deity’s messages. Now seems... inopportune.”

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly. Directly, he announced: “Yiye, I’ll visit a friend today. Inform them I’m unavailable.”

With that, he snapped the box lid shut—vanishing from even Gao Yiye’s sight.

Seeing low clouds vanish overhead, Gao Yiye lit with delight: “The revered Deity visits fellow immortals today! No message duties! Moreover... heehee... with the Deity absent... it’s time for that book.”

Thirty-Two sighed, amused: So be it. If Saint Lady toys whimsy, I indulge her. Who knows how the Deity might react seeing this... unusual comic.

Only one way to find out.

Thirty-Two guided Gao Yiye toward the publisher’s office.

Two hundred comic books already stacked here. Blue cotton-thread-bound covers featured an august “Dao Xuan Deity,” beside bold characters: Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale.

Chapter 225: I Must Buy This Book

Gao Yiye took “her own book” and happily flipped it open.

She was reading, and Li Daoxuan was reading too.

With the “Attention” function, Li Daoxuan no longer even needed a magnifying glass. By simply “attending” to the book, he could immediately pull his vision very close: Huh! This book was printed even better than “Yang Family Generals”.

As it turned out, when the woodcarver printed this book, he worked with an attitude of immense reverence, carving each stroke meticulously.

Gao Yiye’s drawing skills were actually quite poor, with many areas poorly rendered.

But that didn't matter. The woodcarver's drawing skills far surpassed Gao Yiye's, and he simply made up the difference for her.

If her strokes were crooked, the woodcarver corrected them with ten strokes. If she drew Daoist Ma's face crooked, the woodcarver restored Daoist Ma's proper visage.

During printing, the printer also employed the most meticulous attitude, ensuring ink didn't smudge or pool messily.

The binding process was flawless, not a single page crooked or misaligned.

After flipping through it a few times, Gao Yiye was overjoyed: "Wow, fantastic! It's printed so well. Let's start selling this book immediately."

Thirty-Two said, "Before it goes on sale, I need to explain something clearly to you."

Gao Yiye blinked curiously, "What's the matter?"

Thirty-Two spoke seriously, "Gaojia Publishing House wasn't opened from my private funds. The Gaojia Village treasury handles its profits and losses. And this 'Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale' was not produced by the Deity's decree. Therefore, village treasury funds cannot be used for it."

Gao Yiye understood. Thirty-Two had told her this before; even the wages for the woodcarver doing this job had to come from her.

Though this was more symbolic than practical, she still had to follow the rule. Otherwise, as the Saint Lady setting a bad example, if others recklessly used village treasury goods, that wouldn't be good.

Gao Yiye: "I understand. The materials used for these two hundred comic books, the woodcarver's labor, and the associated costs should all be my responsibility."

Thirty-Two nodded: "If none sell, you must pay the full cost into the village treasury. If they sell, then the money from sales can be used to reimburse the village treasury. Any leftover money is your runbi fee."

Gao Yiye: "Huh? So if they all sell out, I can actually earn money? Is this called a runbi fee?"

Thirty-Two smiled: "Publishing houses always pay authors a runbi fee; this is already a standard practice in the prosperous Jiangnan regions. It's just rare in remote little Northern Shaanxi villages to publish books, so you haven't heard of it. Simply put, books that sell well bring higher runbi fees. Poor sellers bring smaller fees or sometimes none at all. Publishing at your own expense like this means you could lose money if the books don't sell."

Gao Yiye fully grasped it now: "Alright, I get it!"

Thirty-Two smiled: "Remember this clearly, Saint Lady: if you mess around publishing your own books and they don't sell, you'll lose money."

Gao Yiye: "I don't care about losing money! Enough lecturing, let's start selling right now!"

Thirty-Two chuckled and shook his head, "Fine, let's begin."

He directed the bookstore attendants to move the two hundred copies of "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale" onto the shelves by the entrance. Once displayed, he sent two attendants to stand outside the shop and shout loudly: "New book at the publishing house! Get your new book!"

"A new book?" Villagers strolling through the Gaojia Business Circle instantly perked up, swiftly gathering in a crowd.

At the head was the Old Village Chief.

He spent all day in the business circle now, selling bamboo products from his stall, close to the bookstore, and arrived lightning-fast.

Hearing of the new book, the Old Village Chief suddenly felt forty years younger. He bolted to the bookstore entrance, shouting: "Is it the third volume of 'Yang Family Generals'? Quick! I've been wanting to read it!"

The attendants smiled awkwardly: "It's not 'Yang Family Generals'."

"Eh?" The Old Village Chief looked crestfallen: "Then what is it? If it's not as good as 'Yang Family Generals', I won't buy it."

An attendant wore an odd expression: "Whether this book is good or not, I dare not say. Best you see for yourself."

With that, one attendant raised his hand, holding up "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale" for everyone to see.

Most villagers who could read were at the new school visiting, so the crowd by the door was entirely illiterate. The words "Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale" meant nothing to them.

However, the portrait of the Dao Xuan Deity Statue on the cover was instantly recognized by all.

"Ah! Isn't this the Deity?"

"How bold! Putting the Deity on a comic book!"

"How dare they?"

The attendants looked uncomfortable: "This book was drawn personally by the Saint Lady. It's called 'Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale'. I'll flip through a few pages; see for yourselves."

As they spoke, they opened the book.

The crowd peered intently and immediately understood: The Dao Xuan Deity descended to the mortal realm for amusement. He saw a poor little village. Robbers lived on the mountain next to the village. The robbers came down to raid. The Deity stretched out his hand – Wham! – and crushed the robbers.

Seeing this, the Village Chief gasped loudly: “Ah! Ah! Ah! This... this is the Gaojia Village story! When the Deity first manifested, it was exactly like this... An old man like me lacked the fate, I couldn’t see the Deity’s hand, only Yiye could. Unexpectedly... this was what it looked like back then... Bless Yiye for drawing it all.”

The Old Village Chief didn’t need to wait for another page. He instantly pulled out a handful of copper coins: “I have to buy this book!”

The villagers beside him heard this and suddenly understood: “So buying this book will let us know the story of when the Deity first manifested!”

“Buy it!”

“We must buy it, even if we have to sell our pots and pans!”

A gaggle hurriedly felt for their money, and in the blink of an eye, two hundred copies had sold out.

Those who didn’t get one flew into a rage in front of the bookstore: “What’s going on here? Such an important book, and you barely printed any copies?”

“Exactly! This is the Deity’s story! Shouldn’t you have printed more?”

The commotion startled the boys badly. They quickly called Thirty-Two out. He hadn’t expected that Gao Yiye’s playful comic book, pieced together with borrowed elements, could sell this spectacularly.

Little did he know, Gao Yiye had effectively ridden the wave of the Deity’s popularity – a concept ancient folk wouldn’t grasp.

Thirty-Two was utterly unprepared. He could only wave his hands, “Don’t panic, everyone! The woodblocks are carved. We’ll reprint immediately! With the blocks, printing is quick! In two or three days, we’ll have many, many more copies... I assure you everyone can get one!”

“Don’t cause any more trouble!”

Chapter 226: Making Money Even Through This

Li Daoxuan watched this scene from outside the box, his mouth curving upward sharply.

Gao Yiye was going to earn a lot of money.

The better the book sold, the more she earned.

Moreover, her situation was different; she was essentially self-publishing, like an investment, and the return on that investment was much higher than what royalties might bring.

Simply put, royalties were like a eunuch writing a book on Qidian, with Qidian paying him a fee.

Self-publishing to make money was like the eunuch starting his own Qidian website.

Which model was more profitable went without saying.

Three days later, the second printed edition of five hundred copies was also snatched up instantly. The Gao Family Press had to rush out a third edition, again of five hundred copies, and again they were seized in a flash.

This mad rush finally ended at the sixth edition, when a total of twenty-seven hundred copies had been printed. Gaojia Village had achieved “each family having one copy or even two,” the market was saturated, and no more could be sold.

Gao Yiye made a huge pile of money.

As the Deity supported her, this money was useless to her. After thinking it over, she simply ran to Refugee Valley and gave away the money to the poorest elders.

By doing this, the news that the Saint Lady had earned a lot from her book and shared it out spread instantly across Gaojia Village.

Those skilled in painting in the village couldn't help having a little thought: Making a comic book could actually earn so much money? Though I dare not draw the Deity carelessly, I could invent other stories. Maybe this could also strike it rich?

Chongzhen Year One, July Tenth. Finally, the reclamation work on the Loess Plateau near Refugee Valley achieved some success.

Large swathes of the Loess Plateau had their soil loosened and were turned into square farm plots.

Everyone cooperated without conflict; it was understood that whichever family cleared the land owned the resulting farm plot for their use.

The Qingjian County Villagers were not greedy, as each household worked within their limits, only digging two to three mu of land before finishing. They knew that with just a hoe and their own strength, they couldn't overreach. Otherwise, they might not manage it well and could end up worse off than with a small piece of land.

But...

What should they plant in this small farmland?

They had rebelled and escaped from Qingjian County, so naturally they hadn't brought seeds. To sow crops on this land, they needed to buy seeds, which required significant spending. Rushing in without caution risked a poor harvest plus losing the seed money, so they had to weigh it carefully.

Early in the morning, Dian Deng Zi Zhao Sheng came to find Gao Yiye here: "Saint Lady, I have a small request."

Gao Yiye said: "What is it?"

Zhao Sheng said: “Our Refugee Valley group has finished clearing the land. Since it’s still mid-July, there’s time to catch the end of spring for planting crops. But everyone feels uncertain. Could you... perhaps... invite the Deity to advise us?”

“It’s only that matter,” Gao Yiye replied, pointing to the low cloud overhead. “The Deity happens to be up there; he has already heard you.”

Zhao Sheng hurriedly looked up at the sky, his face pleading.

Li Daoxuan was eating cumin-seasoned hand-torn pork ribs.

He had definitely heard Zhao Sheng’s words, but... the seeds he was waiting for from that person—brought by her—hadn’t returned yet. What was to be done?

As he thought this, the corner of his eye caught something, and he could not hold back a surge of delight.

Xing Honglang was back!

It neatly solved his problem, like someone offering a pillow just as he began dozing off.

The party she brought was indeed large. Beyond her thirty-eight salt smuggler subordinates, over twenty others came along.

Among them were threadbare scholars in scholarly robes and poor craftsmen in burlap clothing—it was a bustling, sizable group.

Also, her people no longer returned with empty carrying poles; the poles were packed with all kinds of strange goods.

Li Daoxuan had previously told her to bring anything not found in the village. She absolutely kept her word, collecting whatever was unavailable there.

They included Jingdezhen porcelain, glazed glass items transported from the West Regions, silk brocades from Jiangnan, samurai blades from Japan, chickens, ducks, and even several piglets...

Xi'an truly showed why it was the northwestern region's biggest city—finally able to buy many peculiar items like a bundle of red chili peppers.

For a Chongqing native, spotting red chili peppers caught his eye and cheered him up inside. It clearly meant he'd have to find time to teach the little people to eat spicy food. Though teaching Shaanxi people spiciness might seem odd, who could blame him—their Deity was from Chongqing?

The Deity had to lead you astray!

Of course, this could wait; take it step by step. He needed to focus on what mattered now.

The most useful thing she brought was a carrying pole laden with corn.

Corn arrived in this land in 1531. By the end of Ming rule, it had spread to Hebei, Shandong, Henan, Shaanxi, Gansu, Jiangsu, Anhui, Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and more—across ten provinces.

But its presence was only “spread to,” not widespread cultivation.

Li Daoxuan hadn't found corn being grown in villages like Gaojia Village, Zhengjia Village, or Zhuangjia Village among dozens nearby, nor was it mentioned in Chengcheng County. Yet after Xing Honglang went to Xi'an, with only a little asking, she still secured some.

However, amid the drought, grain prices were terrifying—one dou of corn had soared to eight hundred wen cash.

Xing Honglang cared not for the price; she knew things the Deity explicitly requested needed no hesitation, only to be obtained. So she brought back a full carrying pole.

Seeing this, Li Daoxuan felt confident.

He bent his head and spoke to Gao Yiye: “Tell Zhao Sheng to have Qingjian County Villagers trial planting corn. The corn seeds have been brought back by Xing Honglang. Hand these out first to the Refugee Valley farmers for use; after harvest, repay the seed money to the village treasury.”

Zhao Sheng listened blankly: “Corn? My apologies, sir. I concentrate only on books—not laboring physically or recognizing grains. I don’t even know what corn is, embarrassing the Deity.”

“Not knowing is totally normal—no need to belittle yourself,” Li Daoxuan replied, retrieving a pre-printed sheet labeled “Planting Corn from Scratch” and setting it lightly before Zhao Sheng.

He also slid in a matching portion of celestial fertilizer nearby: “You read, so I entrust this method. Study it carefully to instruct villagers exactly. Follow every step to the letter; rich rewards will come.”

Zhao Sheng’s spirits soared on seeing that large sheet—indeed it must be planting wisdom from the immortal realm.

He’d heard Gaojia and Zhengjia Village’s wheat fields reaped bigger yields solely through celestial fertilizer. Now the Deity gave celestial fertilizer plus celestial farming arts—apparently Qingjian County farmers were about to rise up!

Chapter 227: Hong Chengchou Arrives

Zhao Sheng, just as Xing Honglang had when she first saw the cement formula, immediately regarded this piece of paper as a celestial prescription. Since it was a celestial prescription, it naturally required careful safekeeping.

Hurry and start rolling the paper!

But his physical strength was far inferior to Xing Honglang’s. Ten Zhao Shengs combined might not match Xing Honglang. The enormous, thick paper proved tremendously difficult for him to roll. After managing just a small section, he ran out of strength. Huff huff, he panted heavily. The moment his grip slackened, the rolled paper sprang open, pushing him backward until he tumbled to the ground.

Thump! He hit the floor, and the large paper promptly covered him.

Wriggling beneath the huge sheet, he created a small bulge above him. "Wah! Help! Somebody... help me..." he cried.

A large group of Villagers from Qingjian County rushed over immediately. They rolled the large paper back up, while two others helped Zhao Sheng to his feet. Face flushed with embarrassment, Zhao Sheng looked skyward and said, "Our apologies, Deity. Mr. Zhao is a scholar, unused to such physical tasks. Please leave such matters to us in the future."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "No matter at all. Just help him carry this paper back. Study it diligently and take care not to misinterpret any steps."

The Villagers replied with solemn reverence, "Using the celestial prescription to plant celestial crops, we certainly dare not deviate from the steps. Please rest assured, Deity."

The villagers shouldered the rolled paper and rushed back to Refugee Valley. With deep solemnity, they unrolled it. Illiterate themselves, they now realized Zhao Sheng's true value. He read the words from the large paper aloud to them, character by character, sentence by sentence.

These Villagers were all seasoned old farmers with immense agricultural experience. They grasped the corn planting methods upon hearing them. Only the use of fertilizer presented something entirely new. Fortunately, people from Gaojia Village and Zhengjia Village were already familiar with fertilizer. Li Daoxuan sent two people over to instruct them, and that would suffice.

With the corn situation handled, Li Daoxuan could shift his attention back to the red chili peppers Xing Honglang had brought. Truthfully, he could have provided chilies directly to the crate before. Never doing so was simply because the idea hadn't occurred to him. Now that Xing Honglang had brought these to Gaojia Village, they were worth investigating.

"Xing Honglang, take out those red chili peppers. I wish to examine them closely."

Once Gao Yiye relayed the message, Xing Honglang was thrilled. Bringing back this small item and having the Deity take immediate notice meant her choice was validated. She quickly produced all the red chili peppers, holding them up in her cupped hands, lifting them as high as she could.

Truth be told, lifting high wasn't strictly necessary. Li Daoxuan could now use the "Focus" function, eliminating the need for a magnifying glass. He pulled the image of the chili peppers closer for a detailed inspection. Excellent! They were indeed the familiar red chili peppers. Xing Honglang had brought back dried chilies.

This wasn't surprising. Having been introduced to our dynasty not long ago, chilies had only recently appeared in the northwestern region. Even in larger cities like Xi'an, fresh red chili peppers were hard to come by. What one could buy were dried chilies, grown in the south, dried, and brought to Xi'an as a form of "spice."

These would do perfectly!

'Delighted,' the Deity commanded. "This evening, once everyone has finished working, we shall all celebrate a festival. This festival shall be named the 'Deity Hot Pot Festival.'"

Everyone blinked in momentary surprise, but quickly recalled the previous "Deity's Unexpected Festival," where the Deity had bestowed delicious soy-braised beef upon them, bringing immense joy to all.

"Wonderful! We get to celebrate today!"

"Let's push hard and get our work done!"

"Finish today's tasks early so we can start celebrating!"

Brimming with enthusiasm, the villagers...

As the sun set, the villagers concluded their day's work and headed home. Normally, this time was reserved for hurriedly preparing dinner. But today was different. They were celebrating the "Deity Hot Pot Festival," naturally requiring them to follow instructions precisely.

Under the direction of Gao Yiye, the villagers brought out numerous pots and woks. They set them up beside the big pond in Gaojia Village, filled them with water, and lit the fires.

Simultaneously, the “hot pot delivery” Li Daoxuan ordered arrived. He had procured single portions of a dazzling variety of ingredients. Now, he sliced only a tiny piece from each portion and placed it into the crate.

The villagers watched as chunks of chicken, pork, tripe, blood curd, duck intestines, bean sprouts, cabbage, mushrooms, and more descended rapidly from the sky.

“Wow!” many villagers exclaimed, their mouths watering copiously even before tasting anything.

Li Daoxuan chided good-naturedly, “What’s the rush? First, you need to prepare the broth base... Add these things into the pots step by step, boiling them with the water: chili peppers, Sichuan peppercorns, mature ginger, garlic, salt...”

He listed a long series of items. Most were unavailable to the villagers, especially during a famine when peasants lacked the resources to cultivate such seasoning crops. But it didn’t matter. What the villagers lacked, Li Daoxuan possessed. He conferred whatever was missing, small amounts each time, for them to add to their pots.

In that moment, hundreds of large pots simmering with hot pot broth lined the village, filling the air with a rich, savory fragrance.

Just as the atmosphere grew festive and lively, Li Daoxuan suddenly noticed something amiss...

On the official road running alongside the cement road connecting Gaojia Village to Zhengjia Village, a large procession emerged. A very large one. Laden mules and horses, carts laden with grain, and soldiers formed a mighty convoy. At its heart flew a large banner emblazoned with the character “洪” (Hong). Beside it, a line of smaller characters read: “Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor.”

Li Daoxuan murmured in surprise, “Hmm? A government grain convoy?”

Leading this grain convoy was a strong, middle-aged man dressed in the official garments of the Fourth Rank. Possessing a lean face and intensely focused eyes, he looked certainly no pushover.

Flanking him were over a hundred hired guards. Each stood tall and imposing, their gazes sharp, radiating formidable capability.

Li Daoxuan silently pondered: A Fourth Rank Grain Transport Supervisor responsible for escorting military provisions, surnamed Hong... Might it be the very man I have in mind?

He was not mistaken. This man was Hong Chengchou, later a figure renowned across the realm, a top-tier powerhouse of the late Ming dynasty. Despite being a lean scholar, his military exploits were so formidable few military officers could match them.

Several days prior, Hong Chengchou had received orders from Hu Tingyan, the Governor of Xi'an. He was to gather provisions and transport them to Xi'an for military pay intended to combat the increasingly rampant bandits in Northern Shaanxi.

Setting out from Hancheng on Tongguan Road, Hong Chengchou led his grain convoy on the route destined to pass through "Heyang County, Chengcheng County, Pu County" to Xi'an.

They progressed uneventfully initially. However, upon nearing Heyang County, Hong Chengchou received reports that a bandit leader named Fan Shanyue was gathering a force exceeding ten thousand bandits near Heyang County.

He didn't fear bandits like Fan Shanyue, but engaging in combat with bandits while escorting grain carts was pure folly. He decided against traversing the Heyang County seat, opting instead to cut directly across desolate villages and wild hills into Chengcheng County. That decision led him inadvertently to Zhengjia Village. From there, following the official road running alongside the cement road, he approached Gaojia Village.

Chapter 228: Joining the Deity Hot Pot Festival

He had walked a long distance and detoured to evade the bandit army, failing to rest in Heyang County. Hong Chengchou was both tired and hungry.

But as he sat on his horse, his demeanor remained impeccably composed, with no wrinkle on his clothes and no sign of fatigue on his face. He appeared straight, dignified, and utterly unperturbed.

When passing through Zhengjia Village, he was slightly surprised; the area seemed to have rained recently, with abundant green grass growing everywhere and trees looking vibrant. The fields appeared freshly harvested for wheat, many stalks still left behind.

In the village, there was even a big pond with a pool of clear water.

This puzzled him a bit.

Yet water was always welcome. Hong Chengchou ordered his men to fetch a basin of fresh water. He took out a comb to tidy his hair, then washed his face to refresh himself. He, Hong Chengchou, could not be seen looking disheveled; at all times, he must maintain an impeccable attitude.

At the west entrance of Zhengjia Village, he saw a strange gray “stone road” running alongside the official path, which astounded him further.

Out of caution, he avoided walking on that odd “stone road” and instructed his men to continue on the official path. They walked and walked; after six li, Gaojia Village came into view.

“What village lies ahead? Report quickly!”

The scout on duty promptly responded, “Master, it appears to be Gaojia Village. Two years ago, when I passed through, it was a small desolate village. I don’t know why, but it’s transformed into a large town now.”

Hong Chengchou frowned and thought it over. “In recent years, the great drought and roaming bandits have forced common folk to flee everywhere. Here, signs of rain are evident: crops can be grown and wild vegetables gathered. Refugees converging to build up a big town is understandable; nothing unusual about it. Stop overreacting like you’re a simpleton who hasn’t seen the world. Remember the Hong family motto: behavior—always mind your composure and avoid others’ ridicule.”

The servant hastily composed his expression.

Hong Chengchou said, "Since there's a large town, we can pause to rest for a bit. Let's go."

The Hong family servants escorted the grain convoy and slowly entered Gaojia Village.

Shi Jian, the sentinel of Gaojia Village's militia, spotted them from afar and rushed back to report. Then Cheng Xu immediately hid himself in the background, while Thirty-Two emerged to greet them with Gao Yiye and some scholars.

No one dared to neglect a fourth-rank court official.

Li Daoxuan's focus intensified at once. Hong Chengchou had long been infamous; if Li Daoxuan wielded his "Thanos Hand" now, he could instantly crush this top-ranked traitor in "Records of Turncoat Officials".

But...

Was this truly right?

Hong Chengchou would surrender over a decade later—a future event that hadn't happened yet.

Could someone be judged over something that hadn't occurred?

It didn't seem right!

In Marvel movies, when Deadpool traveled back before WWII and saw the infant Hitler, he didn't kill him either.

Unhappened matters didn't need to occur; the best way was not to let a person face that trial.

Li Daoxuan sighed softly: Hong Chengchou! Maybe... with me present this time, I won't let you hit rock bottom. I'll hold off on killing you for now.

Hong Chengchou and his party entered Gaojia Village maintaining their stately composure.

All the Hong family servants appeared energetic, imposing, and kept their gaze forward, while Hong Chengchou stood even taller, chest out, looking dignified and grand.

Though he appeared not to glance aside, his eyes darted swiftly, rapidly appraising everything in Gaojia Village.

The fortress with walls three zhang high indicated that the village's gentry held formidable power, beyond that of ordinary wealthy families.

In the village were harvested wheat fields and colorful markets...

A strange large vehicle???

At the sight of the huge small train, Hong Chengchou nearly lost his composure and displayed a look of astonishment—like a country bumpkin. He forced himself to control his facial muscles to prevent any distortion.

“Don't panic, composure!” It must be Westerners' tricks; Westerners love concocting such bizarre contraptions. If this official expressed shock, those barbaric Westerners would surely mock him.

At that moment, Thirty-Two stepped forward. “I am Thirty-Two, Steward of the Li Family in Gaojia Village. My apologies for the late welcome.”

Without speaking, Hong Chengchou let his servant state for him, “Our master is Mr. Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor, responsible for escorting the court's military supplies. Passing through, we plan to stay overnight.”

This was far from unusual!

It was common practice for high court officials on duty to seek lodging from wealthy households. The hosts typically entertained them well and farewelled them properly, building goodwill in return.

Perhaps one day, this grand official might extend a favor.

Thirty-Two naturally grasped this unwritten rule and smiled. "If Mr. Hong chooses to visit, we're most delighted to receive you. I will arrange your quarters immediately."

Just then, Gao Yiye whispered in Thirty-Two's ear, "The Deity has ordered: invite Hong Chengchou to the Hot Pot Festival and tease him a little."

Thirty-Two absorbed this, his smile unwavering, and continued, "By the way, our village happens to be holding the 'Deity Hot Pot Festival' today. While you await arrangements, Mr. Hong, why not take a look?"

A question mark formed above Hong Chengchou's head. "Deity Hot Pot Festival?"

Thirty-Two gestured toward the pond area, drawing Hong Chengchou's gaze. There, on open ground next to the pond, he saw hundreds of big pots boiling water, their bubbling broth enticingly inviting. Alongside them stood numerous large tables, each laden with varied ingredients: meat, vegetables, seafood, and more...

Amid this severe drought, how did this village possess such diverse foods?

Was this real?

Hong Chengchou's attention fixed itself there instantly.

Thirty-Two smiled. "Your Excellency, the servants and Military Gentlemen you brought must all be weary and hungry. Why not participate in the Hot Pot Festival? With meat and dishes, enjoy a hearty meal."

Hong Chengchou glanced back; truly, his men were all tired and hungry. Gazing at the scores of boiling pots, “eat now” was written plain on every face.

“Hmm!”

Hong Chengchou cared deeply for his servants and gravely said, “Proceed! But partake prudently, heed your eating manners, and do not disturb the local populace.”

The hundred-plus servants, soldiers, and porters he commanded burst into cheers together and charged toward the row of boiling pots.

Thus, the Deity Hot Pot Festival officially kicked off!

Chapter 229: What Happened to Wang Er?

At the onset of the Hot Pot Festival, it wasn’t the people of Gaojia Village who first displayed disgraceful eating manners.

After all, Gaojia Village was abundant in resources and had long passed the stage of “starving souls scrambling for food.”

The truly unsightly spectacle came from the porters transporting the grain!

These were poor, downtrodden souls conscripted by the authorities. They had pushed grain carts over one hundred li from Hancheng to Gaojia Village, utterly exhausted by the journey, without a decent meal along the way.

Now, confronted with such a vast array of ingredients and large pots of already boiling water, how could they resist?

A group of porters timidly eyed the Gaojia villagers, too fearful to act. However, upon seeing the Saint Lady give them a meaningful glance, the Gaojia villagers understood. They smiled collectively, picked up the pre-prepared food on the tables with their chopsticks, and tossed it into the bubbling pots.

Sliced meat, tripe, duck intestines, lotus root slices...

Various ingredients immediately swirled in the pots as the aroma of hot pot pervaded the air.

A sharp, spicy note laced the fragrance, but the porters paid it no mind.

Ravenously hungry and seeing the hosts' approval, they hurriedly grabbed long chopsticks, fished a piece of meat from the pot, and prepared to devour it.

Gao Yiye quickly intervened, "Your constitutions differ from us Gaojia villagers. Do not recklessly eat from the red broth pots—you could suffer fatal diarrhea. You must only consume food from the clear broth pots."

Only then did the porters notice two kinds of pots: one with reddish broth and another with pale broth...

Heeding her warning, they suddenly realized something unusual about the scent of the red broth. Quickly switching to the clear broth pots, they scooped up freshly cooked ingredients and flung them into their mouths...

Sizzle! Blazing hot, blazing hot!

But oh, the satisfaction!

"The flavor is so rich! There's salt, oil, pepper... so many seasonings! Utterly delicious!"

Having never tasted anything so exquisite, the porters immediately wept as they ate, reminiscent of abandoned kittens crying while being fed.

Soldiers and retainers under Hong Chengchou's command then crowded forward, partaking with appreciative murmurs and sighs.

As the guests had begun, the Gaojia villagers no longer held back. Time to feast!

Over four thousand villagers surged forward, gathering around several hundred large pots to begin cooking.

“Wow, the red broth pot’s flavor is overwhelming!”

“Sizzle! So spicy, so spicy! I can’t take it—I’m switching to the clear broth!”

“Huh? Can’t handle the heat? I find this fiery kick thoroughly enjoyable!”

Most couldn’t endure the spice. Fortunately, Li Daoxuan had prepared wisely: only about ten red broth pots were prepared, while the mild clear broth dominated. Thus, most congregated around the clear broth pots, while the spice-tolerant minority huddled by the red broth ones, eating while emitting the rather pathetic hissing sounds of scalded mouths.

Swiftly, Hong Chengchou’s retinue blended seamlessly with the Gaojia villagers. Social distinctions dissolved, all becoming fair-weather friends huddled around shared pots.

“Come, brother, try this piece of meat—it’s fantastic!”

“This blood tofu has such a peculiar texture.”

“But it’s seriously delicious, hahaha!”

“Here, cook this bamboo shoot slice!”

“It’s nearly summer—how do you still have bamboo shoots? How were they preserved till now?”

“These are immortal realm bamboo shoots. They defy seasons.”

“Hahaha, just talking nonsense to trick me.”

Hong Chengchou saw his men mingling harmoniously with the people of Gaojia Village, eating joyfully. He couldn't help but think to himself: this stuff genuinely seemed delicious. Most importantly, the atmosphere was lively; after just one meal together, they had become like old friends. Strange—truly strange charm.

As he contemplated this, Thirty-Two approached and said, “Hong Daren, we've specially prepared a quiet hot pot table. Won't you join us for a meal?”

Though appearing composed externally, Hong Chengchou was actually weary and starving. He couldn't resist any longer and nodded, replying, “Then this official will trouble you.”

He dismounted and followed Thirty-Two into the main fortress.

They arrived in a grand courtyard where pots were arranged in the center—two of them: one clear broth pot and one red broth pot.

Those dining privately here were Gaojia Village's veteran management team: Gao Yiye, Thirty-Two, Third Miss, Tan Liwen, Mr. Wang, Madam Bai, and Young Master Bai.

Seeing Hong Chengchou, everyone respectfully saluted.

Hong Chengchou was accustomed to such settings; official gatherings often involved dining with strangers, usually families of local gentry—it didn't matter.

He casually returned a fist salute and sat down imposingly between the two pots.

He frowned immediately upon sitting.

The hot pot emitted an overwhelmingly pungent aroma of spices and beef tallow, easily seeping into clothing—which would severely damage his appearance.

Having no spare official garments prepared this time, he dreaded reaching Xi'an tomorrow only for the Provincial Governor to smell beef tallow on him—a mortifying prospect.

He quickly shifted farther from the red broth pot.

Picking up chopsticks, he sampled a slice of aged meat freshly cooked in the clear broth pot. His eyebrows twitched slightly. Huh? This was unexpectedly delicious. The seasoning was abundant; one bite burst with salt, pepper, ginger, garlic, and myriad flavors.

The array of spices alone for this single pot must've cost a fortune.

Then he recalled hundreds more pots boiling outside.

This...

Just how affluent was this village?

He couldn't help feeling startled.

Li Daoxuan "observed" his subtle shift in expression and chuckled inwardly: Scared now, aren't you? Hehehe!

"Hong Daren," Thirty-Two asked earnestly, "Could your delivery of provisions to Xi'an mean the Provincial Governor is finally tackling the bandit scourge? No more waiting for them to 'plunder until next spring and settle naturally'?"

Hearing Thirty-Two's mocking tone, Hong Chengchou instantly recognized shared disdain for the Provincial Governor's policy—a coincidence, since he himself detested it.

Praising together might be dull, but condemning together? Definitely invigorating.

Hong Chengchou scoffed, “Hu Tingyan is aged and incompetent—too blind to grasp reality in Shaanxi. Last year, he claimed they’d ‘plunder until next spring and settle naturally.’ But spring’s nearly gone now with zero signs of settlement from those bandits! Ha! Things only worsen. ‘Naturally settle’ is utterly laughable. Against such worthless thieves, we must wipe them out.”

Thirty-Two probed, “Oh? So...these provisions you’re delivering are for the Provincial Governor to fund troops suppressing bandits?”

Hong Chengchou confirmed, “Yes! He’s awake now—troops must be mobilized. Especially Bai Shui Wang Er. Growing bolder daily, if we don’t act soon, it’ll spiral out of control.”

The moment “Wang Er” was uttered, everyone present perked up attentively.

Even Li Daoxuan burned to inquire: So how is Wang Er faring now?

Chapter 230: Hong Chengchou’s Thoughts

Hong Chengchou, his enthusiasm for conversation ignited, began to speak at length.

It turned out that Wang Er had not been idle during this recent period.

After leaving Chengcheng County, he first entered Yijun County, rallied an army of six thousand, captured Yijun County, beheaded the county magistrate—this much was still known to everyone.

Next, Wang Er continued moving north.

He knew that the nearer he was to Xi’an, the easier it would be for the officials to pursue and suppress him. To stay safe, he had to go even further north. Thus, he passed through Yijun County and entered Luochuan, where he joined forces with Bu Zhan Ni (Not Sticky Mud).

After a brief period together, Wang Er took a dislike to Bu Zhan Ni’s character and no longer wished to associate with him. He continued north and soon reached the outskirts of Yan’an Prefecture.

Hong Chengchou said, “Just as Wang Er arrived at Yan’an Prefecture, the King of Disruption from Ansei also rose in rebellion.”

Hearing the words “King of Disruption,” Li Daoxuan paused slightly but immediately understood. It was still too early—this King of Disruption was not Li Zicheng, but the first generation, Gao Yingxiang from Ansei.

It was still the early stage of the peasant uprising. Gao Yingxiang, not wanting to implicate his clan, had not revealed his real name. Instead, he fought under the alias “King of Disruption.” He would not reveal his true name for another two years. So apart from Li Daoxuan, no one knew his real identity at this time.

Hong Chengchou continued, “Wang Er and the King of Disruption from Ansei combined their forces, greatly boosting their momentum. Their total troop count exceeded ten thousand. However, Yan’an Prefecture was a prefectural city, impossible for them to capture. The two bypassed the city and continued north, soon reaching the Yulin region...”

Thirty-Two whispered, “Is the Yulin region also in rebellion?”

Hong Chengchou chuckled, “You are correct. The Yulin region was also in turmoil. Suide’s Zijin Liang (Purple Golden Beam) and Fugu’s Wang Jiayin had just risen in rebellion. Wang Er, the King of Disruption, Wang Jiayin, and Zijin Liang united. Four rebel leaders gathered together, their forces numbering tens of thousands, creating an immense uproar.”

Hearing this, everyone’s faces involuntarily showed expressions of dread.

Had the bandit army outside unknowingly reached the scale of tens of thousands?

Hong Chengchou: “Wang Jiayin, originally a soldier in the border army, was skilled in archery and horse riding and knew how to train soldiers and forge weapons. Wang Er, renowned as the foremost rebel in the land—these two men together, one drawing large numbers of outlaws with his reputation alone, the other training the rebels using border army methods...”

At this point, Hong Chengchou even spoke with amusement: “‘The rebellion resolved itself by next spring!’ Ha! ‘The rebellion resolved itself by next spring!’ Truly, it makes this official laugh himself to death. If anyone had reported bandits causing chaos this time last year, the Provincial Governor would have indiscriminately had them beaten without investigating, refusing to admit bandits existed at all. Ha ha ha ha... Look at us now! You didn’t say anything, I didn’t say anything, nobody said anything, and now the bandits number tens of thousands. Now they have to speak. I wonder if his head hurts or not?”

Everyone: “...”

After a long silence, Thirty-Two sighed, “This endless turmoil ultimately harms the common people, alas. Master Hong, I have limited foresight and knowledge. I don’t know, in the end, how this rebellion can be resolved?”

Hong Chengchou had long harbored many thoughts in his mind, troubled by having no one with whom to share them. Now being asked directly, he reasoned that speaking here posed no risk and simply continued expounding: “The scourge of the roaming bandits began with natural disasters, and these disasters show no sign of being resolved in the short term. Therefore, pacifying the bandits is useless. Even if temporarily pacified, they will rebel again sooner or later once they run out of grain. To truly quell this rebellion, in the end, all the bandits must be exterminated.”

Thirty-Two: “Killing them all is too contrary to Heaven’s harmony. Could we instead consider that if there were sufficient grain to eat, extermination might not be necessary?”

“Exactly! If there were sufficient grain to pacify them, extermination wouldn’t be necessary.” Hong Chengchou said, “Yet the realm suffers severe drought, and this drought shows no sign of ending. Where could sufficient grain be found? Unless Heaven itself intervened...”

He shook his head, “Therefore, in the end, the only solution is complete extermination.”

From his position, he could see no path forward other than killing.

Li Daoxuan too sighed inwardly. Although he was not aligned with the Ming court and had no intention of helping them, if viewed from the Ming court’s perspective, exterminating these roaming rebels was undoubtedly the best, or indeed, the only solution to the problem.

During the late Ming Dynasty, several Provincial Governors and Viceroyalty Governors adopted a policy of pacification towards the roaming rebels—men like Yang He and Xiong Wencan presided over such efforts. Yet without exception, they failed.

Why?

The reason was simple: pacifying people obligated the government to provide them food, farmland—a means to survive. If it couldn't do this, how could pacification succeed?

But the Ming court's finances were dire; it couldn't provide sufficient food.

With natural disasters rampant, the Ming court couldn't provide an environment capable of producing grain.

Several pacification attempts ultimately failed. Instead, they gave the bandits respite. The bandits pretended to accept pacification, ate the court's grain for a while, rested, then promptly rebelled again. They stirred up chaos anew, coercing even more peaceful citizens into banditry, further ruining productive capacity and reducing food yield.

With productivity shattered, grain yields sank even lower. Ultimately, this led to a deficit capable of starving tens of millions.

With such a massive shortfall, this many people had to die for the survivors to have enough food to endure the famine year.

Therefore, the only correct solution for the Ming court at the time should have been to abandon the naive idea of appeasement early in the rebellion, fight desperately to annihilate the rebels, protect the common people who hadn't rebelled, and safeguard productive forces. Only then could they prevent the food shortage from worsening further, ensuring fewer deaths later.

However, a brutal crackdown from the start would have been too cruel and inhuman. Apart from the Manchus, Zhang Xianzhong, and a few authors of wish-fulfillment web novels, no one else could bring themselves to do it.

So, the Ming court could only oscillate between appeasement and suppression, indecisively switching tactics.

Fortunately, Li Daoxuan could counter natural disasters.

He wasn't on the same side as the Ming court. He had the confidence to avoid the "kill them all" approach. He had ample grain; the only thing lacking now was talent capable of managing all aspects of the situation...

Li Daoxuan spoke: "Ask Hong Chengchou: if there really were someone who could solve the food problem, what would he do?"

Gao Yiye quickly whispered the question into Thirty-Two's ear.

Thirty-Two steadied his gaze and said solemnly: "Master Hong, please forgive my presumption despite our shallow acquaintance... I dare to ask: if someone could provide you with sufficient food..."

Hong Chengchou snorted lightly: "If there really were enough food, it would be simple. Execute those worthless thieves who have no sense of restraint and keep flip-flopping. Then appease the good people who were forced to become bandits, giving them enough food. This bandit menace could naturally be quelled."

Saying this, he couldn't help but sigh: "But this is ultimately just wishful thinking. Firstly, I cannot produce that much grain. Secondly, I am merely a humble fourth-rank Grain Transportation Commissioner, a minor official overseeing grain shipments. How could monumental decisions like this fall to me? Leaving it to those foolish, senile idiots to handle this affair will only make an utter mess."

The method he described was precisely what Li Daoxuan was already implementing. Li thought to himself: This man's capability is strong, and he has yet to commit any misdeeds. If I could recruit him into Gaojia Village as one of my people before he becomes corrupt, depriving him of the opportunity to fall—with such ability, he might actually be of use.

Alas...

Securing a fourth-rank official outright to become one of his own wouldn't be easy. A mere display of divine power wouldn't make such a man instantly prostrate himself in worship.

The higher the rank, the greater the lust for power, and the pettier the schemes and tricks become. If I were to "reveal my divinity" to him, showing the hand like Thanos, he would most likely kneel immediately, feign submission, and pretend utter obedience. Yet once he stepped beyond my sight, he'd flee far away, never setting foot in Gaojia Village again in his lifetime. That's how cunning and slippery such men were.

For now, it had to be abandoned.

Let it be as fate decides.

During the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty, the population was approximately over 100 million. By the end of the Ming and the start of the Qing, only 50 or 60 million remained – tens of millions had died.

The famine ceased in the early Qing partly because the Little Ice Age ended, and partly because tens of millions had perished. The reduction in population by tens of millions decreased food consumption, ensuring that enough grain finally sufficed for those left.

Simply put, during the Little Ice Age, with food supplies dwindling, the grain of the entire realm could no longer feed its entire population. Tens of millions had to die; there was no other solution...

The peasant uprising at the end of the Ming was essentially a selection process — to survive, eliminate others to guarantee food ended up in one's own belly.

If you couldn't conjure food out of thin air, even as a time traveler, you couldn't save those tens of millions. They had to die – whether from starvation, execution by the Ming army, slaughter by the peasant rebels, or killing by the Qing troops. Regardless of the method of death, they were destined to die, because the grain shortfall was unsolvable.

This was a tragically helpless matter. Without the golden hand, no one sent there would possess any strategy to counter it.