

Great Ming 271

Chapter 271: Melee

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu had already charged out from their own army formation.

The three idiots were assigned to “Instructor He’s personal guards” and did not belong to any of the five hundred-man teams. Therefore, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were not incorporated into formations like the spear formation or firearm squads.

While other Militia Soldiers formed up to confront the enemy, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu directly “charged into the enemy ranks.” Taking huge strides, they surged forward with a powerful dash, smashing straight into the rebel formation.

Instantly, several spears stabbed towards them.

But it was utterly useless. The armor plates on these two men were absurdly thick, comparable to the ancient fierce warriors who had charged into countless battles and emerged unscathed. Ordinary spears stood no chance of piercing them; the iron spearheads merely clattered harmlessly against the metal.

Zheng Daniu swung his spear and swept it forward with a whoosh, sending two enemy soldiers flying through the air.

Gao Chuwu copied the move, sweeping his spear, but unexpectedly, an equally ferocious enemy officer on the other side also swung his spear forward. With a loud clang, the two spear shafts collided mid-sweep, and then crack – both shafts shattered.

The man opposite froze momentarily. Instantly abandoning his broken spear, he pulled his waist knife from its sheath.

This movement reminded Gao Chuwu, who also immediately discarded his spear shaft. Reaching over his shoulder with a swift motion, he drew out a thick-bladed large knife.

A gift from Xing Honglang!

The enemy officer glanced at his own ordinary waist knife, then at Gao Chuwu's thick-bladed large knife. He swallowed hard involuntarily... Damn... the disparity in weapons was huge.

Gao Chuwu: "Heh!"

He took one large step forward and swung the blade down with a forceful whoosh.

The frightening power behind this strike made the man dare not block it directly. He hastily retreated backward several steps.

Gao Chuwu, brandishing his large knife, chased after him with wild swings. He didn't manage to cut down his main target, but he did chop down a swath of other rebel soldiers blocking his path.

Zheng Daniu: "Wow, Chuwu! Kid, you're fierce! I'm gonna lose to you."

Gao Chuwu grinned broadly: "The knife Miss Xing gave me indeed works great."

Cheng Xu yelled angrily from a distance behind them: "Stop thinking about women on the battlefield! You'll die fast that way."

Captain Wolf was starting to sense something was off.

Before clashing, he wasn't sure, but now, battling head-on, he realized this opponent wasn't the border army in Guyuan. Whether in training level or ferocity, they fell short of real border troops.

Logically, his soldiers should have secured an easy victory. But why did the actual fighting feel so wrong?

His soldiers, usually formidable, faltered strangely – spears would suddenly veer off course mid-thrust, knives would slip from their grasp mid-swing... showing none of their usual bravery and ferocity.

Moreover, the enemy soldiers were peculiar. Each one was physically robust, looking healthy strong, obviously well-fed and warm-clothed, remarkably like Great Generals' privately raised, heirloom retinues of bodyguards.

His border army soldiers could only claim an advantage in combat experience and reckless fearlessness. In terms of equipment and physical fitness, they were drastically outmatched.

"Damn it all!"

Under normal circumstances, most commanders would consider retreat. But Captain Wolf was, after all, a hardened border army veteran, accustomed to life-or-death struggles against nomadic tribes. He would never yield or retreat so easily; those who faltered didn't deserve to garrison the frontier.

Captain Wolf's gaze immediately locked onto Cheng Xu: the enemy was just a bunch of new recruits, holding together solely because of this "Captain Ghost" directing them.

"Kill Captain Ghost, and the enemy will crumble without a fight."

Captain Wolf slapped his mount's rump. "Hiyah!" He spurred his horse forward, charging horizontally across the field with leveled lance, aiming straight for Cheng Xu.

By now, the front lines of both armies had dissolved into chaos. Rebels and Militia Soldiers were thoroughly intermingled. Cheng Xu's position wasn't held far back like those of "scholarly officials commanding troops." His stance was significantly more forward.

This gave Captain Wolf the chance to reach him.

With a charging horse, he instantly cut through the chaotic battlefield and reached Cheng Xu in the blink of an eye.

Unlike those unskilled martial artists who shout "Take this spear!" before striking, Captain Wolf wasted no words—he thrust his spear straight at Cheng Xu's head.

Cheng Xu's attention was still on the military formation; every new recruit required his supervision. Hearing sudden hoofbeats, he turned and found Captain Wolf's spear almost piercing his face.

Terrified, he leaped backward while drawing his waist knife to block.

Clang!

A crisp ring echoed—the blow knocked his helmet askew. Though unharmed, the shock was immense.

Damn, that spear's faster than lightning.

Captain Wolf's horse had already charged past Cheng Xu, galloping several yards ahead. It then spun around and raced back toward him.

Cheng Xu cursed inwardly: Fuck this—bullying me 'cause I'm horseless? And all I've got's this useless commander's knife, no spear?

He'd come purely to adjust the Militia Soldiers' tactics, never intending to fight. Mountless and unarmed, he was just a command tower—now pinned by a spear-wielding cavalry captain, pressure crushed him.

In an instant, Captain Wolf was upon him again.

A whistling spear aimed straight for Cheng Xu's forehead.

Cheng Xu scrambled backward, his speed nearly dodging the blow—until his back slammed into a Militia Soldier who'd been stabbing at bandits, unaware Cheng Xu retreated.

Thud!

The collision blocked Cheng Xu's escape.

Captain Wolf's spear tip now hovered before his eyes.

Shit. I'm done for.

Not even time to vividly picture his grandmother flashed through Cheng Xu's mind; death felt certain.

Just then, another spear thrust sideways—lifting before Cheng Xu's face with a clang that flung both weapons upward.

Cheng Xu turned: "Huh?"

It was Fang Wushang!

Fang Wushang had long chafed inside the city. Flinging the gates open, he'd charged out leading a hundred soldiers—yet true to his lone-wolf style, he'd outpaced them. His men lagged far behind while he tore into the battlefield solo.

Captain Wolf eyed the new arrival: a mere ninth-rank inspector.

As a fifth-rank Hundred-House captain of the border army, he scoffed at the lowly patrol officer. Without pause, he swung his spear toward Fang Wushang.

Fang Wushang blocked horizontally. Clang! Shockingly, he held firm.

Captain Wolf: "Huh?"

Their horses brushed past each other...

Galloping several yards apart before wheeling around to charge again.

Cheng Xu growled: “Fuck this! Two ambushes at me, then you switch to Fang Wushang? That’s just goddamn rude!”

His gaze swept the ground—landing on a fallen bandit soldier clutching a small recurved bow.

Cheng Xu grinned darkly, snatching the bow and nocking an arrow.

As Captain Wolf and Fang Wushang spurred toward each other, another clash imminent—Cheng Xu drew aim at Captain Wolf’s face and loosed his arrow with a whiz.

Chapter 272: The Deity Reveals Himself Before the Entire County

Captain Wolf was galloping wildly on horseback, his attention fully fixed on Fang Wushang.

Suddenly he heard the sound of wind rustling, and an arrow came flying straight toward him—this startled him badly, so he hurriedly tilted his head back; the arrow narrowly skimmed past his nose tip, almost striking him squarely in the face, scaring him quite a bit.

When he lifted his head back up and straightened it, he spotted Fang Wushang already right in front of him, swinging his spear—thud—it struck Captain Wolf squarely in the chest.

The thick armor on him blocked the spear tip from causing direct harm, but the force packed in that thrust knocked him off the horse.

With a loud thump, he hit the ground, rolled over several times, and then managed to leap up.

As soon as he stood up, he saw Cheng Xu standing before him.

Captain Wolf: “Fuck!”

He barely had time to say that one word before Cheng Xu twisted his neck—crack—and it snapped.

Almost at the same instant, Fang Wushang's spear followed through again—thud—this time piercing through a gap in the armor plates and stabbing into Captain Wolf's body.

Cheng Xu clapped his hands and leapt away: "Damn it, you nearly speared me!"

Fang Wushang: "I had it under control."

The two only exchanged those words and immediately parted to go attend to their own tasks.

Cheng Xu began loudly rallying the militia again, while Fang Wushang reined in his steed and circled the rebel army once more.

With Captain Wolf dead, the rebel army lost their will to fight.

Every captain was already beginning to think of fleeing.

However, in Chengcheng County's ranks, their zeal surged greatly; Fang Wushang's hundred subordinates charged over with overwhelming momentum—these were soldiers actually shaped by Cheng Xu, who deeply understood their old commander's spirit: when encountering strong foes, they turned as timid as mice; when the enemy seemed cowardly, they became as fierce as lions.

Further back, the servants, constables, and helpers under Liang Shixian, as well as the county's militia and refugees, felt their morale soar too, flung open the city gates, and rushed out with loud battle cries.

This charge carried truly unstoppable force.

The rebels saw this—how could they possibly withstand it?

No one even needed to give orders; with wild screams, they turned tail and ran.

However, this time Li Daoxuan could not let them escape.

Last time Li Ying's troops could be allowed to flee because they were somewhat still considered officials—though they had bad habits like extorting the rich and robbing commoners, they at least knew restraint and wouldn't kill innocents indiscriminately; otherwise, civilian officials might impeach them.

But these men before them now were the rebel—they no longer knew what restraint meant; having traveled here from Guyuan burning, killing, and looting all along, they had grown more brutal than bandit troops.

Li Daoxuan could not let this group scatter back into the villages again.

After a moment's thought, he figured it was about time!

After so many foundations and hints laid in the county town, most folks living there should already have known the name of "Dao Xuan Deity"—if he didn't reveal himself now, then when?

With a click, he donned the "Infinity Gloves," flicked the switch on them, and several "Infinity Stones" lit up right away, making his entire right hand flash with multicolored light...

He bent down to the box and said: "Yiye, announce loudly that I'm about to intervene."

Gao Yiye, rushing with pride, loudly told the devoted followers nearby: "The Deity is about to intervene to punish evil and uphold virtue."

The devoted followers were overjoyed and immediately roared back: "The Deity is about to intervene!"

By then, there were already many devoted followers—hundreds of them all chanting together in unison, shouting that one phrase simultaneously; their voices rang out for miles, and almost everyone atop the city walls, below them, and across the entire battlefield heard their outcry.

"The Deity is about to intervene!"

Standing on the city wall, Liang Shixian exclaimed “Huh!”: “What’s the meaning of the Li Family’s actions?”

Clerk shook his head: “I don’t understand!”

Liang Shixian felt slightly annoyed: “We’re at war now, such a serious moment. Playing divine being tricks under these circumstances isn’t appropriate, right? Let’s not turn a decent family into something like White Lotus demons...”

Before he could finish his sentence, clouds parted in the sky. A massive golden hand split the mist, descending straight from above.

Liang Shixian: “!!!”

Clerk: “!!!”

Everyone on and below the city walls: “!!!”

The enormous golden hand shimmered with multicolored light—that was the “Deity’s glow” of His revered name, exactly as folk legends described...

Devout men and women who had witnessed the Deity manifesting before shrieked hoarsely: “See! The Deity’s hand... I told you long ago! I saw the Deity manifesting in the grove outside the city, yet you stubbornly refused to believe! Haha, do you believe now?”

The giant hand plunged downward!

With a thunderous boom, it slammed onto the ground terrifyingly close before the rebel troops.

The earth shook violently. The remaining several hundred rebels—already fleeing—suddenly saw a giant hand blocking their path. After the deafening crash, the hand lifted, leaving behind an enormous palm imprint at least ten zhang wide and ten zhang long.

That single strike made them all soil themselves in terror.

Not being from Chengcheng County, they hadn't read Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale, utterly unprepared psychologically. Witnessing such a colossal hand smash down unexpectedly, their first thought wasn't "divine being" but "monstrous demon." Rather than simply risking cardiac arrest or pissing themselves, hundreds collapsed—legs giving way, stumbling, crumpling, kneeling—in grotesque postures across the ground, many with pants smeared with their own filth.

Li Daoxuan slowly retracted his hand, commanding: "Capture them all. Confiscate their weapons. Send them for labor reform!"

Gao Yiye loudly relayed the divine decree, and the believers rushed toward the rebels with joyous cheers.

Meanwhile, beneath Chengcheng County's walls, an eerie atmosphere settled.

Believers who had long trusted in Dao Xuan Deity's existence and even witnessed His manifestation were undoubtedly the happiest. Instantly reversing past disbelief despite their fervent testimonies, now the entire city saw the Deity materialize. Dare they disbelieve anymore? Hahaha!

Nonbelievers, however, reeled under immense shock. Their state mirrored Bai Yuan's upon first arriving at Gaojia Village: witnessing the Deity's manifestation while watching surrounding devotees kneel one by one.

Seconds later, discarding all restraint, they roared alongside the faithful:

"Deity bless us! Deity bless us!"

"I saw the Deity with my own eyes!"

"O Deity, forgive this humble one! Lard had befuddled my mind—I dared question Your existence! I was wrong! From this day forth, I pledge undying loyalty to Dao Xuan Deity Teachings!"

Amidst the tumultuous cries and cheers,

Liang Shixian, Magistrate of Chengcheng County, gaped soundlessly skyward, remaining speechless for a long while: "The Li Family's household deity... was... an actual god?"

Chapter 273: Come Down and Fight

Liang Shixian was completely stunned.

The Clerk standing beside him was equally stunned.

The two did not know how long they had been stunned; when they came back to their senses, they saw that people outside had already confiscated the weapons and armor of the several hundred terrified rebels, stripping them bare.

Someone was controlling the scene, but who was controlling it?

Clearly, he himself as the county magistrate had not given a single order, so why were things now so orderly, with everyone doing their own tasks?

After seeing such a gigantic divine hand, why hadn't the entire county fallen into chaos?

Shouldn't everyone be stunned, crowding together, stampeding, fleeing, spinning around in confusion like ants on a hot pan?

Liang Shixian's mind was in turmoil, and he desperately rallied himself: No, I must think carefully...

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, immediately activated an emergency repair mode for traumatic stress response; the white clouds of his homeland, his old mother's gentle whispers, the old ox in the countryside, the soft sunset, the cool evening breeze... all sorts of soothing images flickered through his mind like a revolving lantern. Then, with a "ding," it settled on a warm rural landscape scene.

Gazing at this scene, he felt his mind grow calm, and his chaotic thoughts gradually cleared.

“No wonder I’d always sensed something amiss. That small area of the Li Family had rainfall, endless grain, plenty of weapons, and never lost against multiple bandit invasions... So, the Li Family’s household deity truly existed—he had been casting spells to protect the land of Gaojia Village all along.”

Liang Shixian muttered: “So that was it... so that was it!”

The Clerk was rushing with pride: “County Lord, that Elementary Math you brought back for me to learn last time was actually a sacred text! I told you it was incredibly powerful; after mastering it, my accounting speed doubled.”

The two had just spoken thus...

When a furious roar rang out from outside the city; Fang Wushang leaped onto his horse, lance at the ready, charging straight toward where the giant hand had slammed down. He and his horse halted at the center of the enormous palm print, and he tilted his head up to shout at the low cloud in the sky: “What monster dares to invade my Chengcheng? Come down, and this general will fight you to the death!”

Everyone stood silent...

Liang Shixian drew a sharp breath: “Has this guy not read Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale?”

The Clerk felt awkward: “I heard General Fang dislikes reading books.”

Liang Shixian pressed: “Not even comic books?”

The Clerk stammered: “This...”

Liang Shixian covered his face: “Even if he doesn’t know the name of Dao Xuan Deity, after seeing such a huge hand, why would he dare to challenge it?”

The Clerk broke out in cold sweat: “I have no idea.”

Fang Wushang was actually terrified; that earlier slap hadn’t just scared the rebels out of their wits—it had shocked him senseless too.

He had no knowledge of Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale, nor that the county folks had recently spread tales of some Dao Xuan Deity; he was a classic failure from compulsory education.

Upon suddenly seeing a giant hand descend, Fang Wushang was genuinely scared out of his wits.

But once he regained his senses, his duty to protect the land surged from within; after all, he was a patrol officer.

As a patrol officer, he was supposed to ensure no villains plagued the whole county; no matter how strong that villain was, a patrol officer had to confront it.

If all 108 bandits from Liang Mountain Marsh occupied Chengcheng County as warlords, he, Fang Wushang, would still charge to confront them, battling from the Earthly Fiend Stars to the Heavenly Chief Stars, until he subdued and captured all 108 to cease.

Now that a massive monster had appeared in the county, he had to step up as patrol officer.

It wasn’t about whether he could win; it was his responsibility, an unavoidable fight.

Fang Wushang raised his head and bellowed: “Monster, come down...”

Li Daoxuan watched him with great interest, looking down. That guy!

Alright, I’ll play with him for fun.

He extended one finger and slowly poked it toward Fang Wushang.

Fang Wushang saw the huge golden hand coming again, and his heart tightened. He waved his spear:
“Yah yah yah!”

With a fierce thrust, he stabbed at the tip of Li Daoxuan’s finger.

The Infinity Gloves were made of alloy, several millimeters thick. In reality, it was about a meter thick in scale. With such thick alloy plate, even if Fang Wushang was wielding a spear, even if he had a rocket launcher, he couldn’t breach it.

His spear thrust upward and only produced a “ding” sound.

Fang Wushang felt his helplessness, but he couldn’t admit defeat. He waved his spear again and poked at Li Daoxuan’s finger...

Just then, a person leapt up nearby, kicked in mid-air, sending Fang Wushang flying off his horse. Then that person flashed and pinned Fang Wushang to the ground, locking his hands and feet, rendering him unable to move.

The immobilizing technique from the Ghost God Fist Technique was incredibly effective.

The newcomer was Cheng Xu: “Patrol Officer Fang, stop acting crazy. If it weren’t for the Deity having a good temper and teasing you, one finger press would have crushed you dead just now.”

Fang Wushang: “Deity? You know that demon?”

“That’s not a demon, that’s a deity,” Cheng Xu retorted angrily. “Fortunately, it’s a deity who allows a mortal like you to be disrespectful. If it were a real demon, you would’ve been killed long ago.”

This remark jolted Fang Wushang awake!

Exactly!

His body instantly relaxed.

Since he wasn't struggling, Cheng Xu stopped restraining him and loosened his hold.

Fang Wushang got up confusedly and gazed up at the strange low cloud in the sky: "This... which deity is this?"

A devotee ran over and shoved a comic book into his hand.

Fang Wushang flipped through the pages blankly. As he flipped, sweat poured down: "Oh, I see... Ah? I see?"

Cheng Xu put his hands on his hips.

There was no reasoning to be done with that senseless fellow. Ignore him for now.

Cheng Xu turned to tend to the militia.

In this recent battle, the Gaojia Village Militia had gained a huge wave of experience. However, unlike before, there were casualties this time. Even with the Deity secretly helping from above, several dozen militiamen were injured, all with "bullet wounds" and "arrow wounds".

Every militia soldier had a small medical kit containing disinfectant and Yunnan Baiyao that Li Daoxuan had distributed to them in advance.

The wounded soldiers were treating their own injuries.

The uninjured soldiers were gathering loot and overseeing prisoners.

The enemy had a total of eight hundred border army soldiers in this battle. Over a hundred were killed or wounded in combat, and Captain Wolf was eliminated by Cheng Xu and Fang Wushang. The remaining more than six hundred bandit soldiers were unhurt, but their morale had collapsed entirely, and they were scared out of their wits. Now, stripped of all equipment, they were trembling and didn't know where to go.

Chapter 274: Hand Over the Captives to Gaojia Village

Cheng Xu stood before the more than six hundred captives, chuckling twice.

Those six hundred or so people trembled; they dared not resist, as the terrifying giant hand in the sky could strike down at any moment, leaving them with no courage to fight back.

Now they could only wait quietly for their fate...

Rebellion was a capital offense, punishable by execution along with their families; they knew their chance of survival was slim.

Their only hope might be being captured and turned into artisan households, but that was not much different from death—in fact, living might be worse than dying.

Cheng Xu had originally intended to say: "Now I'm sending you off to Gaojia Village for labor reform."

Suddenly, it occurred to him—no, he was impersonating Captain Ghost at that moment; how could a "rebel band in Guyuan" handle matters of Gaojia Village? Better for him to slip away first instead.

After laughing weirdly twice, Cheng Xu turned around and shouted loudly to County Magistrate Liang Shixian, who had just emerged from the city: "Magistrate Liang, I've done what I promised. Now I must return to Huanglong Mountain. This mess here belongs to you."

Liang Shixian was still utterly dazed and hadn't noticed the huge flaw of "The Deity emerged, yet Captain Ghost showed no fear at all." He gave Cheng Xu a deep bow: "Thank you, Captain Ghost, you've truly been a great help this time. On behalf of Chengcheng County's residents, I thank you. I'm a man of my word; I'll definitely speak well for you in the court to help recover your back pay and restore your official title."

Cheng Xu chuckled: "That's fair enough, just don't trap and kill me."

He waved to the militia: "Let's go! We're returning to Huanglong Mountain."

Then, the militia made a splendid exit.

Liang Shixian stood dazedly before the over six hundred surrendered soldiers, his head aching slightly, thinking to himself: How should these people be dealt with? By the rules, they ought to be escorted to Xi'an and handed over to the Provincial Governor for punishment, but I lack sufficient manpower for the escort. If Fang Wushang does it, he only has a hundred troops; guarding over six hundred from the border army? That was laughably risky! These troops were terrified now, but after a day or two, they'd recover their nerve; even unarmed, they could annihilate Fang Wushang's hundred-some men later.

But... they'd already surrendered; I couldn't just order them wiped out now, could I? The one in the sky... hadn't killed them...

Thinking this, Liang Shixian couldn't help but lift his head and gaze at the low cloud in the sky.

Clever as he was, he almost instantly linked the Deity with that low cloud.

While he was tangled in doubts, Mr. Wang and the mysterious woman in a bamboo hat walked over to him together.

Mr. Wang smiled: "County Lord, are you suffering from these six hundred captives giving you a headache?"

Liang Shixian: "Yes! Though we relied on divine aid to defeat the rebels, figuring out how to punish them—I'm really... well... a bit..."

Mr. Wang: "Do you recall those two thieves who stole steamed buns?"

Liang Shixian obviously remembered; such a case didn't even need recalling through a parade system to be clear: "What do you mean, Mr. Wang?"

Mr. Wang smiled softly: “There’s no need to send them to the imperial court for judgment; turn these six hundred plus into ‘labor offenders’ so they can atone for their sins through work.”

Liang Shixian: “But this is treason, warranting execution along with their families! How can something serious like that get resolved through labor reform?”

Mr. Wang sighed lightly: “Earlier, the Deity struck only the ground in front of them, not their heads. This made the Deity’s position obvious... They say Heaven values all living beings; the Deity meant that these border soldiers were mere subordinates, constrained by circumstances beyond their control. Most of the blame for rebellion, looting, and slaughter lies with their leader, Captain Wolf, who has already been executed...”

Liang Shixian got it: “Heaven values all living beings—that phrase fits perfectly here.”

Mr. Wang went on: “County Lord, you likely lack enough hands to escort these rebels to Xi’an now. If you send someone to Xi’an requesting forces for escort, Provincial Governor Hu Tingyan might stir up some troublemaker.”

Liang Shixian mulled it over: That was true; Hu Tingyan was a notorious incompetent governor with poorly disciplined troops full of men like Li Ying. If the Provincial Governor dispatched soldiers to Chengcheng to collect them, those troops might go on a rampage in Chengcheng County and cause more trouble instead.

Mr. Wang said: “Act as if these people had already died in the battle just fought. Write to the Provincial Governor, attach Captain Wolf’s severed head, and report that all rebels were executed—this actually makes things easier for you.”

Liang Shixian smiled bitterly: “It’s clearly a lie, so why does it feel... like the more viable path?”

Mr. Wang sighed deeply: “Because... in these hard times, living honestly brings more hardship than deception.”

Liang Shixian: “...”

Mr. Wang: "If County Lord finds them too burdensome to manage, hand these rebels over to Gaojia Village to deal with."

Liang Shixian: "This... doesn't that seem inappropriate?"

Mr. Wang pointed at the low cloud overhead: "The Deity will watch over them."

Liang Shixian felt his spirits rushing with pride.

His focus returned to the Deity.

He raised his head, looked deeply at the low cloud in the sky, then clasped his fists and bowed deeply: "This humble official arrived at Chengcheng County over a year ago; ever since, I benefited from the Deity's protection without realizing it. Only today did I learn of the secret assistance—I'm deeply embarrassed."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

Gao Yiye leaned close to Mr. Wang's ear and whispered a few sentences.

After that, Mr. Wang said to Liang Shixian: "The Deity says, no formalities are needed; you're a fine official who cares deeply for the people. He wishes you to keep that approach going forward. The welfare of the common folk should top all priorities; the rest... can be tossed aside."

Liang Shixian had always pursued that path; being affirmed by the Deity filled him with quiet joy.

Liang Shixian turned his attention toward Mr. Wang: "Then I'll notify Patrol Officer Fang immediately to have these surrendered soldiers escorted to Gaojia Village and handed over to your management."

Mr. Wang smiled: "Excellent; leave the next steps to us."

Liang Shixian turned and headed toward the county office.

Li Daoxuan glanced around: Fang Wushang had arrived with his hundred-some troops to carry out the escort. From the county seat to Gaojia Village was just over thirty li—quite a short distance, manageable in half a day—but guarding over six hundred captives with barely a hundred men remained highly dangerous.

Fang Wushang's men felt immense pressure.

Li Daoxuan focused his vision on the group, monitoring the rebels closely along the route. Thankfully, they were thoroughly terrified and showed no signs of resisting at all; obediently escorted by Fang Wushang, they walked the over thirty li. Only as evening fell did Gaojia Village finally appear.

The enormous fortress and the wondrous railway train startled the captive rebels immensely the moment they entered Gaojia Village.

Chapter 275: You'll Be the Head Guard

The Great Ming in the Box

Gaojia Village had previously managed large numbers of labor offenders, but that situation was slightly different from the current one.

Previously, most labor offenders came from villagers in Zhuangjia Village, Zhengjia Village, and the surrounding villages. After Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu died, they immediately shed their fierce hearts and obediently took up the promising profession of being labor offenders.

Li Daoxuan had barely restricted their freedom at all, essentially giving them free rein. Yet they remained docile, not daring to cause trouble or make a fuss.

But the Guyuan rebel band was different!

These men weren't ordinary civilians. They were battle-hardened soldiers from the border army. They had no friends here, no neighbors. Their numbers were substantial—over six hundred—far surpassing the previous groups of labor offenders.

They had to be strictly managed, otherwise trouble could easily arise.

Therefore, they couldn't be settled in the "Labor Offenders Village." A proper "prison" had to be arranged for them.

Ever since starting the Tiny Kingdom project, Li Daoxuan impulsively bought miniature models whenever he saw them on online shopping sites. Countless models were already piled up at his home. Rummaging through this pile, he quickly found a "Lego prison."

Perfect. This would do.

Just then, Fang Wushang arrived, escorting over six hundred rebel prisoners to the outskirts of Gaojia Village. Thirty-Two came out to greet him, accompanied by Tan Liwen. Hearing Fang Wushang state these were rebels sent by the Deity for reformed labor, Thirty-Two was pondering how to arrange things.

A huge golden hand descended from the sky. Right before Fang Wushang and the six hundred prisoners, it began snapping Lego bricks together, clicking and clacking.

Li Daoxuan deliberately built it in front of the prisoners, intending to intimidate them and lessen the likelihood of them cooking up misdeeds during their reformed labor.

The effect was immediate...

Not only were the prisoners terrified, even Fang Wushang and his group were startled. They watched the huge golden fingers manipulate the bricks—clicking and clacking—and in no time at all, a massive grey structure was assembled. This structure had numerous rooms, each with a door made of “mesh.”

Though this type of door wasn’t identical to a Ming Dynasty “jail cell,” anyone whose minds were not blocked by tumors could instantly recognize it as a “prison.”

Once built, the golden hand swept away a patch of ground beside the road being built between Gaojia Village and the county seat. It cleared a flat area and deposited the enormous prison building there.

Thirty-Two immediately grasped the plan. “General Fang, please trouble your men to escort the prisoners into this prison, then hand them over to us.”

Fang Wushang was still dazed, but his subordinates spontaneously sprang into action.

Actually, while Fang Wushang might not have read the “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale,” his men surely had. Accepting the Dao Xuan Deity was far easier for them. Having just witnessed a “Deity manifesting divine power to conjure an immortal prison,” moving prisoners inside was plainly the next step.

“Get in...” A soldier prodded a prisoner with his spear shaft.

This prisoner was no ordinary captive. He was a fierce warrior, the very one who had stood firm against Gao Chuwu until Gao Chuwu’s spear shaft broke, forcing Gao Chuwu to chase him halfway across the battleground brandishing a thick-bladed large knife. His bandit name was “Old Nan Feng,” his real name unknown.

Skilled in martial arts, he hadn’t died on the battlefield. But Li Daoxuan’s massive hand had scared him into surrendering. Stripped of his armor now, he wore only a thin cotton shirt.

Poked by the common soldier’s spear shaft, Old Nan Feng flew into a rage, glaring fiercely at the offender.

The glare carried an imposing aura that made the soldier's hand tremble. He didn't dare strike a second time. "What? Get in! Otherwise... the Deity... will punish you..."

Old Nan Feng didn't fear such soldiers; unarmed, he could have killed two or three of them easily. But hearing mention of the Deity, his defiance evaporated. He looked up at the huge golden hand still hovering in the sky, lowered his head, and obediently shuffled into the Lego prison.

The surrendered soldiers quickly filled the large grey prison.

Though scared witless by the skyborne giant hand, their ingrained military discipline kept them remarkably orderly. Once inside the prison, they acted as if entering a military encampment. Grouping in small numbers by cell, they filed in with an unexpected and almost methodical neatness.

Then, the huge golden hand descended again. With a gentle nudge, it shut the prison gate. All six hundred men were now securely confined.

Fang Wushang finally snapped out of his daze. His facial muscles twitched awkwardly. He cupped his fist. "My duty here is complete, Commander. I shall take my leave."

Knowing the deity had manifested divine power right before Fang Wushang implied things must be resolved in the county town, Thirty-Two saw no further need for concealment. He smiled faintly. "Farewell, General Fang. Feel free to visit Gaojia Village again when you have time."

Fang Wushang left with his men, still slightly befuddled.

The headache promptly shifted onto Thirty-Two's shoulders.

He glanced up at the low cloud hanging in the sky, almost wishing to ask the Deity for guidance. But Gao Yiye wasn't in Gaojia Village; she was "on official business" in the county seat. Clearly, that was the priority right now. Settling those tens of thousands of people in the county seat was undoubtedly what the Deity would focus on next.

The matters in Gaojia Village therefore fell entirely to Thirty-Two.

Rushing with pride, he thought hard for a moment, then turned to Tan Liwen. "Go find Zhong Gaoliang."

Tan Liwen replied, "Plant sorghum? Certainly! Spring is coming soon, I'll organize people to sow immediately."

Thirty-Two clarified, "I said, find the man named Zhong Gaoliang."

A question mark seemed to float slowly above Tan Liwen's head.

Thirty-Two almost kicked him. His foot was practically aimed at Tan Liwen's crotch when he sighed and pulled it back. "How did you become a clerk? A clerk's most crucial skill is a strong memory, especially remembering key people among the populace! Have you forgotten Zhong Gaoliang? The one from the labor camp who got his sentence reduced and was released first?"

Tan Liwen finally remembered.

He hurried off to find the man. Shortly after, Zhong Gaoliang was brought over.

The sturdy man, who had just been plowing a field, felt a little apprehensive at being suddenly summoned by Clerk Tan. He rubbed his hands. "Manager Thirty-Two, what did you summon me for?"

Thirty-Two said, "You were an exemplary labor offender back in your day. You must have quite some experience with reformed labor life, right?"

Zhong Gaoliang jumped in fright. "Experience? No, no, nothing of the sort! I'd never commit crimes and get tossed back into labor reform!"

Thirty-Two pointed first at the newly built prison then at the golden hand still lingering in the sky. "The Deity just manifested divine power and built a huge prison. Over six hundred Guyuan rebels are locked inside. They need managing."

Zhong Gaoliang blinked. “Huh? What’s that got to do with me?”

Thirty-Two continued, “I’ve been thinking. There’s a position perfectly suited for you. That position is: Head Guard.”

In modern terms, “Head Guard” often implies the most influential prisoner among inmates.

But in ancient times, the “Head Guard” referred to the person appointed by the magistrate to manage the prison—essentially a warden in today’s terms.

Zhong Gaoliang’s jaw dropped open. “M-me? Head Guard? M-me? Have I got what it takes?”

Chapter 276: The Mood Was Lively

Thirty-Two scolded with a laugh, “Look up at the sky.”

Zhong Gaoliang lifted his head and saw the enormous golden hand in the sky actually giving a thumbs-up gesture.

Though he didn’t understand its meaning, he sensed it was a sign of encouragement and approval.

Well, even the Deity had given his approval.

That settled it—Heaven’s arrangements take precedence.

Zhong Gaoliang reluctantly agreed, “Alright, I’ll be the Head Guard. But what about my sorghum fields at home?”

Thirty-Two chuckled, “Rent them to your neighbors.”

Zhong Gaoliang broke into a nervous sweat, “Then I’d become a landlord? No! Landlords are bad people.”

Thirty-Two: "..."

Li Daoxuan couldn't help but find this amusing: Haha! This fellow is rather endearing.

Technically, renting out a small plot did make him a landlord, but equating such a trivial matter with moral judgment seemed naive.

Thirty-Two had no choice but to spread his hands wide and reply, "The Head Guard's wage is extremely high. Five taels of silver a month—calculate how much that is over twelve months, then compare it to the income from your sorghum fields. How much would that be?"

Zhong Gaoliang: "Twelve times five taels... what is that? Even counting all my fingers and toes isn't enough..."

Thirty-Two: "Pfft!"

Li Daoxuan: "Pfft!"

Just then, a child ran by—Gao Sanwa. With a bright laugh, he explained, "Uncle Zhong, first multiply five by two. That's ten. Then, twelve is the same as six times two. That means twelve times five equals six times ten. Now, figure it out!"

Zhong Gaoliang: "Six times ten makes sixty! Sanwa, so you are quite brilliant."

Gao Sanwa puffed out his chest proudly. "Hahaha! Mother always calls me stupid—she has no idea how smart I really am!"

"Sanwa!" A furious roar cut through the air. Gao San Niang charged over, wielding a bamboo stick. "The teacher said you skipped classes again! You're in for a beating!"

Gao Sanwa jumped in fright. "Mother's here! Gotta run!"

With that, he took off like a shot. Gao San Niang brandished the bamboo stick and tore after him. In the blink of an eye, both vanished into the distance.

Li Daoxuan smiled: The younger generation of Gaojia Village was brimming with promise.

Zhong Gaoliang had also tallied the figures clearly now. An annual income of sixty taels of silver far surpassed the yield from his sorghum fields. He decided not to farm the fields himself, nor rent them out—he didn't want to turn into a landlord. Instead, he'd lend them to a neighbor freely.

"If I become Head Guard, what exactly do I need to do?"

Thirty-Two answered, "You'll organize these labor offenders, telling them what tasks to perform, what incentives they can hope for, etc. You've lived in the Labor Offenders Village—you understand their needs firsthand."

Zhong Gaoliang tilted his head, thought briefly, then broke into a wide grin. "Okay, I actually do know all about this."

Thirty-Two continued, "One person won't be enough—you can't manage six hundred alone. Call your old friends from the camp. Form a team—a large team capable of handling six hundred labor offenders..."

Zhong Gaoliang recoiled. "That's the scale we're talking?"

Thirty-Two glanced up meaningfully toward the sky, then declared with utmost seriousness, "With our railway and cement roads steadily expanding... the number of labor offenders will only keep growing. Forget six hundred—six thousand? Sixty thousand? Entirely possible. Zhong Gaoliang... your position may become increasingly crucial."

Just as they were deep in discussion, Cheng Xu arrived.

He'd led his militia on a decoy maneuver, pretending to "enter Huanglong Mountain," then circled back quietly to Gaojia Village. They'd remained hidden near the outskirts until Fang Wushang and his men

had departed. Now emerging before the group, he grinned, “Zhong Gaoliang, until you assemble your team, my men will temporarily guard the prison for you. They’re a rebel band from Guyuan—savage fighters, not easy to control.”

Zhong Gaoliang beamed with relief. “Many thanks, Instructor He!”

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan felt reassured. This team was clearly capable of managing the six hundred prisoners properly. His immediate focus should remain on Chengcheng County.

With a thought-click, his vision shifted back to the county seat.

Chengcheng County basked now in the golden light of the setting sun. The shadows of the city walls stretched long upon the ground.

Nearly half a day had passed since the battle concluded, yet the townsfolk were still euphoric. Murmurs and chatters about the “Dao Xuan Deity” filled every street and alley.

Li Daoxuan immediately noticed someone peddling comic books on the street: “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale, Volume One”. When originally sold by Chengcheng Bookstore, it was priced at just one copper coin and came with two taels of free flour.

But here, the hawker yelled the price: ten copper coins.

After shouting just a couple of times, he made a sale to a wealthy buyer. This gentleman cradled the comic book like a precious treasure, devouring its pages intently. Finishing it, he was unsatisfied and pleaded loudly: “Who has Volume Two?”

Volume Two had already been printed, but only the initial shipment of two thousand copies had reached the county. Those had sold out instantly and were now cherished possessions stowed away in homes, their owners unwilling to part with them.

After begging in the street extensively with zero success, the wealthy man rushed to the bookstore. He banged on the door and yelled angrily, “When will Volume Two be available again? We demand quicker releases! Printing is too slow—or I’ll report you to the authorities!”

Shifting his attention toward the City God Temple, Li Daoxuan found it absolutely thronged. Crowds packed the area—densely packed inside, overflowing outside. Especially the side shrine dedicated to Third Lady—now packed with kneeling devotees.

The original believers were naturally all present, supplemented by many freshly minted adherents. They crammed the small chapel impossibly full. Those unable to enter waited respectfully outside in orderly queues.

A well-dressed gentleman stood eloquently before Third Lady. “Venerable One, all devout worshipers wish to contribute funds and efforts to cast a grand statue of the Deity. To enshrine it here in the City God Temple so that worshipers may offer daily prayers and chants.”

Third Lady responded serenely, “The intention is noble indeed. However, I am merely one living an ascetic life. Coordinating such secular matters is not my calling...”

The well-dressed man promptly replied, “You need only grant your permission. Leave the execution to me. My name is Teng Yifeng. Many artisans within Chengcheng County are acquainted with me. By the Deity’s blessing, I have successfully established a Chengcheng Cement Factory. The cement currently used in our roads comes from my factory. If you consent, I shall promptly assemble skilled artisans to craft a splendid and majestic statue of the Deity.”

Third Lady was overjoyed. “Then this matter rests entirely in your capable hands.”

Teng Yifeng bowed deeply. “Thank you, Venerable One, for entrusting me with this vital task. I pledge my utmost skill and dedication to creating a magnificent and awe-inspiring statue!”

Li Daoxuan couldn’t help but shake his head. Grand monuments bring ruin to countries! Please—don’t build extravagant structures; stick to building roads!

But then, upon reflection... road construction served as work relief, creating employment. Constructing the enormous statue could serve the same purpose: relief through labor. Very well. So be it.

Chapter 277: This Thing Must Be Collected

The Great Ming in the Box

Li Daoxuan inspected the entire county and his gaze finally settled on the county office.

At that time, it was already dusk. Liang Shixian, however, had not left work. He was still sitting inside the county office, with a pile of documents beside him. His clerk was also busy running around, compiling various materials into books and passing them to him.

Li Daoxuan looked curiously and discovered that what Liang Shixian was holding was a “debt ledger,” which recorded that on a certain year, month, and day, he had borrowed a certain amount of grain from the Li Family in Gaojia Village. Again, on another certain year, month, and day, he had borrowed another amount of grain in Gaojia Village...

It was a thick book! It was all filled with such records.

Liang Shixian held that book, and his expression was one of deep lamentation. “I thought I owed countless debts to a hidden family,” he said, “but now I know it was actually aid and food granted to the world by a deity. Sigh, this book has become a joke.”

The clerk said, “The deity probably lacks nothing and will not make us repay, right? After all, we did not use this grain for personal gain, and we distributed all of it to the common people.”

Liang Shixian nodded. He realized then that when he went to the Li Family to borrow grain in the past, and they gave it so readily for distributing congee to save lives, it was truly the deity’s mercy for all people.

Huh? Wait! It seemed there was some detail forgotten back then.

Yes, at that time, Thirty-Two had said they did not pay taxes on behalf of the people!

He hadn't considered the Li Family a deity then, so he didn't think much of it. But now, reflecting carefully, he suddenly sensed something wrong.

He lowered his voice and said, "I feel a trace of unease."

The clerk asked curiously, "Dong Weng, please speak."

Liang Shixian replied, "The Dao Xuan Deity has already brought rain and ended the drought in villages like Gaojia Village, Zhengjia Village, Zhuangjia Village, Wangjia Village, and others, so they can produce grain again. Yet, these villages show no sign of paying taxes."

The clerk froze; the brush in his hand stopped moving.

Liang Shixian continued, "Right now, nearly ten thousand refugees in the county are working on road construction under the Dao Xuan Deity's organization. Although their wages are generous, they don't pay taxes. For a time, I forgot about this matter, overjoyed they survived. But now it strikes me—if they keep avoiding taxes, isn't that a huge problem? If the court investigates, what should I do?"

Hearing this, Li Daoxuan couldn't help but grin. "Haha, you're right! I forgot that too, but you the official still remember."

Exactly, this matter gets forgotten by all except the magistrate for good reason.

Because tax collection is a magistrate's top "performance"—do it well for fast promotion, do it poorly... heh.

The clerk also paused in surprise. After a few seconds, an awkward look appeared on his face. "Dong Weng, on this tax issue... I suggest postponing once more."

Liang Shixian questioned, "I delayed it last year. Should I delay again this year?"

The clerk whispered, "Use the same tactics as last year to keep stalling. We must not collect taxes now—that would defy heaven's will. To be brutally honest, all the silver and grain in the people's hands now come from the Dao Xuan Deity, barely any by their own farming. Taxing them now is taxing the Dao Xuan Deity. What if he gets angry and slams down a giant hand? How would you resist? As the Chengcheng County magistrate, you can't leave; there's nowhere to flee."

Liang Shixian mumbled, "Ah, it seems accurate. But collecting taxes is my duty. After delaying a year, I've done my best. Since the deity has infinite power and cares for the people, maybe he can conjure grain to cover the people's taxes? That would relieve court pressure on our remote county and stop it eying these poor folks."

As he spoke, he suddenly sensed something amiss, like a memory detail slipping away.

No! Focus hard.

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, instantly switched to mental search mode in his mind. Past scenes, uttered words—every phrase rotated like a lantern, then "ding," froze on something Thirty-Two had said. "After paying up? Who gets it? Are you sure that tax silver all hits the treasury? Even if it does, will it ever help the people?"

Clearly, the deity refused to pay taxes to the court.

Liang Shixian sighed deeply. "This tax... we should indeed not collect it now."

Hearing his struggle, Li Daoxuan seriously pondered a question: should tax be levied?

Yes!

Gaojia Village's current setup isn't sustainable—it runs solely on the materials he endlessly sends via the golden hand, all dumped into the village treasury, so it's not a proper system.

But without his golden hand interference, a sound system would need taxes to fill the county treasury, funding national projects.

Without a county treasury, who pays for a highway? Plead with the people to chip in? That would ruin the whole world.

So tax is essential, but the method must shift—not burden the poor, but the middle-income or above. This was complex.

Many subtleties existed!

Li Daoxuan didn't think he could dream up the perfect plan instantly; it demanded time to research the how, how much, and whom to tax, crafting a detailed scheme.

Of course, collected taxes couldn't go to the court—they had to stay in the county treasury, enriching Chengcheng County's people. That was another big debate; it needed clarity, not haste.

Until that plan was ready, the people of Chengcheng County could celebrate freely a while longer!

He moved his gaze to the printing shop. There, Gao Yiye sat in the book chamber with the four girls—bought out from a brothel—collaborating on drawing volume three of “Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale.” This volume had already reached the county siege phase: armies assaulting the walls, the deity's palm crashing down, rebels begging mercy...

Li Daoxuan smiled: That sly girl tracked current events well!

“Yiye! Starting tomorrow, you'll have work to do: relay the story to the four girls for drawing. You help me manage things—coordinate with the magistrate on revamping the county city.”

Gao Yiye felt rushing with pride: “Yes, sir!”

Chapter 278: The Scientist Arrives

Chongzhen Year Two, first lunar month. Beijing, imperial palace, Imperial Study.

Zhu Youjian was intently reviewing memorials, his brows deeply furrowed.

Three Boundary Governor Wu Zhiwang reported the mutiny in Guyuan. Mutinous soldiers had plundered the treasury of Guyuan Prefecture before attacking Jingyang, Fuping, and Sanyuan. Guerrilla General Li Ying was also captured...

Reading this memorial made his heart feel like it was riding a roller coaster plummeting downward.

This report dated from the twelfth month of the previous year, but he only saw it now in the first lunar month because the backlog of memorials piled up endlessly—unreadable, simply unreadable.

Recalling his ancestor Zhu Yuanzhang's formidable statecraft, Zhu Youjian felt a wave of shame.

"Even border troops have rebelled. Withholding pay for so long... indeed disastrous."

Zhu Youjian couldn't help but heave a deep sigh.

His trusted eunuch Cao Huachun whispered softly, "We must find a way to acquire silver, Your Majesty. Otherwise..."

Zhu Youjian replied, "But where can silver be found?"

Cao Huachun extended his hand, offering a memorial: "Your Majesty, perhaps examine this report."

"Oh?"

Zhu Youjian opened the memorial and focused. It was submitted by Liu Mao, a supervising secretary from the Office of Scrutiny for Justice. The document proposed strict reforms to the courier station system, redefining its usage standards. It argued that rectifying various abuses could save the courier service hundreds of thousands of liang of silver annually.

“Eliminate the reckless distribution of travel passes to relieve the people’s suffering!”

After reading it, Zhu Youjian frowned slightly. “Merely reforming the courier stations could save hundreds of thousands of liang yearly?”

Cao Huachun murmured, “The courier system’s expenditures are indeed immense. Officials of all ranks often demand excessive porters and horses during travels. Some even extort ‘zhe qian’—forcing courier stations to supply more than needed, keeping the surplus as converted silver for themselves... Meanwhile, the stations report these inflated sums to the court, burdening the state treasury.”

Zhu Youjian’s brows knotted tightly. “So these scoundrels swindle hundreds of thousands from the treasury yearly?”

Cao Huachun confirmed quietly, “Exactly, Your Majesty.”

Zhu Youjian erupted in rage. “Outrageous! Immediate reform! Rein in the courier stations’ spending! This waste ends now!”

Cao Huachun soothed, “Do not anger yourself, Your Majesty. After reform, those hundreds of thousands will flow back to the treasury. You should rejoice instead.”

Zhu Youjian pondered this. Yes—previously, this drain went unnoticed, but now exposed, the wealth would return. He could deploy hundreds of thousands more liang yearly. Wasn’t this splendid? It would greatly ease his strained finances.

At this thought, his spirits soared as if on a jet engine.

But joy lasted barely moments...

“Report! Urgent dispatch!”

A eunuch rushed into the study, handing over an urgent military report.

Zhu Youjian scanned it: “Bandits rampaged through Luochuan, Chunhua, Sanshui, Lueyang, Qingshui, Cheng County, Hancheng, Yi County, Zhongbu, Shiquan, Yichuan, Suide, Jiazhou, Yao, Jingning, Tongguan, Yangping Pass, Jinsuo Pass, and more...”

The endless string of place names made Zhu Youjian’s heart plummet like a dive coaster. He roared, “What do these endless names mean? Why not say: Shaanxi and its borders have descended into chaos?!”

Cao Huachun broke into a cold sweat.

Zhu Youjian thundered, “Are Shaanxi Governor Hu Tingyan and Yan-Sui Governor Wu Zhiwang utterly worthless?”

As he finished shouting, another eunuch burst in breathlessly: “Report! Yan-Sui Governor Wu Zhiwang has died of illness! A new governor is urgently needed!”

Zhu Youjian: “!!!”

He frowned, lost in thought for a long moment, then commanded, “Summon Yang He to see me.”

...

Meanwhile, Chengcheng County was stirring with renewed vitality.

Since the Dao Xuan Deity manifested publicly to its people, heavenly interventions became frequent. First, the deity induced rain over Chengcheng County in full view of all. Then, through his herald, Mr. Wang, and the magistrate, he began reviving every trade in the city.

As with Gaojia Village’s path, the government artisans were the first beneficiaries.

The Deity directly raised all artisans' wages.

This broke ancestral custom, yet Magistrate Liang Shixian raised no objections and promptly obeyed.

By the late Ming Dynasty, far-sighted officials recognized the artisan household system's flaws and desired reform. Liang Shixian simply lacked the power to change it. With supplies granted by the deity bolstering him, he finally had the courage to treat artisans generously.

Simultaneously, the deity released vast stores of grain to restock the county granary.

Liang Shixian immediately opened an official grain shop, selling grain at prices from non-famine years. Within days, the exorbitant grain price—one dou of rice costing a thousand coins—plummeted back to normal rates.

Overjoyed by this achievement, sources reported Liang Shixian stood in the county office yard, laughing heartily: "People of Chengcheng, your magistrate has lowered the grain price for you!"

Once grain prices normalized, commoners no longer spent every coin on food. They now had energy and coins to purchase other goods. Thus, trades everywhere reawakened, gradually restoring life to the city.

Fabric shops reopened. Tailor shops welcomed customers. Tea houses drew patrons again. Pottery and wares found buyers. Craftwork began selling. Theatrical troupes performed to audiences...

The county's revival exceeded all predictions.

Amidst this lively rebirth...

One Daoist and three companions crossed through Chengcheng County's city gates.

The Daoist was Ma Tianzheng. The three with him were Song Yingxing and his two servants.

Exhausted and hungry, the four travelers had journeyed afar.

Their path had not been easy—meeting packs of bandits multiple times. Yet in these times, Daoists commanded respect; bandits hesitated to rob them. When occasional ruffians attacked, Ma Tianzheng's Quanzhen sword art sufficed for defense.

“Mr. Song, this is Chengcheng County,” Ma Tianzheng said with a long sigh of relief. “From here to Gaojia Village is merely thirty li. Let us rest here tonight and proceed tomorrow.”

Entering the city, Song Yingxing also eased. “Marvelous! I too have wearied. Shaanxi is truly fearsome—famine and bandits everywhere. Ah, without Daoist Ma's aid, I could never have reached here.”

Ma Tianzheng replied, “It was this humble Daoist's duty.”

As they spoke, a large crowd approached down the street. Leading them, a mother and son: Young Master Bai and Madam Bai. Beside them walked contractor Teng Yifeng.

Addressing Young Master Bai respectfully, Teng said, “Young Master Bai, we heard you possess a masterful method for moving heavy objects. Our road construction team faces an enormous boulder blocking our way. It needs removal. We beg your assistance.”

Chapter 279: How to Calculate?

Young Master Bai laughed, “How big is that large stone you want to move?”

Teng Yifeng said, “It's about two zhang long and one zhang wide—a whole large stone, extremely huge. The laborers couldn't budge it at all. It really troubled us, and we felt awkward asking the Saint Lady to bother the Deity again. The foreman from Gaojia Village said that Young Master Bai could handle heavy objects.”

Young Master Bai laughed heartily, “Haha, such a small stone! With physics knowledge, we can easily drag it away.”

The speaker meant nothing by it, but the listener took it seriously.

Upon hearing this, Song Yingxing frowned, thinking secretly: To move such a gigantic stone? I do know a method—carve large gears from giant wood, one placed vertically, one horizontally, with the gears meshed. Use oxen to pull the vertical gear, rotating it to drive the horizontal gear, and thus drag the heavy object.

But few know this method. How can this hairless little kid know it? What is this “physics” he spoke of? Should I ask him?

Just as he thought this, Daoist Ma ahead greeted Madam Bai and Young Master Bai, saying, “Ah, isn’t that Madam Bai and Young Master Bai? This humble Daoist offers his respects.”

The mother and son, seeing Daoist Ma, were quite pleased. “Daoist Ma, it’s been a long time. We heard you traveled abroad on the Deity’s orders. Have you returned now?”

Ma Tianzheng smiled, “Fortunately, I didn’t fail the mission. I finally completed the Deity’s instruction. Tomorrow, this humble Daoist plans to return to Gaojia Village to meet the Deity.”

Madam Bai smiled and pointed at the sky. “The Deity is in the county town now. Look up and you’ll see him.”

Ma Tianzheng was greatly surprised. He hurriedly looked up and indeed saw a Sharp Knife Troop of low cloud floating in the sky. He immediately dusted off his clothes, bowed deeply, and said, “Disciple Ma Tianzheng pays homage to the Deity.”

The low cloud gently swayed, seeming to respond to him.

Ma Tianzheng was overjoyed: The Deity responded to me!

Just as he wanted to say more, Song Yingxing grabbed his arm. “Daoist Ma, do you know this young master? Please introduce us. I have much to discuss with him.”

Ma Tianzheng finally recalled the main point. He quickly pulled Song Yingxing over and introduced him to Young Master Bai, while also presenting him to the Deity. “This is Mr. Song Yingxing from Fengxin County, Jiangxi.”

“This is Young Master Bai of the Bai Family Fortress.”

When Li Daoxuan heard the three words “Song Yingxing,” he was immensely delighted: He’s here, finally here, hahaha, the top scientist of the late Ming Dynasty. Now we’ve tricked him in. Once he’s in my sight, he won’t be able to leave—I have countless ways to keep him around.

Very well. Let Young Master Bai chat with Song Yingxing first. Though Young Master Bai had only learned physics up to eighth grade, it was enough to open a new world for Song Yingxing.

Song Yingxing cupped his hands politely toward Young Master Bai. Although the other was nearly thirty years younger, Song Yingxing still didn’t dare disrespect him. “Young master, just now I heard you say you could move such a large stone using physics methods. May I ask what approach you plan to take?”

Young Master Bai sized up the middle-aged man curiously. Seeing his eager, questioning expression, as if very interested in scholarly discussion, he felt a surge of happiness himself. He had learned physics too quickly—no one in Gaojia Village could discuss it with him anymore. Now someone who seemed keen had arrived. He couldn’t resist boasting a bit.

Young Master Bai chuckled and revealed what he’d just learned. “Gears!”

“Is it really gears?” Song Yingxing was thrilled. “Hey, my idea was to use gears too.”

Young Master Bai said, “Huh? You also understand gears? Have you studied the Tome of Physics in the heavenly books?”

Song Yingxing asked, “What is the Tome of Physics in the heavenly books?”

Young Master Bai said, “So you haven’t studied it. Whew, you scared me! I thought someone outside Gaojia Village knew the Tome of Physics too. Hehe.”

Song Yingxing was somewhat curious. “May I ask what the Tome of Physics in the heavenly books is?”

Young Master Bai replied, “That can’t be explained in a few sentences. Let’s go examine that large stone first instead.”

Soon, the group arrived at the site outside the city. They saw a massive stone blocking the middle of the road. The villagers had to either shift it or detour the path. Undoubtedly, for the public sun chariot to run smoothly later, moving the stone was the right solution.

Young Master Bai asked, “Have they studied how heavy this stone is?”

Teng Yifeng answered respectfully, “We can’t weigh such a large stone. We don’t know its weight.”

Song Yingxing smiled inwardly, thinking: This can only be weighed using Cao Chong’s elephant-weighing method... But elephants can move—you can lead them onto a boat. This stone is immobile and can’t be put on a boat, so weighing is impossible.

Just as he thought this, he saw Young Master Bai take out a tailor’s soft ruler, measure the stone’s widest diameter, then grab paper and pen and quickly calculate. Looking up, he said, “About 60,000 jin.”

Song Yingxing froze. “!!!”

Young Master Bai continued calculating on the paper. After a moment, he raised his head again. “To move over 60,000 jin of stone, we need a large gear made with a diameter of XX and a smaller gear with a diameter of XX to assist... Let me check... Mmm... This figure is about right. Call the blacksmith. Make several gears based on my dimensions—only bigger than I specified, not smaller. Otherwise, even two oxen won’t pull it—insufficient strength.”

“Set up the gears here, use oxen to pull, and have workers pry it hard with iron rods on the other side. That’ll shift the stone away.”

Song Yingxing was inwardly shocked: I knew gears could lift large stones, but I couldn’t precisely calculate the gear size or how many oxen were needed—just made them as big as possible. How did this kid calculate so precisely?

Upset by his ignorance, Song Yingxing hurriedly asked, “May I ask, Young Master Bai, how do you accurately calculate how much weight gears of a certain size, pulled by two oxen, can lift?”

Young Master Bai chuckled slyly. “The difference in diameter between the large and small gears determines the multiple by which the force is amplified... Take the approximate strength of two oxen and the diameter difference of the gears to calculate... Oh, it’s hard to explain verbally. I’ll write you a formula to see yourself.”

He picked up the pen and quickly scribbled a formula on the paper.

But Song Yingxing couldn’t understand it at all and froze for a moment.

This was terrible. He’d always thought he knew everything, but coming here had shown him there were higher skies abounding and people surpassing people.

“I have a small request. Um... the Tome of Physics in the heavenly books... might I trouble you to let me read it?” Song Yingxing blushed slightly. “I can pay a handsome reward.”

Young Master Bai didn’t care about rewards at all. As long as someone was willing to learn, the material could be freely taught—that was the Deity’s original words. So he’d just give the book.

Chapter 280: Song Yingxing’s Travels

Young Master Bai immediately pulled out “Middle School Physics, Second Grade, Volume Two” and placed it into Song Yingxing’s hands. “Uncle, it seems you’re quite interested. This book’s for you. Ah, actually, this text is too advanced. Without foundational knowledge, it won’t make sense to you. I didn’t bring any basic books with me... And before tackling physics, one must first learn mathematics. Otherwise, you won’t grasp the formulas.”

With limited books on hand, Young Master Bai pointed toward Gaojia Village’s direction. “Uncle, better head to Gaojia Village instead. At Gaojia Village School’s library, all the books are available for free reading.”

Song Yingxing replied, “Many thanks, young friend.”

He turned to seek Daoist Ma, only to find Daoist Ma bright-faced. The old priest was deeply engrossed in bowing and reciting sutras to the cloud floating in the sky while recounting his experiences traveling to Jiangxi.

Ever since finding evidence proving “deities truly exist,” Daoist Ma took immense pride in his profession. When preaching to others, he no longer felt the doubt and guilt that once troubled him. Now his sermons exuded absolute confidence.

During his journey to Jiangxi to locate Song Yingxing, he’d preached energetically to many. His voice boomed with a powerful vitality he’d never before experienced. It felt like a rebirth.

This pilgrimage profoundly matured him, lending him a truly immortal radiance.

Upon returning and encountering the Deity, he promptly knelt to express his gratitude for this transformative rebirth.

To Song Yingxing, however, such behavior seemed utterly irrational.

Hesitating briefly, Song Yingxing decided against asking Daoist Ma for guidance. Just over thirty li remained to Gaojia Village. With two servants guarding him, he could manage the route alone.

Enquiring among workers about Gaojia Village’s direction, Song Yingxing learned the very road under construction led straight there. Following the excavated roadbed, he set off.

Li Daoxuan observed the small figure of this “wild scientist.” Determined to secure this person’s talents, Li fixed his focus squarely on Song Yingxing, trailing along mentally as he journeyed.

Not far along the path toward Gaojia Village, Song Yingxing encountered a grayish road stretching onward.

He stooped down, running his fingers over its surface. “Cement! This matches what Daoist Ma showed me... Astonishing. To witness actual cement used in road construction here in Chengcheng County is remarkable.”

Proceeding along the cement road presented unparalleled comfort. Its firm flatness made the journey effortless. Suddenly, the public sun chariot approached. Packed aboard sat laborers heading toward a worksite.

Frightened momentarily, Song Yingxing exclaimed, “What bizarre vehicle is this?”

Unlike Daoist Ma’s reckless habit of leaping before traffic, he prudently stayed clear, letting the peculiar wheeled transport zoom past him.

Now lacking any chance to examine that chariot, Song Yingxing continued his hike.

Closer to Gaojia Village, the surroundings grew increasingly peculiar.

Colorful, enigmatic structures lined the road’s edges. Pinching one’s surface material baffled Song Yingxing—neither wood nor metal nor earth could define it.

“What alien substance is this?” Puzzled but undeterred, he pressed further.

Dusk approached as Gaojia Village emerged ahead.

Night settled, yet Gaojia Village awoke with vibrant nightlife. Peasants completed their daily labor, shouldering hoes and shovels while journeying back home, converging with Song Yingxing’s path.

Gleaning directions, Song Yingxing queried, “Fellow villagers, is this Gaojia Village?”

A farmer carrying a hoe grinned. “Aye, here stands Gaojia Village. First time visiting, sir?”

Song Yingxing confirmed, “Indeed. I heard about this place’s ‘school,’ overflowing with books.”

“Night’s fallen; the school closed until tomorrow. You’ll find it bustling come morning,” advised the farmer.

Wondering about lodging, Song Yingxing asked, “Then... where should I lodge tonight?”

That hoe-carrying local indicated Gaojia Business Circle. “Seek shelter at the inn over there!”

Scanning where gestured, Song Yingxing spotted an illuminated, multicolored cluster crowning the hillock.

Every twilight, Gaojia Business Circle lit dazzlingly.

Those colorful lights originated from lanterns crafted by lamp makers accompanying Xu Dafu from Xi’an.

Brilliant hues burst throughout the business circle’s expanse. Its glow interplayed strikingly with technicolored plastic structures, evoking disco-like rapture.

Surveying such bizarre architecture, Song Yingxing muttered half in shock, “This... this must embody debauchery itself!”

Summoning courage, he entered the business circle...

Turbulent excitement arose nearby as people discussed an approaching theater troupe’s performance.

Following their movement led Song Yingxing to view Shaanbei Diaoqu. As a Jiangxi native witnessing this northern drama for the inaugural time, he halted captivated.

Tonight’s Dao Emotion play enacted “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale.” Eager for novelty, this troupe adapted comic books conceived by Gao Yiye onto stage.

Peasants knelt miserably sobbing before brutal bandits swung swords threatening violence. Suddenly, a colossal paper palm descended from overhead, squashing villains against earth.

Feigning death, one bandit howled dramatically.

Accompanying sanxian and sihu string instruments ushered peasants' songful ode to Dao Xuan Deity's mercy...

Rapt viewers yelled thunderous: "Magnificent!"

Pieces of silver and other coins showered upon performers.

Enchanted by his premiere Shaanbei Diaoqu experience, Song Yingxing contributed handfuls of coppers too.

Turning toward attendants, he mused, "Severe drought in Shaanxi renders lives unbearably harsh. Witnessing suffering universally along our trek, yet... Gaojia Village residents thrive amid such blissful vivacity. Extraordinary!"

Servants whispered uneasily, "This settlement brims with outlandish weirdness, Master."

Song Yingxing's smile broadened. "Such peculiarities fascinate me profoundly."

Amid his remark, a boisterous vendor's cry erupted nearby: "Spectators here! Savory rice noodles await!"

Song Yingxing peered curiously toward the source. Beside that theatrical platform, unmistakably sat a rice noodle shop marked "Laba Rice Noodles." Amazement seized him utterly.

"Am I bewildered? Rice noodles? That's distinctly southern cuisine!"

Equally startled followers stammered, “Master... it indeed is such a shop here... Utterly bewildering...”