

Great Ming 231

Chapter 231: This Officials Dignity

“Ah, talking about this is pointless. I won’t mention it anymore.” Hong Chengchou’s mood turned somewhat sour. “Let’s just eat.”

In the hot pot, all kinds of ingredients tumbled. He picked out a few items with his chopsticks and sampled them. Satisfied with each one, he couldn’t help expressing amazement. So many ingredients and such ample seasonings—for such a small pot of hot pot, the attention to detail was immense. “I observe your village is extremely prosperous. I wonder which family the Fortress belongs to?”

Thirty-Two smiled. “Our master’s surname is Li.”

Hong Chengchou: “The Fortress in Gaojia Village, yet it belongs to the Li Family? Tsk tsk! Most capable, truly capable.”

He thought privately: So it’s an ancient reclusive clan, unwilling to be recognized by outsiders... hence even twisting the village’s name. This Li Family possesses immense power. Must not underestimate them.

Thirty-Two said, “We have no real capability. In the future, we might even need to seek favors from Lord Hong.”

Hong Chengchou: “Easy to discuss, easy to discuss.”

He tossed out vague words casually—whether it’d be “easy” depended entirely on whether future mutual benefits existed.

“By the way, Lord Hong, you’ve only been eating from the clear broth pot. Would you like to try the red broth side?” Thirty-Two plucked a slice of beef from the red broth and popped it into his mouth. “Mmm, delicious! Who knew I could handle such spicy food? I never realized before.”

Young Master Bai shook his head. “Spicy food tastes awful. I dislike it.”

Gao Yiye and Third Miss also said, “Don’t like it.”

But Tan Liwen and Madam Bai declared, “We think it’s wonderful! This fiery sensation feels amazing.”

Their argument piqued Hong Chengchou’s interest. He wanted to try it, yet dreaded the spicy aroma and beef tallow staining his robes. His body kept far from the red broth pot, but his arm stretched to its limit. Extending his chopsticks fully, he lightly pinched a piece of aged pork with the very tips and placed it in his mouth.

“Tsk!”

Spicy, yet exhilarating.

Only then did Hong Chengchou discover he, too, could handle spice. He actually found the food in the red broth pot tastier than that in the clear broth.

“Lord Hong, come sit closer.” Thirty-Two scooted to the red broth pot’s side, waving at him.

Hong Chengchou shook his head. Delicious it may be, but moving nearer was out of the question—absolutely not! His robes must never absorb the hot pot’s scent. Couldn’t ruin this official’s dignity!

He maintained his distant posture, reaching far with his arm and chopsticks across the entire table to snag food from the red broth pot. Bringing it to his mouth, his facial muscles restrained any expression of delight for dignity’s sake. Yet the exhilaration blazing in his eyes betrayed him.

Thirty-Two suddenly spoke: “Lord Hong, oil... it’s on your chin...”

“Ah?” Hong Chengchou panicked. In 0.001 seconds, his hand flashed to his sleeve, whipping out a small bronze mirror. Glancing into it—indeed! A smear of red oil stained his chin. This... this... this... utterly damages this official’s dignity!

In another 0.001 seconds, he zipped to a servant standing by the courtyard entrance ready to attend him. Snatching a handkerchief, he wiped his chin spotless in 0.001 seconds. Then, in another 0.001 seconds, he flashed back to his seat.

One last 0.001 second—he sat perfectly upright, straightening his robe’s wrinkles with a practiced hand...

The table guests only saw a blur. Hong Chengchou seemed never to have moved, yet the red oil had vanished without a trace, his robes impeccably tidy.

Hong Chengchou wore an expression as if nothing had transpired. “Eat, everyone, keep eating.”

The others: “...”

Why do we suddenly feel like punching him?

Thus arose the question: Assaulting a fourth-rank imperial official—how many years imprisonment would that bring?

That evening, hosts and guests alike celebrated joyfully, sharing a delightful Deity Hot Pot Festival. Among Gaojia Village’s four thousand-plus villagers and Hong Chengchou’s several hundred subordinates, three-fifths awakened their “spicy food tolerance.” The other two-fifths, however, declared: “Chilies? We’ll never touch them in this lifetime.”

Li Daoxuan didn’t mind. Take it slowly. One day, you’ll all ride singing songs toward a splendid future—warmly dining on hot pot with your wives.

Early in the morning of the next day, Hong Chengchou rose early. He brought his subordinates, bid farewell to Gaojia Village, and continued onward to Xi’an.

As he departed, the massive bandit suppression operation was about to formally commence. However, Li Daoxuan knew they were bound to fail—there was absolutely no chance of success. He only wanted to know when Hong Chengchou would return next and whether it might be possible to lure this scheming man into becoming one of their own villagers.

Hmm...

Leave it to fate!

The outside world grew increasingly chaotic. Hu Tingyan, the Provincial Governor of Shaanxi, started working, dispatching large forces to pursue the bandit troops. In an instant, all of Shaanxi trembled, swarming with officials rushing about.

Bai Yuan sent frequent reports. Officials had inflicted a major defeat on Bu Zhan Ni at such-and-such place.

Officials dealt another major blow to Zijin Liang (Wang Ziyong) at such-and-such location.

Officials crushed Zuo Guazi at such-and-such spot.

...

The officials appeared exceptionally fierce and invincible, winning every battle with almost no defeats. Yet it didn't have any effect at all. The bandit troops were constantly losing battles, but their numbers kept swelling—growing larger the more they fought, increasing despite every defeat...

Just as the outside world boiled like a pot of congee, Gaojia Village was not idle either.

Xing Honglang had returned from Xi'an with chickens, ducks, and piglets. Although these were few, letting them slowly multiply would bring hope for the future.

Villagers hadn't dared to raise animals before because, barely able to feed themselves, how could they sustain livestock? Now, with surplus grain, raising livestock had become essential.

Raising chickens was manageable, but raising ducks proved awkward. As ever, the two little ducklings Gao San Niang raised had jumped right into the village's big pond. A group of villagers were scrambling frantically to chase the ducks ashore.

The Old Village Chief pointed angrily at Gao San Niang's nose: "This is our only source of drinking water! Get your filthy ducks out now!"

Gao San Niang flushed with embarrassment: "I'm doing it—"

"Easy now, settle down," said Gao Yiye, skipping over cheerfully and waving her hands. "Everyone, don't worry. The Deity says ducks are necessary! He will grant us another large pond specifically for raising ducks and fish!"

The villagers gasped: "Wow!"

True enough, yet again, a massive pool descended from the sky. This one wasn't a strangely-textured box but a stone basin. The Deity's colossal, multicolored golden giant hand stretched down from the heavens. With two or three movements, it scooped an enormous pit in the ground, placed the stone basin inside...

Then came the pouring down of a Milky Way—in an instant, the basin filled with water.

Gao Yiye laughed heartily: "The Deity said this pond is pure, natural stone, perfect for raising fish and ducks. Stop bullying Gao San Niang's little ducklings! They're adorable!"

The villagers shook their heads: "We're the ones being bullied! They're bathing in our drinking water—who knows if they're defecating in it!"

Gao Yiye countered: "Haven't all of you bathed in the pond too?"

The villagers chuckled: "People and ducks are hardly the same!"

Today, too, joyous spirits filled Gaojia Village.

Chapter 232: Chaos of War

Shaanxi was ravaged by warring chaos; turbulent currents surged beneath the world's surface.

In August, Captain Yan Qianer, leader of the first squad under Bu Zhan Ni, led his forces into Chengcheng County, their blades pointing straight at Fengyuan Town.

Liang Shixian, Chengcheng County Magistrate, rallied the Village Militia from both Chengcheng County and Fengyuan Town to once more make a desperate stand at Fengyuan Town. This time, Liang Shixian was extremely well-prepared. Besides the five hundred plastic bows borrowed from Gaojia Village, they had also made several hundred proper bows themselves. Nearly a thousand militia members defended the walls, arrows raining down.

Then, Patrol Officer Fang Wushang led his troops to the fight, repelling Yan Qianer.

By September, the labor offenders in Gaojia Village had completed their sentences. They were all released from prison and began new lives. At the same time, the bandit Fan Shanyue, leader of the He Yang bandits, re-entered Chengcheng County and launched a major assault on Quangou Village. He was beaten back by the Quangou Village Militia and Patrol Officer Fang Wushang.

In October, the power of Yichuan's Zuo Guazi had grown immense. He no longer hid his true identity, revealing his real name as Prince Shun, known in the Jianghu as Wang Zuogua. Leading an army of eight thousand, he swaggered through Yichuan County. Unfortunately, swaggering made it hard to see the road ahead, and he ran headlong into Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor. Wang Zuogua's forces were brutally beaten into submission by Hong Chengchou's hired guards. Suffering a severe defeat, Wang Zuogua fled back into Huanglong Mountain once more, placing Bai Family Fortress back on high alert.

On the third day of the eleventh month, an imperial edict summoned the court officials to nominate cabinet members. Court ministers submitted names including Cheng Jiming, Left Vice Minister of Personnel, Qian Qianyi, Right Vice Minister of Rites, and others. Simultaneously nominated were eleven others: Zheng Yiwei, Li Pengfang, Sun Shenxing, He Ruchong, Xue Sanxing, Sheng Yihong, Luo Yuyi, Wang Yongguang, Cao Yubian, and so on. The Minister of Rites, Wen Tiren, and the Vice Minister of Rites, Zhou Yanru, were not nominated due to their lack of reputation. The grand factional strife of the late Ming Dynasty had officially begun...

In just these three and a half short months, the outside world had boiled into utter chaos.

But Gaojia Village remained enveloped in an atmosphere of peace and harmony – oh, no, perhaps “peaceful” wasn't the right word. It should be described as: nervous.

In Refugee Valley, the farmers gazed at the cornfields they had painstakingly cultivated since breaking the land, their expressions a mixture of fear and anticipation!

The harvest time for the corn had arrived.

Li Daoxuan was actually a little nervous too. After all, he was a city kid, unable to distinguish the five grains and utterly clueless about agriculture. Though he had printed out the complete “Guide to Growing Corn from Zero” for Zhao Sheng, he had no idea if this guide was reliable or if it would yield results.

If it failed, causing the common people to waste immense effort and become heartbroken, disappointed, and sad, he, as the Deity, would not be happy either.

Now was the moment of truth.

Zhao Sheng walked nervously toward a patch of thick, lush corn stalks.

The corn stalks, standing as tall as a person, held up one plump ear of corn after another. However, they were still wrapped in green husks, hiding what lay inside.

Had this been a crop planted by the farmers themselves, someone would have already secretly peeled back the husks to peek within long ago. But this was “Celestial Food,” grown by “celestial methods,” and the Deity had decreed that they “must strictly follow the planting instructions written in the Celestial Book.”

The simple-hearted farmers dared not disobey the Deity’s will. They dared not peek, completely ignorant of what grew inside those spindle-shaped ears.

Only now, when the harvest time recorded in the “celestial prescription” had come, did they summon Zhao Sheng to personally reveal what this miraculous “Celestial Food” truly was.

Everyone’s breathing was heavy.

Even Li Daoxuan was sweating with tension.

With trembling hands, Zhao Sheng grabbed an ear of corn and gave it a mighty wrench...

A collective cheer went up! "He got it!"

"Yaaaaah!" Zhao Sheng let out a grunt. It hadn't come off.

"....." The crowd fell silent.

Zhao Sheng strained again, roaring! "Wo ya ya ya!"

Still didn't snap off.

"!!!" Everyone stared in disbelief.

Zhao Sheng gasped for breath, panting heavily. "Hu hu hu! Pulling this off... takes so much... strength! Doing farm work... is... this... tiring?" Puff puff puff... "Someone... help me..."

Everyone facepalmed at the same time, the sound of hands slapping faces echoing "slap!" all around.

Did you stupidly try to snap it off the wrong part? Why are you wrenching so hard on the corn stalk itself?

Finally, it was the Old Village Chief of Jiejia Valley who stepped forward. Though gaunt and lean, standing no taller than Zhao Sheng's shoulder, he exuded a wiry strength. Grasping an ear of corn as though snapping a man's neck, he gave it a sharp twist—crack—and broke it off.

All the farmers in Refugee Valley cheered together, "It's off! Wonderful, it finally came off!"

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but clench his fist: Whoohoo! It came off. Eh? Wait... no! It's just one ear of corn off its stalk. What in blazes is there to cheer about? Darn Zhao Sheng, leading everyone astray.

The Old Village Chief stood dumbfounded, clutching the ear, utterly lost about what to do next. Only after several seconds did he remember to peel it open. Fumbling hurriedly, he finally stripped off the husk.

A golden-yellow ear lay unveiled before their eyes—each kernel plump, rounded, and glossy.

Everyone stared in stunned silence: "So... this was what we planted back in July. Its fruit grew clustered together, much like grains of rice or wheat grow on their ears."

As this sunk in, a sudden realization struck them: "Good heavens! This crop bears such huge ears! How heavy must this be?"

The Jiejia Valley Village Chief hefted the ear, his expression one of disbelief. "This one alone weighs well over half a catty."

"Heavens! Over half a catty for just one?"

"It has a core inside—that should be subtracted to weigh just the kernels."

"Even after removing it, it'd still be close to half a catty."

"Good heavens! This yield... it's staggering."

"If one ear is this heavy, how much could one acre produce?"

"Surely five hundred catties at the very least!"

They were familiar with wheat ears, yet those seemed minuscule beside this corn ear—utterly incomparable in scale.

The simple, hardworking farmers were shocked senseless by the terrifying yield potential of corn.

After a rigid pause, the villagers burst into ecstatic shouts: “Celestial Food! Incredible! The Celestial Food’s truly miraculous!”

“Here in the barren Loess Plateau, we’ve grown five hundred catties per acre. Gracious!”

“It’s not Celestial Food. It’s just an earthly crop brought to us from Xi’an by Brother Xing. It was only through the Deity’s celestial methods and celestial fertilizer that it grew so bountiful.”

“Ah, yes! Yes! The credit goes to those celestial methods and fertilizer!”

“Praise the Deity!”

“Blessings of the Deity!”

The farmers of Refugee Valley danced in unrestrained joy, their hearts brimming with elation.

Li Daoxuan also breathed a sigh of relief: Success! Wonderful. At last, the little people hadn’t toiled in vain. Armed with this planting experience, they could continually refine methods, remove pests diligently, and likely squeeze out even higher yields.

Of course, gains like that couldn’t be rushed.

Just as he thought this, specks of light began rising from the villagers of Refugee Valley, merging into the chest. Then, a blinding golden light erupted—the Rescue Index soared once more.

His field of vision expanded again. This time, however, the increase was monumental, for a great many farmers, their souls saved, had found joy and contentment in life at last.

Chapter 233: Bai Family Fortress Comes into View

Since his vision had greatly improved, Li Daoxuan immediately rushed to survey the newly expanded area.

He wanted to see one particular place urgently, so he prioritized clicking the “West” and “North” buttons repeatedly.

Soon, his vision incorporated a new village, “Shiqu Village,” but it was empty inside; this seemed to be Old Shi Si’s village. Continuing to click northwest, he added “Hejiagou Village,” which was also empty.

He kept clicking...

As he clicked, a large fortress came into Li Daoxuan’s view.

The fortress was square-shaped and had clearly been renovated not long ago; its layout suspiciously copied a Hakka roundhouse, featuring four tall corner towers and a lookout tower that had just been erected recently.

On the balcony of the lookout tower’s third floor, a man dressed in white robes was seated and fanning about; in his hand was a book titled “Middle School Math, Lower Second Grade Volume,” and he was studying it intently, with a stack of discarded calculation papers piled on the table.

Bai Yuan, it was Bai Yuan!

Li Daoxuan was overjoyed; he could finally see Bai Family Fortress.

He had half a mind to reach down and poke Bai Yuan to say hello.

But upon seeing Bai Yuan diligently working on his math problems, he decided not to disturb him for now.

Li Daoxuan continued adjusting his view to observe the surroundings of Bai Family Fortress.

After passing Bai Family Fortress, his vision could only move north another mile or so before stopping; it barely reached the foothills of Huanglong Mountain, and he couldn't yet see the scenes on Huanglong Mountain itself.

He pulled back and surveyed all around.

Around Bai Family Fortress were vast farmlands, but all the ground was cracked like tortoise shell patterns. A little farther out, there were several small villages arranged in a semi-circle, guarding Bai Family Fortress in the center.

This layout somewhat resembled Gaojia Village's current setup, where Gaojia Fortress was in the middle, surrounded by villages like Refugee Valley and Short-term Workers Village.

However, Bai Family Fortress was much smaller in scale, and while Gaojia Fortress's farmlands were fully operational, this area was still bare yellow soil.

Li Daoxuan freely dragged his view, scanning the several small villages around Bai Family Fortress; these varied in size, some with hundreds of people, others only dozens.

The villagers there seemed mentally and physically healthier than those in the desolate villages he had found before.

Even though the natural disaster was merciless, the quirky Bai Yuan was still full of compassion; during the two years before the drought, Bai Yuan had used his wealth to aid the surrounding villagers. Later on, Li Daoxuan frequently sent large trucks to bring grain, continuously helping Bai Yuan assist the villagers.

This kept the villagers near Bai Family Fortress barely surviving, and they hadn't fled as refugees, effectively stabilizing the population there.

Li Daoxuan felt happy inside too; seeing this state of Bai Family Fortress assured him that he had always judged Bai Yuan correctly...

How could he send a greeting gift to Bai Family Fortress and the neighboring villages?

Rain would surely be a good idea, but Bai Family Fortress plus the extensive surrounding villages covered a vast area; Li Daoxuan would be too busy making rain—clicking left-click-click, right-click-click—it would take ages and that didn't feel like a joyful gift; it was more for subtle nourishment.

The gift had to be big, to startle the villagers and make it fun.

Li Daoxuan kept roaming his view, and soon he spotted something unusual.

Right between Bai Family Fortress and that cluster of villages was a massive depression.

It was truly huge; if Li Daoxuan placed the center of the box on the center of that depression, the giant pit would fill nearly the entire box—it shouldn't be called a depression but a sinkhole.

Upon closer inspection, he saw that Bai Family Fortress and the surrounding small villages were all built around this sinkhole.

Li Daoxuan didn't grasp it at first, but after a few seconds, a lightbulb went off in his head; he realized it wasn't a huge sinkhole at all but a lake.

A dried-up small lake!

Ancient people loved building villages around lakes; he just hadn't thought of it before—his reaction was too slow.

Now that he'd figured that out, Li Daoxuan knew exactly how to give the villagers a gift.

First, he prepared several large buckets, then slipped downstairs to the courtyard pond in his residential complex, filling them to the brim. This scared the koi fish, who swam frantically away, nearly getting scooped into the buckets.

The water-filled buckets were very heavy; Li Daoxuan struggled to drag them one by one into the elevator, and finally managed to get them up to his room and over to the box.

A dignified Deity, hauling the buckets until he was sweating profusely.

Now he could greet Bai Yuan.

Li Daoxuan clicked on the words “Bai Family Fortress” outside the box, and the view jumped directly above Bai Family Fortress; Bai Yuan was still buried in his math homework.

Li Daoxuan opened the box lid and intentionally didn’t use a Thanos-like hand, instead fanning his hand toward Bai Yuan...

A strange strong wind rushed at Bai Yuan.

The papers on his desk flew up with a swish, scattering everywhere.

Bai Yuan exclaimed, “Ah!” and jumped up: “My math problems!”

He dashed forward in one swift motion, grabbing a paper that had just floated up; spinning around, he caught another one. Running and leaping, he snatched several draft papers back, then laughed heartily: “Hahaha, even a sudden demon wind can’t stop my math skills from advancing by leaps and bounds...”

Just as he laughed, he sensed something wrong; overhead, at about seventy zhang (230 ft) high, there floated a Sharp Knife Troop of low cloud—wasn’t that exactly what appeared every time the Dao Xuan Deity manifested?

Bai Yuan broke into a sweat instantly and cried out urgently: “The Deity is here? Ahhh! I’ve been extremely disrespectful, calling it a demon wind; strike out ‘courtesy’ from the arts. Deity, forgive me; I truly didn’t expect you to grace Bai Family Fortress personally.”

Li Daoxuan chuckled to himself; as the Dao Xuan Deity, he was meddling with little people and couldn’t blame Bai Yuan for words slipping out. He took out an A4 paper, printed some words on it, and unfolded it below.

Bai Yuan was awaiting punishment from the Deity, when suddenly the cloud layer parted, revealing a giant paper in the sky with the words: “Summon the villagers.”

Rushing with pride, Bai Yuan understood; the Deity had finally flown to Bai Family Fortress to care for the common folk there. Hahaha, splendid! Bai Family Fortress had finally gained the Deity’s favor.

Overjoyed, he ran to the railing of the balcony and yelled down at his servants: “Strike the clappers! Summon all villagers, hurry, hurry, hurry!”

The servants struck bamboo tubes hanging in each corner of Bai Family Fortress, producing “kong, kong, kong, kong” sounds that carried for miles; soon, similar sounds echoed from nearby villages, and large numbers of villagers rushed out from their homes.

Chapter 234: Moving Mountains and Creating Lakes

In the “kong kong kong” sound of bamboo clappers, all the villagers gathered toward Bai Family Fortress.

At this time, Bai Family Fortress wasn’t exactly safe, as Huanglong Mountain beside it was occupied by the Yichuan bandits led by Wang Zuogua; however, Wang Zuogua had encountered setbacks at Bai Family Fortress before, so he didn’t dare attack again for a while.

But nobody knew if he would come or when he would arrive.

Therefore, Bai Family Fortress had always been in a “state of war readiness.” Long ago, Bai Yuan had agreed with the villagers that once an emergency arose, they would sound bamboo clappers to alert nearby villages, and upon hearing the clappers, those villages would sound theirs too; then everyone would gather toward Bai Family Fortress and rely on its fortress wall to defend against sudden troubles.

Now that the clappers were sounding, the villagers assumed something was wrong, so they quickly grabbed their prepared valuables, brought their children and families, and all rushed over to Bai Family Fortress.

In short order, the little Bai Family Fortress had gathered hundreds of people.

The civilian militia even pulled out weapons, actively climbed onto the fortress wall, and someone even yanked off the black oilcloth covering the Giant Crossbow Vehicle, preparing to load the bolts.

Seeing this, Bai Yuan quickly shouted loudly, "Bandits are not here, sheathe your weapons! The Deity wants everyone to assemble."

"The Deity?"

The servants of Bai Family Fortress had witnessed the Deity manifesting before, so they instantly felt overjoyed.

But more villagers had never seen the Deity perform miracles firsthand; they only knew that Lord Bai often said how good the Deity was, how wonderful, how merciful, how kind, that the Deity was a fine deity, and the food they ate was bestowed by the Deity.

Beyond that, they didn't know much.

Bai Yuan understood the Deity well; seeing the villagers all confused and bewildered, he shouted loudly, "Stop yelling wildly and guessing blindly! Stand still, widen your eyes, and prepare to witness the Deity manifest."

The villagers quickly complied.

Hundreds of people stood solemnly with hands at their sides, a scene that looked rather impressive.

Li Daoxuan saw everyone was present, so he readied to act; since Gao Yiye wasn't here to relay messages, he didn't bother with words and got straight to business.

He shifted his viewpoint slightly south of Bai Family Fortress, aimed at the center of the small lake, then struggled to lift a large bucket, rested its rim on the edge of a box, carefully tilted the bucket, and poured water inside...

Back in Bai Family Fortress, everyone had their eyes wide open watching closely.

They saw that the low cloud in the sky suddenly drifted southward and finally hovered stationary at a distant southern point.

Bai Yuan focused his gaze and realized that directly beneath that low cloud was none other than "Horseshoe Lake," the water source for Bai Family Fortress and several surrounding villages?

Horseshoe Lake had nurtured Bai Family Fortress and several surrounding villages; it was the spiritual anchor for all the villagers in this area, but at the end of the drought's second year, Horseshoe Lake dried up, making the villagers feel as if they had lost their souls.

And now, what exactly was the Deity doing, floating above Horseshoe Lake?

Could it be...

Suddenly, Bai Yuan understood and couldn't help but roar loudly, "The Deity plans to help us restore Horseshoe Lake! Heavens! I guessed it! The Deity must be casting a spell to bring heavenly springs to fill Horseshoe Lake!"

The villagers were shocked.

In the next moment, they saw a colossal torrent surge out of the sky.

The enormity of that torrent could be called an inverted heavenly river!

It crashed down fiercely and powerfully, completely unmatched in scale to the water that had filled the small pond in Gaojia Village.

Even with some mental preparation, Bai Yuan was frightened by that terrifying torrent.

The servants of Bai Family Fortress and all the surrounding villagers all stared dumbfounded like idiots.

The horrifying torrent roared down from the heavens, rushing into the dried-up bed of Horseshoe Lake; in the blink of an eye, water began pooling at the bottom, and then the skyward flow continued surging onward, pouring endlessly into the lake.

The water level in the lake kept rising higher and higher.

Everyone in the Bai Family Fortress lost their ability to speak, just staring dumbfoundedly.

After a short while, the water stopped flowing...

The lakebed had already accumulated deep water, but it was still some distance from the lake shore. After waiting for a few dozen blinks of the eyes, a massive torrent of water gushed out from the sky with a splash once more, continuing to pour into the lake.

The villagers remained stunned.

Not enough yet?

Splash! It happened again.

Li Daoxuan poured several large buckets of water into the box one after another. Finally, the small lake was filled up. The mighty Deity flopped down by the box, sticking out his tongue like a dog, panting, unwilling to move.

While he was exhausted, the servants inside the Bai Family Fortress cheered joyfully as they jumped up:
“The Horseshoe Lake is full again!”

“Our Horseshoe Lake has come back to life!”

“Hahaha, wonderful!”

The dumbfounded villagers also snapped out of their shock: “So... this... this is the Deity’s power? Moving mountains and creating lakes... capable of anything...”

“With the Horseshoe Lake, I can grow crops even if the heavens don’t grant rain.”

“We can finally... wuwu...”

At that moment, the irrigation ditches along the lake’s edge, dug years ago, began filling with water. The lake water flowed along the ditches to all the surrounding farmlands, as if hope was spreading throughout the whole area.

“This winter, I won’t have to live in fear anymore. As soon as next spring comes, I’ll start planting crops right away.”

“The Deity is benevolent!”

“The Deity blesses us!”

“Long life and great blessings!”

Li Daoxuan lay by the box, sticking out his tongue: You all are happy, but I had to move so many buckets of water by hand, lifting heavy buckets to pour them into the box, and carefully not spill it outside the lake. Tired out, ah, raising pets sure isn’t a job for humans.

The villagers rushed out from the Bai Family Fortress, happily crouching by the lake, playfully splashing the water. Some dashed home to push out little wooden boats, then a second family, a third...

Turns out, many villagers kept boats at home. Before, when the water dried up, they feared the boats might sink to the lakebed as the water level dropped, so they dragged them back. Now that the lake had water again, of course, they brought the boats out.

“Though there are no fish in the lake yet, Fish and Shrimp will probably appear soon...”

“Wherever there’s water, fish mysteriously show up.”

“It won’t take long before we can fish for a living again.”

Ecstatic fishermen rowed with double oars over Horseshoe Lake, even racing to see who was faster. Though still poor, they had become optimistic.

“Hahaha, I won!”

“After over a year without rowing, my skills are rusty.”

“Haha, mine too, it was luck, pure luck that I beat you.”

Bai Yuan ran out from the Bai Family Fortress, stood by the lake, crouched down, scooped up water with his hands, and splashed it forward. Suddenly, his face lit up with a smile: “Good! Let’s have a boat race. I’ll put up two taels of silver as a prize for the fastest family.”

The fishermen were delighted: “Haha, great! Thank you, Lord Bai.”

“Coming, coming, time for a boat race.”

Seeing them so jubilant, Li Daoxuan suddenly realized his own mood had improved too. The earlier hard work seemed worthwhile.

Indeed, isn't raising pets meant to heal oneself?

Chapter 235: Chengcheng County also came into view

After a while, Li Daoxuan finally stopped panting and regained his breath. He took out the medical nebulizer and rained on the area around Bai Family Fortress. Then he sat down in front of the computer, opened the online shopping site, opened the store where he had bought the small train last time, and sent a message to the store owner: "Boss, I've come back to buy the small train and tracks."

The store owner was overjoyed: "Dear, welcome back. What do you want this time?"

"Still two engines, two train stations, and then... small tracks..."

Li Daoxuan thought seriously. The straight-line distance between Bai Family Fortress and Gaojia Village was well over thirty li. With all the twists and turns, crossing mountains and rivers, it was at least forty li, which converted to twenty thousand meters. Divided by two hundred times, that came to one hundred meters.

For this sort of thing, it was always wiser to buy more than less; having extras prevented problems.

Li Daoxuan said: "I want one hundred fifty meters long of small track."

"Pfft!" The store owner nearly spat out in shock. "Dear, what are you buying such long small track for? Is your house really that big?"

Li Daoxuan: "My estate takes up half a mountain, and my kid's play area is football field-sized. Is it strange for me to buy one hundred fifty meters of track small train for my own child? Never seen a rich guy? Are you doing this deal or not? Not, I'll find another shop."

The store owner was sweating: "Boss, don't get mad. Business is always doable; I'll prepare it right away. By the way, since dear's small track is so long, I suggest buying several more train stations. Placing more stations along the path would be pretty fun, and the kids will love it."

“That makes sense.” Li Daoxuan had no idea if the bridges would be useful or not, but he figured he’d buy them just in case. “Also get me five big bridges, ones that combine freely to fit all sorts of terrains.”

The store owner was overjoyed: “Got it! Dear, you are really my lifesaver.”

A big batch of goods was ordered...

Li Daoxuan secretly thought: Later, I would have to lay the small train tracks all the way from Gaojia Village to Bai Family Fortress. That was no small job; over one hundred meters long with twists and turns, and it might need “land clearing” or “bridge building” in spots, exhausting me for sure.

But thinking again, this was actually pretty fun, wasn’t it? This wasn’t setting up a small train in the living room; it was playing with toy trains in a real world, making it feel really rewarding when you got it right.

“Cai Xinzi, I’m going to modify two small trains again.”

“Done, no problem.”

“Then later I’ll spend twenty dollars to hire a runner to deliver them to you.”

“Oh, you’re getting richer these days, even hiring runners.”

“Hahaha, rich, carefree.”

“Hey, I’ve made a bundle working with you too. Keep the micro-sculpting jobs coming; I’m loving these commissions.”

“You bastard, you run a model shop; don’t go turning yourself into a micro-sculpting broker.”

“When money’s at stake, anything goes. No shame in that.”

Just as they talked, Cai Xinzi abruptly said: “By the way, after earning a few deals with you, I’ve got enough cash. I plan to finally marry my long-time girlfriend soon. You? You’re flush now; shouldn’t you find a good woman?”

Li Daoxuan laughed: “Nah, I don’t want to step into the grave of marriage. Isn’t it better to spend all this money alone?”

Cai Xinzi chuckled: “You... fine, whatever, as long as you’re happy.”

Closing WeChat, Li Daoxuan’s focus turned back to the box.

The small people in Bai Family Fortress were holding boat races on the lake, one happier than the next. They clearly didn’t need tending right now; Bai Yuan had been keeping them in good shape.

Li Daoxuan considered carefully.

Since he could see Bai Family Fortress, that meant nearly all of Chengcheng County was visible. Shifting his view a bit, he might get a clear look at many villages too.

Moving his view southwards from Bai Family Fortress, he tapped east and west from time to time. The view wobbled as it headed south, and soon Li Daoxuan spotted a small town that looked fairly busy.

This small town even had low town walls, about one zhang high, with archers patrolling them. Over the town gate hung a plaque that read “Fengyuan Town” in large characters.

Li Daoxuan felt a stir in his heart: So this is Fengyuan Town!

County Magistrate Liang Shixian had repelled the bandit army here twice, defeating Bu Zhan Ni, Zuo Guazi, Yan Qianer... This place was a key stronghold against bandits for Chengcheng County, no wonder archers guarded the town walls.

It was likely in war mode right now.

A quick look was enough; everyone here was a wild figure. Li Daoxuan wasn't rushing to meddle.

In a place full of wild figures, if he rashly stuck out a "Thanos-like hand," it would just scare them without any good results.

Putting yourself in their place made it clear: if he was gaming at home and a big, bright golden hand suddenly loomed from the sky without Gao Yiye around to explain, would he think it was a force for good?

Obviously not; he'd be wary and cautious, and bolt the other way first!

Humans feared unknown giants before deciding on worship; until knowing the giant's nature, fleeing for safety was the average person's instinct.

Better not scare Fengyuan Town's citizens; life was tough enough in famine years, so he should approach these small people gently.

His view slid onward, continuing south.

Tapping and tapping...

South of Fengyuan Town were many villages where people still lived. It wasn't that these spots escaped disaster; they lined a wide "great imperial road."

This great imperial road ran north from Chengcheng County, through Fengyuan Town, onward to Yan'an Prefecture. As a result, plenty of merchants traveled it, so villagers managed teahouses and inns, surviving day to day by the skin of their teeth.

Li Daoxuan traced this great imperial road all the way south until a small, crowded county seat appeared in view.

Chengcheng County!

No surprise there—he'd expected it. The distance from Gaojia Village to the county was similar to Bai Family Fortress's, so seeing one meant he should see the other.

Chapter 236: The Method to Intervene in the County

Li Daoxuan saw the county town, but with the same thought, he could not rush to act.

First, he placed himself in the position of an observer.

His gaze swept over the county town from above.

He saw that on the narrow streets of the county town, refugees from various villages were everywhere, wearing tattered clothes, faces sallow.

The number was very large; a casual glance revealed tens of thousands.

During the Ming Dynasty, a prosperous county town in Jiangnan could easily hold hundreds of thousands of people, while a small county town like Chengcheng County in the northwest could also have seventy or eighty thousand people.

These people were usually scattered among the villages in the county and would not gather together.

However, a severe drought forced these county residents, who were originally scattered around, to come to the county town.

This made the already not wide streets of the county town even more crowded.

At that moment, it was exactly mealtime, and suddenly a bell rang in the center of the county town. Hearing this sound, the refugees lying haphazardly on the street suddenly felt energized and stood up.

"The meal is starting!"

“It’s time for distributing congee again.”

“We can eat now.”

On all the streets, huge crowds rushed towards one direction.

Li Daoxuan’s gaze naturally followed the movement of the crowd, and soon arrived at the front of the county office, where a stage had already been set up. Liang Shixian was personally overseeing it, supervising a large group of constables and helpers bringing out the cooked noodle paste.

Under the shouts of the constables, the refugees formed a long line, each holding a cracked bowl. They received one bowl of noodle paste each, retreated to the eaves of the shops on the street, and drank the noodle paste with hardship.

Liang Shixian frowned tightly; he knew this one bowl of noodle paste could not fill anyone up, but he could only distribute this much to each person, because he did not have much grain in his hands.

This grain was all obtained by him with a thick face, begged from the reclusive great family, the Li Family, in Gaojia Village.

Each time he fetched thirty carts of it, it would be consumed in a few days, and he had to shamelessly go again for another thirty carts...

And so repeatedly, he had been begging for grain from the Li Family impudently for a year.

He had already started to feel something strange...

Although it had rained around the Li Family and they had wheat fields, how could the grain from those few wheat fields be enough for his own reckless use?

The Li Family must have some way to get grain from a peculiar place.

This method was very secretive, so that no one could discover merchant teams transporting grain back from other provinces for the Li Family; not a single grain convoy had ever been found.

He had ten thousand questions in his mind that he wanted to ask, but he swallowed them back at the last moment.

Once he voiced this doubt, the Li Family wouldn't give him grain anymore, would they?

Without grain, what could these common people do?

The imperial court would not give him grain; not only would it not give, but it might demand he collect overdue tax silver from Chengcheng County—wouldn't that be like killing these common people?

Even for the sake of these common people, he, Liang Shixian, could only pretend not to know, feign ignorance, act as if he had not doubted the Li Family at all, pretend he knew nothing, and be a shameless foolish official.

Li Daoxuan used the "attention" function to look at Liang Shixian. From his expression, Li sensed his sympathy for these people, but also felt his helpless feeling of powerlessness.

He truly wished to help him!

But now was not the opportune moment to intervene on his behalf.

As the saying went, rashly extending a hand wouldn't help others; it would frighten them.

He continued to survey north, south, east, and west, intent on glimpsing the entire panorama of the county seat.

Suddenly, on the western street of the county seat, an ornate building captured Li Daoxuan's attention.

The City God Temple!

The City God Temple of Chengcheng County, an ancient and imposing historical relic.

The incense offerings at the temple appeared rather sparse...

The common folk were destitute, unable even to afford incense sticks or candles.

All they could do was kneel before the City God and knock their heads a few times.

Li Daoxuan observed that while the main hall of the City God was nearly empty, a side chamber held seven or eight devout followers kneeling properly on prayer mats, chanting and bowing in worship to something.

He focused his attention on the side chamber, and its interior became instantly clear.

Seated there with solemn dignity was the Third Lady, whom he hadn't seen for some time. Beside her was an array of jars and bottles. A group of worshippers was praying fervently: "May the Deity bless us!"

"Please, Deity, let my daughter's diarrhea heal soon."

"Deity protect us, may my son's sores vanish quickly."

After listening to one individual's "description of symptoms," the Third Lady opened a jar, carefully scooped a tiny amount of medicine, and placed it into an elderly woman's hands. "This is divine medicine bestowed by the Deity. The method of use is as follows... Use it cautiously upon returning home. Should your son be fated to live, he will naturally recover. But if this is a trial he is ordained to face, even the Deity cannot save him."

The elderly woman showered her with profuse thanks, kowtowed, and withdrew.

Watching this, Li Daoxuan's eyes lit up.

A solution presented itself...

A way to intervene in the county seat without frightening the populace.

Hehe!

Hadn't the game Civilization long ago shown the way?

To reach into another's city without resorting to war, the best method is "culture." Once "cultural" invasion has taken root, an enemy city can switch allegiance in a heartbeat.

To wrest Chengcheng County over and transform it into "our county," the cultural approach was the most reliable and caused the least harm to the people.

Li Daoxuan reached out and tapped the words "Gaojia Village" on the side of his box. Whoosh! His perspective snapped back to a point above Gaojia Fortress.

Having just surveyed the suffering county seat, the instant his vision returned to Gaojia Village, he immediately sensed a completely different atmosphere.

Xing Honglang and Gao Chuwu were actually engaged in a duel!

Li Daoxuan had no idea how many times these two had clashed. Certainly, Xing Honglang would always pick a fight with Gao Chuwu upon returning from a trading trip.

A large crowd held their dinner bowls, eating their evening meal while enjoying the spectacle.

Xing Honglang attacked first, her Jin Hong Fist slicing through the air with audible force. Gao Chuwu immediately countered using the Guanzhong Hong Fist. Back and forth they traded blows, over a dozen moves passing in the blink of an eye. Then, Xing Honglang intentionally exposed an opening; Gao Chuwu lunged, only to punch empty air.

Xing Honglang swiftly closed the distance, Bang! Bang! Bang! A rapid flurry of strikes rained down.

Gao Chuwu's towering frame toppled once more, collapsing with a thud that kicked up a cloud of dust.

The onlookers burst into laughter again: "Hahaha! Gao Chuwu will never beat Xing Honglang! This is getting more dull by the day! Dull, I say! Hahahaha!"

Even Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two, standing in the crowd, clapped their hands and laughed loudly.

Li Daoxuan spoke: "Yiye, ask Thirty-Two, how many copies of the Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale remain unsold?"

The words had barely left him when Gao Yiye abruptly froze, as if paralyzed.

Several seconds later, she turned mechanically, her neck seemingly stiff, tilting her face upwards towards the sky: "Ah... uh... cough... That... that book... Deity... you know about it?"

Li Daoxuan purposely pretended to scowl: "How could I not know? Could such a matter be concealed from me?"

Chapter 237: Printing Two Thousand Additional Copies

Gao Yiye noticed the Deity's expression seemed displeased and felt utterly terrified. "Oh... oh... this..."

Suddenly, the Deity's expression shifted into a smile. "Alright, I'm not angry. I merely wished to ask how many copies remain unsold."

Gao Yiye let out a sigh of relief. "Whew... I knew the Deity is the kindest!"

Li Daoxuan thought: Hearing “kindest” suddenly makes me sound old.

Gao Yiye quickly spotted Thirty-Two among the crowd. “Steward Thirty-Two, the Deity has a question for you.”

Thirty-Two: “Oh? What decree does the Deity command?”

Gao Yiye: “He wishes to know how many copies of Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale remain unsold.”

Thirty-Two’s expression instantly became extremely peculiar, vividly conveying the thought “Ah, this matter is finally unraveling,” though he didn’t utter it aloud. Merely looking at his face unmistakably suggested he was thinking it.

Several seconds passed before Thirty-Two snapped back to the present. He saluted the low-hanging cloud with clasped fists. “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale currently has three hundred and thirty-two copies remaining unsold. This humble servant will see them incinerated immediately—burned to ash.”

Li Daoxuan: “Is the woodblock set still intact?”

Thirty-Two promptly replied, “I shall ensure the woodblocks are burned to ash as well!”

Li Daoxuan: “That won’t be necessary. I have use for these books. However, three hundred and thirty-two copies are far too few. We require many more. Notify the bookstore at once—have them print an additional two thousand copies. The cost for this printing run will be covered by the village treasury.”

Thirty-Two was utterly bewildered. How strange! Not only did the Deity not order the destruction of this peculiar comic book, but he even wanted it reprinted? Furthermore, the Saint Lady wasn’t footing the bill this time; the expense would come from the village treasury? This implied the Deity was planning something significant.

But this comic book had already saturated Gaojia Village. Nearly every household possessed one or two copies; it was impossible to sell any more within the village.

He truly couldn't grasp the reasoning, but dared not question it recklessly.

Li Daoxuan: "Once printed, load them onto carts and transport them to Chengcheng County. Deliver a small portion of these books to your wife for her to handle. Move the bulk of them to the Chengcheng Bookstore. Organize a promotional event: Buy one book and receive two taels of flour for free. Remember, only one copy per person is allowed."

Thirty-Two: "Eh? Huh? Wha—?"

After a few seconds, a spark of realization hit him. Of course! This was meant to spread the Deity's renown far and wide! What would follow became self-evident.

"I understand!"

Li Daoxuan smiled. "I knew you'd grasp it promptly. Proceed."

Thirty-Two offered a deep bow, then hurried swiftly in the direction of the bookstore.

Gao Yiye, however, remained clueless.

She blinked her innocent, wide eyes, completely lost and utterly baffled about the whole situation. Her little comic book, originally just drawn for fun and mischief, was now being reprinted using the village treasury's funds... and was even going to be transported into the county town!

Wait! The 'author' line has 'Gao Yiye' written right there!

"This is disastrous, disastrous! If people in the county see this silly comic book I sketched messily, won't they laugh me to scorn?" Gao Yiye fretted. "It was bad enough causing mischief within the village! But this time, my prank is extending all the way to the county! Oh heavens, it's over, it's over! The entire county town will know Gaojia Village has a prankster known for her messy drawings—Gao Yiye!"

Li Daoxuan: “Yiye, is your second volume complete?”

“Huh?” Gao Yiye sounded flustered. “You want to print... a second volume too?”

Li Daoxuan: “Of course another volume is needed. Fetch your manuscript immediately and give it to the woodcarver so we can have the second volume printed. After that, you need to hurry up with the third volume.”

Question marks seemed to fly around Gao Yiye’s head. She momentarily couldn’t tell if the Deity was seriously making a demand or just teasing her playfully. She felt utterly dizzy.

Li Daoxuan commanded, “Get moving!”

“Huh? Okay! Okay!”

Gao Yiye hurriedly dashed off and quickly ran back to the watchtower. She grabbed the manuscript of the second volume and raced toward the bookshop...

The girl’s legs flew so fast, producing a pattering sound that was quite pleasant to hear.

Li Daoxuan couldn’t help but smile wryly; the comic book the girl had randomly drawn might just become the most effective weapon for attacking the county town.

Just then, a group of children caught his eye as they headed toward the pond. This drew his attention—it was November weather, and he wondered if the youngsters were about to play in the water?

If they fell into the water in that cold, wouldn’t they catch a serious illness when they climbed out?

He swiftly directed his “concern” over there.

Only then could he see clearly: the leader was Young Master Bai, followed by Third Miss, along with more than a dozen older children.

The group walked to the pond's edge but didn't foolishly jump in to play.

Young Master Bai fetched a bucket, drew some water from the pond, and set it down before all the children. He then picked up a withered leaf from the ground and gently placed it on the water's surface, saying, "Look, everyone."

The withered leaf floated on the water...

The older children stared blankly, saying, "Look at what? Isn't it just strange that a leaf stays afloat?"

Young Master Bai retorted, "Hey! You fools. You only know leaves float on water, but have you no clue why they float?"

In a flash, he pulled out "Middle School Physics" and stated proudly, "This tome explains that water produces a force called 'buoyancy.' If 'buoyancy' surpasses 'gravity,' stuff can stay buoyant on the surface."

The older children appeared clueless—"buoyancy" and "gravity" were completely foreign terms to them.

Young Master Bai chuckled softly and continued, "You know how a stick looks bent when you set it in water, don't you?"

The older children nodded.

Young Master Bai laughed, "That's called 'optical refraction'; this tome mentions that too."

The older children stared at the "celestial book" in Young Master Bai's hands, utterly dumbfounded.

Young Master Bai went on, "And let me teach you something useful: heat turns water into vapor, which rises to form clouds high up. So clouds? They're just water, hehe."

The moment he finished, Madam Bai suddenly rushed over, furious. "Pure blather!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you seen that cloud in the sky from the Deity? All clouds come from immortals casting spells! Now you're saying it's vapor? You're driving me mad! If the Deity hears this nonsense, he'll curse you!"

Madam Bai waved her hand and swung a hard pinch at him.

Normally, Young Master Bai would take the blow obediently, but this time was different. He ducked down, dodged his mother's hard pinch with ease, spun, and stood tall proudly. "Mother," he said, "this time I'm sharing knowledge from the tome taught by the Deity. I'm not wrong, so I won't accept punishment. I beg your forgiveness."

Madam Bai said, "Huh? What?"

She looked down at her hand, disbelief written on her face.

It was the first time her son had dodged her hard pinch...

As she stood there confused and lost, suddenly a huge sheet unfurled in the sky, displaying large characters: "Don't blindly obey elders! Young Master Bai is amazing."

Madam Bai beamed with joy instantly. "The Deity praised my boy!" she cried. "Hahaha, the Deity praised my son as amazing, hahaha!"

Since that day, she told everyone she met that the Deity had praised her son as amazing. She kept saying those words for the rest of her life.

Chapter 238: Courage to Break the Chains

Once the Deity spoke, Madam Bai naturally set aside her intention to lecture her son, and withheld the hard pinch she had prepared.

Unable to help herself, she stepped away from her position as an elder and became a naive knowledge-seeker instead. “Son,” she said, “you spoke of water turning into clouds. As your mother, I pondered it carefully and found it makes sense. When we boil water, doesn’t it turn into that white vapor? That vapor rises and becomes clouds, right? But... how do we explain the Deity’s clouds?”

Young Master Bai proudly replied. “No explanation needed. The Deity’s clouds are clouds manifested by gods and immortals. They cannot be explained by Physics. Whereas ordinary clouds are formed from evaporated water vapor and can be explained by Physics. It’s that simple.”

Madam Bai finally understood. “Ah, so that’s how it is! My son truly is clever! Ah, my son has grown up! As your mother, I cannot match you anymore.”

As she spoke, Madam Bai beamed with joy. Unlike Bai Yuan, she wasn’t worried about being surpassed by her son; in fact, she yearned for it to happen sooner. After all, as a woman from the old society burdened by the strong limitations of her era, she believed in the adage that “a woman’s virtue lies in lacking talent,” but felt a son must possess talent to inherit the Bai family legacy. Therefore, her son should, or rather must, surpass her.

And the sooner that day came, the better.

Li Daoxuan too felt highly satisfied with Young Master Bai’s growth.

The new generation of Gaojia Village was thriving robustly. By the time Young Master Bai and his peers came of age, significant changes would surely emerge.

By then, everyone would understand the causes of various natural phenomena; they’d grasp light refraction, the action of forces, weight, mass, and a whole bunch of other concepts—seemingly miraculous to ancient people, yet mere common knowledge to modern folk.

He hoped that day wouldn’t be too distant.

At this moment, Gao Yiye returned from the bookstore and thump-thump-thumped her way towards the watchtower, eager to urgently sketch the third installment of Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale.

Li Daoxuan called out to her. “Yiye, go to Young Master Bai. I have an announcement to make.”

Gao Yiye hurried over to serve as the relay.

“Young Master Bai, would you be willing to serve as the ‘Physics Representative’?”

As expected, Young Master Bai’s spirit soared with the question. “Willing! In fact... I had also wished to ask the Deity to appoint me as Physics Representative. I love Physics far more than Math!”

Li Daoxuan conveyed, “But you already serve as the Math Representative. Shouldering both roles— learning Physics yourself while also teaching other children Physics, on top of your Math duties... I doubt you’d have enough time.”

Young Master Bai fell silent. “That...”

It was indeed a concrete challenge.

Though undoubtedly gifted, he had recently begun feeling the strain.

Gaojia Village no longer had just a few dozen students. With the arrival of refugees from Qingjian County, the student body had surged instantly to over four hundred, dispersed across ten classrooms.

Juggling self-learning Math, teaching Math in ten different classrooms, and starting a new self-learning subject—Physics—had become a mountain of pressure for this thirteen-year-old boy.

Li Daoxuan shifted his attention to Third Miss standing behind them. “Third Miss, how is your Math progressing?”

“I’ve reached... the first volume of Junior High Year One Level,” Third Miss answered timidly.

“Would you be willing to take on the role of Math Representative from now on, teaching Math class on my behalf?”

Third Miss flinched at the question, nearly hiding behind Gao Yiye. But as Gao Yiye was facing her directly representing the Deity, letting her hide was impossible.

Gao Yiye reached out, pulling Third Miss forward. “The Deity is speaking to you. Don’t cower. Stand straight; your attitude isn’t proper at all!”

This frightened Third Miss even more. Hunched over, she shyly confessed, “I... I don’t mean to show disrespectful attitude... It’s just... I feel a little scared...”

Perfectly normal for a girl who had just turned twelve; stage fright was understandable.

Li Daoxuan held no blame. “But beyond you, there really isn’t a more suitable candidate.”

“Huh?” Third Miss thought carefully. It seemed true. In Gaojia Village, only she and Young Master Bai had advanced their Math studies fastest, reaching the Junior High Year One level. The children of other villagers, handicapped by their family backgrounds and struggling with independent comprehension and learning abilities, mostly remained stuck at the third grade level in Elementary Math.

Third Miss hesitated, “But I... I am a young lady... Young ladies shouldn’t...”

“Nonsense!” Li Daoxuan countered. “Why can’t a young lady? Women also hold up half the sky! If you dare to try and are willing, I will appoint you as Math Representative. And if anyone counters you, I’ll personally talk to them.”

Who would dare argue with you? You’re a deity!

Third Miss felt the powerful weight of heavenly backing radiating behind her.

Her heart thumped-thumped-thumped. Of course she was willing! Though deeply influenced by Neo-Confucianism doctrines since childhood and twisted by notions of feminine virtue, she was still just a child—unlike fully shaped, bowed adult women weighed by oppression.

She still possessed the courage to break traditions, to shatter constraints.

Third Miss considered it seriously. Raising her small face, a trace of resolve appeared on the rosy cheeks of this twelve-year-old girl. “Deity... I... I am willing to be the Math Representative... Please let me serve.”

“Well done!” Li Daoxuan revealed a gratified smile. “Well done! Excellent! In that case, I’ll have Gao Yiye notify Mr. Wang shortly. The class schedule can be revised henceforth: you will teach the other children Math. Young Master Bai can immerse himself in studying Physics for a while. As soon as other children complete Elementary Math, we will immediately commence Physics classes taught by Young Master Bai.”

Young Master Bai and Third Miss bowed together. “We respectfully heed the Decree of the Deity!”

Li Daoxuan felt a swell of profound satisfaction within. This marked a significant step forward.

With arrangements set for the time being, it was time to edit the video.

Li Daoxuan took out the footage previously filmed—“All the Villagers Collaborating to Hand-Pull Noodles.” He began trimming.

He pared down the process of each household making a single noodle strand, culminating in the merging of them all into one large bowl of hand-pulled noodles, crafting a concise, minute-long short video.

He added an equally bad description as usual: “Harvest time! The folks of Tiny Kingdom prepare their hometown specialty—hand-pulled noodles...”

Seriously, I should have studied harder back in my school days... Ah, at this thought, he shot a deep glance at the Thirty-Two Middle School reflected inside the box.

Chapter 239: Do You Know the Deity's Deeds?

Two days later, the small track connecting Gaojia Village to Bai Family Fortress was finally laid. This small track, were it placed in the real world, would stretch a full hundred meters and was truly quite long.

Li Daoxuan had spent considerable time setting it up. Along the path, he had used metal scrapers on numerous sections to level the ground and smooth the road, minimizing the frequency of sharp curves and uneven sections along the small track.

Passing by two desolate villages, Li Daoxuan deliberately placed two intermediate train stations. Though empty now, he knew people would eventually settle there. Someday, experts would marvel, finding it inconceivable that someone in this world would take a train back to their ancestral village to farm, surpassing even the invention of driving a personal vehicle home for farming – a whole new level!

As soon as the small track reached Bai Family Fortress, Bai Yuan was the first to rush out, elated: “Has the Deity bestowed a train upon Bai Family Fortress too? Fantastic! Hahaha! This time, the engine driver simply must be me, right?”

Once the small train was placed down, Bai Yuan eagerly jumped onto the engine.

He personally piloted the small train on its “trial run,” chugging noisily all the way from Bai Family Fortress to Gaojia Village and then chugging back again.

The forty-mile journey, including time stopped at stations and in motion, took a full half-hour. After just one test run, Bai Yuan realized he didn't have enough time to drive this small train daily.

He couldn't spend all his time mastering only the “art of charioteering” when the other five arts demanded his attention. Reluctantly, he gave up the position, personally teaching two villagers from Bai Family Fortress how to operate the small train and handing over the helm.

Just as Bai Family Fortress rejoiced over the small train's arrival...

Meanwhile, at the City God Temple in Chengcheng County.

Third Lady was reverently expounding Taoist scriptures to the believers when she noticed someone slip through the side hall door – her husband, Thirty-Two.

“Hm?”

Third Lady made a soft sound of surprise but showed no outward reaction. She continued to lecture with perfect composure, merely speeding up her delivery slightly.

Before long, she dismissed the congregation after they had finished listening.

She hurried over to Thirty-Two, delighted: “Husband, what brings you to the county town?”

It had been some time since they’d seen each other, and they missed one another somewhat. Thirty-Two took his wife’s hand and said with a low laugh, “I’ve come by order of the Deity, delivering a batch of books to the county town. Naturally, I had to visit my wife, heh heh. It’s been so long, we must enjoy... the brief separation feels better than the wedding night?”

Third Lady scoffed, her gaze drifting downwards, sweeping over Thirty-Two’s crotch: “Can you manage?”

The question instantly made Thirty-Two’s expression awkward: “Well... um... still...”

Third Lady: “I thought as much! If you can’t manage, then no separation, however brief, feels better than the wedding night.”

Thirty-Two flopped face-first onto the ground, unable to get up.

Li Daoxuan, observing from the sky above, felt a pang of awkwardness himself upon hearing this. So that’s it! No wonder Thirty-Two had come to make that particular wish when the “Dao Xuan Deity Cave” was first built. No wonder Third Lady stayed permanently in the county town, never returning to Gaojia Village to see her husband...

Of course, of course!

So many details he hadn't noticed before.

This fellow wasn't really a man anymore; he was a eunuch.

Harsh!

Fellow man here, sending unlimited sympathy his way.

Third Lady's expression turned serious: "Stop wallowing in gloom. Haven't you long since made peace with this? Let's discuss business. What are the Deity's orders?"

Thirty-Two instantly sprang up from the floor, his expression back to normal. True, it was water far under the bridge. When chatting with his wife, he even occasionally jokingly referred to himself as "Thirty-Two the Eunuch," embracing self-deprecation and open-mindedness.

He pulled a thin book from his sleeve and handed it to Third Lady: "Take a look at this. The Deity had me bring you three hundred copies. They're piled up outside now, awaiting your instructions."

Third Lady took the book. On the cover were the words Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale, alongside a sacred image of the Deity. She bowed deeply in reverence before slowly opening it to look inside.

Reading it, her delight was immediate: "This... this... such a wonderful book!"

Thirty-Two whispered, "The Deity bid me bring you over three hundred copies to distribute as you see fit. Furthermore, two thousand more are to be printed. They'll arrive in a few days for the Chengcheng Bookstore. You know, Chengcheng Bookstore was secretly bought by Gaojia Village a while ago; it's just registered under Mr. Wang's name. Those two thousand copies are to be sold there."

Third Lady frowned: "Will they sell? It's a year of great disaster now. People struggle just to eat. Can we expect them to buy books?"

Thirty-Two chuckled: "Why would the Deity overlook that? The venerable Deity has already decreed: purchase one book, get two taels of flour free."

Third Lady: "!"

With that, Third Lady understood completely.

"If the Deity has arranged this," she thought rapidly, "it means He intends to extend His divine grace to the county town. The Deity is benevolent; He doesn't wish to manifest directly and frighten the common folk. So first, we must spread tales of the Deity's deeds, broadcast His name far and wide. Once the people of the county town all know His sacred title, when the venerable Deity manifests His powers again, it will startle no one."

Thirty-Two nodded: "Exactly. That's what I also think."

Third Lady: "Understood. Where are the three hundred copies? I'll arrange distribution immediately."

Thirty-Two led her out to the adjacent reception room. The three hundred copies formed a sizable pile on the floor. Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu stood beside the pile, offering Third Lady a dopey grin.

Third Lady directed them to move all the comic books into the room where she was staying...

Half an hour later.

A shabbily dressed poor man came in, kneeling before Third Lady. He tearfully explained that his son had been feverish for two days without improvement and begged for immortal medicine...

As usual, Third Lady gave him the medicine. Then, suddenly, she asked, "Do you know which deity bestowed this medicine upon you?"

The poor man quickly kowtowed: "I know! This humble one knows! It's the Dao Xuan Deity!"

Third Lady: "And do you know which demons He subdued, which fiends He vanquished?"

The poor man looked utterly blank-faced. He genuinely didn't know.

Asked about the Supreme Venerable Deity (Lord Lao), the Primordial Deity, or the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, he could have prattled on a little. But about the Dao Xuan Deity? Hmph... it was obscure. Far too obscure.

Third Lady snorted: "Your heart lacks sincerity. Even with this medicine, your son may not recover."

This terrified the poor man; half his soul seemed to flee. He cried out desperately, "This humble man is sincere! Truly sincere! I am merely ignorant, unaware of the Deity's deeds! It's my fault! I will diligently study the scriptures, commit the Deity's feats to memory..."

Seeing the groundwork sufficiently laid, Third Lady swiftly drew another book from her sleeve and handed it to the poor man: "This is Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale. Take it back and study it diligently. Then you will know the Deity's deeds."

The poor man was overjoyed: "Many thanks, Esteemed Lady!"

Chapter 240: The Promotion

The name Dao Xuan Deity felt utterly alien to most residents of the county town. Though a handful of common folk had sought medicine from Third Lady and heard the deity's revered title, they knew the name without any knowledge of the being behind it.

Regarding what kind of immortal this deity truly was, they remained completely bewildered.

Yet, these past few days brought change.

That small group of devout believers could actually recount a few stories about the deity now.

Take this scene: two believers crossed paths in the street and exchanged greetings.

“Hey, Old Zhang, did your child’s ailment recover?”

“All better! Thanks to the devotee bestowing the divine medicine from the Deity upon us.”

“Heh, I used to think Dao Xuan Deity was like that ‘Medicine Dispensing Immortal’, only good for handing out remedies. Just a few days back, another senior brother enlightened me: the venerable Deity possesses immense magical powers, capable of vanquishing demons and monsters!”

“Well, what a coincidence; I know it too. And what’s more, I’ve got a book!” Old Zhang reached into his sleeve, pulled out a small comic, and pointed triumphantly at the cover. “Literate? Didn’t think so, haha! This line here says ‘Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale’. It recounts precisely the tales of the Deity subduing demons and monsters.”

“Oh! Tell me about it!”

“No need for me to tell it. Even illiterates can understand this book.” Old Zhang flipped open the comic with pride, showing the pages one by one. “See this? The Deity’s magical powers could make one hand swell to enormous size. With a single slap down—THWACK!—monsters were flattened...”

“Wow, spectacular! Truly spectacular! Where’d you get this book? I want one too.”

“This book was given to me by a devotee. If you want one, go and petition one yourself. If she deems your heart sincere, she’ll surely gift you a copy.”

“Great! I’ll make a trip to the City God Temple then.”

Exchanges like this spread among the minority... Initially, it was just ten or so individuals passing it on. In the blink of an eye, it reached twenty or thirty. Soon after, hundreds were talking about it. The poorest folks in the county town, those too sick to afford a doctor or medicine, all began extolling the tales of “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale”.

Several days later...

A massive logistics team arrived at the gates of Chengcheng County.

Leading them was Mr. Wang, who had invested heavily to acquire Chengcheng Bookstore. The old sentry guarding the gate recognized Mr. Wang's face and hurried over to greet him. "Sir, back in town again?"

Mr. Wang smiled. "After securing the bookstore, I've been away, busy for most of the year. Now that I have a little free time, I need to return and give the bookstore business some attention. Can't let such a large bookstore lie idle without just cause."

The old sentry felt a pang of awkwardness inwardly: Although Mr. Wang is a good man, he's terribly naive! What era is this? How could books still sell? Leaving the bookstore idle was fine – not earning, but not losing money either. Once you start striving earnestly to sell books, you'll likely lose your shirt. In times like these, idleness doesn't kill you, but ambition might! Entrepreneurship is the express lane to bankruptcy!

Casually inspecting the book transport team, the sentry found the front carts filled with thick comics. Scanning the latter part of the convoy, however, he noticed the larger carts contained only white flour.

Seeing the flour, the sentry instinctively touched his belly and swallowed hard. "Mr. Wang, are you switching business again? Grain merchant maybe? These days, grain trade can turn a tidy profit, way better than a bookstore."

Mr. Wang chuckled. "No, no, no. As a scholar, a bookstore suits me best. This grain isn't for starting a grain business. It's for a promotion."

"Promotion? What's that?"

Mr. Wang stroked his beard, amused. "A novel term. It means 'an activity conducted to boost sales'."

The sentry shook his head, still bewildered.

Mr. Wang elaborated, “Simply put, if you buy a book from me, I give you two taels of flour as a bonus. Managed this way, won’t books sell like hotcakes? That’s what I call a promotion.”

Upon hearing this, the sentry’s jaw literally dropped. “Th... this is your plan?”

Mr. Wang: “Not feasible?”

Sentry: “I’ll take fifty books! No, no, five hundred books!”

Mr. Wang: “Limit of one per person.”

The sentry froze for a second, then disregarding his gate duty entirely, turned and sprinted towards his home. “Mr. Wang! Wait for me! I’m fetching everyone from my household. One book per person is allowed, right?”

Mr. Wang suppressed an internal chuckle but called out, “Don’t run so fast, careful you don’t fall!”

But why would the sentry slow down? With such a glorious offer – buy a book and get two taels of valuable grain thrown in – where else would such a bargain come along? Slow down? Impossible! Full speed only! Despite his advanced age, he momentarily erupted with speed worthy of light-foot martial arts. The famed “Cloud-Dashing Ladder” of Wudang or the “Floating Steps Over Water” of the Xiaoyao Sect were put to shame before his dash. Even the mythical act of materializing steeds from qi could only claim parity. His figure merely flickered twice before vanishing around a distant street corner.

Mr. Wang thought with secret delight: This promotion tactic from the Deity is absolutely unreasonable. Strikes right at the core of human nature! Well, now the city gate lacks its watchman entirely. Tsk.

The transport team made its way through the county’s main street, passing through large clusters of ragged refugees. The scent of flour wafting from the carts drew gaunt heads peering out from alleyways. Eyes, dulled by hunger, fixed on the convoy passing by.

Escorting the convoy was the Gaojia Village Militia. Each man was robust and formidable-looking, clearly not ones to be trifled with. The refugees dared not attempt a riot; they could only watch with listless eyes as the grain carts passed before them.

Li Daoxuan observed this scene, a pang of sorrow touching his heart.

Looking down towards Gao Yiye, who was mingled within the team, he instructed, “Yiye, relay a command: order the militia to deliberately overturn two grain carts.”

Gao Yiye, disguised with a bamboo rain hat and palm bark cape amidst the troop, immediately straightened up. It was her first visit to the county town; she was curiously gazing left and right. Childhood held vibrant dreams of the bustling county town, but this visit revealed a space gray, dilapidated, and lifeless – far cry from the prosperity of Gaojia Village. She leaned towards Mr. Wang and whispered the Deity’s decree in his ear.

Mr. Wang understood. Just as he was about to turn back to convey the order to the rear carts, a loud “OOF!” suddenly erupted from Ground Rabbit, responsible for the last cart. Seemingly stumbling dramatically, he gave his own cart a forceful shove, BANG!, ramming it squarely into the grain cart Zheng Gouzi was pushing ahead of him.

Both grain carts toppled over instantly, sacks of flour spilling onto the street.

Zheng Gouzi instinctively tried to save the sacks, but Ground Rabbit let out another “OOF!”, feigning a tumble right onto Zheng Gouzi. Both men went sprawling, rolling aside together.

Meanwhile, the ropes securing the mouths of the flour sacks seemed mysteriously loose. As sacks tumbled, pristine white flour cascaded onto the street.

Nearby refugees witnessed this spectacle. How could they resist? With a roar, they surged forward. Scooping up handfuls of precious flour, they broke into frantic sprints, disappearing down alleyways.

Ground Rabbit whistled softly, deliberately not obstructing them. Instead, he grabbed hold of Zheng Gouzi, making a show of helplessly watching the refugees carry off every bit of grain from their two fallen carts.

Mr. Wang and Gao Yiye exchanged stunned glances, both murmuring under their breath: That fellow... he deliberately knocked the carts over without even receiving the Deity's command first... how dare he act on his own initiative?