

# THE GREAT MING IN THE BOX

## Chapter 6: The Bailiffs Arrive

1627, Year Seven of Tianqi, Shaanxi, Chengcheng County.

Zhang Yaocai, the Chengcheng County Magistrate, sat in the county office hall, flipping through ledgers handed by his accountant. His brows were tightly knit in displeasure: “Haven’t the back taxes from each village been collected yet? The higher-ups demand urgent payment.”

The accountant forced a smile: “County Lord, the drought in Shaanxi has left vast lands barren. The commoners truly have no grain left. Pressing them won’t yield results—it’s simply a case of nothing left to do.” He emphasized the last phrase loudly, his exaggerated expression adding a touch of absurdity.

Zhang Yaocai knew this accountant often peppered sentences with odd summaries but paid no mind, merely grumbling: “No grain? Those lowly wretches have plenty stashed away—they just hoard it, unwilling to pay.”

The accountant awkwardly replied: “There’s a drought...”

Zhang Yaocai snapped: “There was drought the year before last, and last year too. Taxes arrived just fine. Why fail this year?”

The accountant explained: “The first year of drought, people still had stockpiles. The second year, they sold everything—pans, tools—to barely scrape together taxes. But after three years of unbroken drought... lives are at stake. How could they possibly pay? It’s a matter of pushing limits thrice.”

Zhang Yaocai glared sideways: “What? Defending those worthless peasants? What bribe did they give you to blow ill winds in my ear?”

The accountant paled: “County Lord, I accepted nothing! They’ve no silver to bribe anyone; they’re fighting to survive. I... couldn’t help speaking up. Call it conscience stirring.”

With a scornful snort, Zhang Yaocai ignored him, turning instead to nearby bailiffs: “Form squads immediately to press for taxes. Let me see... Gaojia Village, Wangjia Village, Zhengjia Village—their payments are the worst. Split into teams and visit these villages. Remember, these peasants excel at

playing poor. Beat any who hide grain or resist payment—spare no brutality.”

The bailiffs roared assent.

Horrified, the accountant flung himself at Zhang Yaocai’s leg, wailing: “County Lord, you mustn’t! The people suffer enough! This will only drive peaceable folk to rebel!”

“Get off! I’m done with your antics!” Zhang Yaocai landed a brutal kick to the accountant’s crotch. The man crumpled, squeezing into a ball, clutching himself.

...

As sunset bathed the earth pale gold, Gao Yiye dragged weary steps back to Gaojia Village. Her bamboo basket held half a day’s harvest: tree bark, grass roots, and wild greens. Paired with the boiled egg saved from earlier, this bounty promised to fill her stomach tomorrow.

Her spirits lightened, quickening her pace.

Other villagers streamed home along the path, each clutching baskets of weeds and bark. Many waved warmly at Gao Yiye, thanking her for sharing the miraculous egg.

Returning greetings, Gao Yiye reached her hut and lifted the door latch.

Crash! The door swung open—hundreds of giant, egg-shaped rice grains, each over half a meter wide, surged toward her. She scrambled backward half a step, but the divine rice overtook her. Just as she braced to be swallowed whole, a colossal hand materialized in the sky. It intercepted the cascade. Though the avalanche slowed, rice grains slipping through its fingers tangled Gao Yiye's ankles, and she tumbled.

Stunned, she looked around.

Rice! Giant rice! Each grain dwarfed her; a single one likely weighed over a hundred pounds.

Before the daze lifted, a familiar face shimmered through the clouds—the Great deity, faintly smiling, then vanished.

Understanding dawned: the deity had played a prank on her, stuffing her home with divine rice to startle her upon opening the door.

Once she pieced this together, laughter spilled from her. Being buried under mountains of “giant rice” was a post-drought fantasy she’d never thought to experience. The joy even briefly chased away grief for her late mother.

Trapped within the white pile though, she couldn’t clamber out. She yelled, “Village Chief Grandpa! Gao Chuwu! Everyone, help me!”

Instantly, neighbors rushed over.

Gasps erupted: “Rice! Giant rice!”

The brawny Gao Chuwu charged in, shoving aside the massive grains encircling her and hoisting her free. By then, the Village Chief had arrived. Soon, all forty-two villagers clustered outside Gao Yiye's hut.

Staring at the millstone-sized grains, they froze—minds stunned blank.

Eventually, the Village Chief murmured, "This must be the Great deity's gift? Grain this colossal doesn't exist on earth."

Gao Yiye nodded: "The Great deity played a trick. He packed my house with divine rice to bury me at the door."

The Chief sighed, "May he prank us like this daily!"

Gao Chuwu beamed foolishly. He scooped up a grain; its hundred-pound weight strained his arms, yet he hugged it like treasure. "How to split this? Ten per household?"

“Stop!” The Chief thundered. “Do not presume! This grain may be gifted solely to Yiye. What if angering the deity makes us end like those bandits?”

Gao Chuwu recoiled, letting the rice clatter to the ground.

The Chief softened toward Gao Yiye: “Child, since the deity appears only to you, we must ask you to petition on our behalf... Would he permit us to share this blessing?”

Just then, a shrill, arrogant voice sliced through the village entrance: “Lowly wretches of Gaojia Village—show yourselves! Cease hiding and pretending death! When will you pay imperial taxes owed?”

Every villager’s face darkened. Even toddlers smothered whimpers into fearful silence.

Gao Chuwu hissed: “Trouble. County bailiffs are here.”

Without pause, the Village Chief commanded: “Yiye, Gao Chuwu, all young ones—secure this rice inside Yiye’s home. Bolt the door. I’ll handle the bailiffs. No one must glimpse this grain.”