

Great Ming 61

Chapter 61: We Gained the Shelter of Dao Xuan Deity

Once inside the city, they were safe.

The two sculptors spoke first: "Third Lady, we two plan to go to the market for a walk."

"Hmm, go ahead," he replied. "Early in the morning tomorrow, gather at the city gates. We will go back together. Absolutely do not go back on your own. How dangerous the road is, you have seen for yourselves."

The two sculptors nodded quickly. On the way here, they had nearly been killed by bandits; how could they dare to return on their own.

The two said they begged pardon, then picked up their small bags and headed straight to the market.

At that time, there was a great drought across the land, and the people's livelihood withered. There were not many merchants at the market; some sold various chaotic equipment daily items, but few sold food, especially all sorts of side dishes and seasonings, which were almost never available.

The two sculptors spread out their bags in a corner of the market. They took out some of the fine goods given by the Deity and displayed them.

Once displayed, an amazing thing happened. A large crowd surged over with a roar.

"This... this is sugar! Snow-white transparent sugar!"

The white sugar bestowed by the Deity had been very large lumps, like crystal chunks. But the two sculptors were no fools; at home, they had crushed the large white sugar blocks into a powdered form. Yet this sugar, made with "modern techniques," was far whiter than that from ancient methods; it clearly wasn't the same kind of product.

The two sculptors raised their faces and laughed: "Fine goods, eh?"

“Give me one qian.”

“I want two qian.”

“I’ll take one qian too.”

The city commoners were much richer than those in the villages, but they still didn’t dare buy much. Forget buying by the jin; they wouldn’t even consider purchasing by the liang. They could only buy one or two qian to satisfy their cravings.

While one sculptor sold sugar with great excitement, the other drew a circle of people: “This of yours... is it lard?”

The sculptor answered: “Yes, indeed, top-grade lard. Smell it—nice and fragrant?”

“What times are these anymore? How do you even have lard?”

“People have nothing to eat. How could your family manage to raise pigs? What kind of household is this?”

Of course, the city folk couldn’t raise pigs themselves. The lard they usually ate came from being sold into the city by villagers. But ever since the drought began, pig-farming households grew fewer and fewer, almost vanishing.

These people hadn’t tasted the flavor of lard in ages.

“This... I’ll take three qian.”

“Give me five qian.”

Each person bought little, as the items were too costly. But so many buyers came that all the goods brought by the two sculptors sold out completely in no time. They transformed into two large bags of pieces of silver.

The two sculptors weighed the silver in their purses, thrilled beyond words. They then exchanged glances and exclaimed: "Now we can pay the 'artisan registration fee'!"

As it turned out, these two sculptors, like Li Da, held artisan registration.

The difference was that Li Da was called "permanent workers," while the two sculptors went by "rotating workers."

The permanent workers had to operate under a "duty system," reporting punctually for working in government workshops. Their personal freedom was severely constrained. Therefore, Li Da was eager to shed his artisan registration.

The rotating workers, though, enjoyed more liberty. Once every three to five years, they took alternating shifts in government workshops, typically working for three straight months. This could then grant them a rest period of three to five years, making them relatively freer.

In the forty-first year of Jiajing, the court reformed the artisan service system by allowing rotating workers to skip duty entirely. Instead, they must pay an "artisan registration fee" of four qian and five fen annually. The court then used these funds to hire others for the working.

Previously, the two sculptors couldn't afford the money, so they dutifully took their rotating shifts. But recently, blessed by the Deity, they acquired many valuable items at home. This stirred them to exchange the items for silver and use it to cover the "artisan registration fee."

For that reason, the two of them risked death to follow Thirty-Two on a trip to the county town.

Now that the money had been exchanged, the pockets of both were full, and they were brimming with confidence; they could go to pay for their freedom.

The two strode proudly, chests out, walking as if with the wind, heads held high, heading toward the official workshop.

Inside the workshop, walking through the hall, all along the way, they encountered various artisans: carpenters, sawyers, tilers, blacksmiths, tailors, painters, bamboo workers, tinsmiths, typesetters, founders, screen makers, embroiderers, double-line workers, stonemasons, silversmiths, drum makers, armorsmiths, ink-kiln workers, barrel makers, multicolored painters, engravers, tanners, perfumers, clay sculptors, paper makers, glassmakers...

The official workshop held countless talented individuals, all masterful and dexterous experts.

These were people who saw each other every day, so most knew one another.

Spotting the two sculptors, they waved and greeted, "Hey, it's you two? I recall you both just had your rotation last year; you shouldn't be needed this year, so why are you here?"

The two sculptors smiled arrogantly, "We've earned some money, come to pay the artisan registration fee, heh heh heh."

As soon as they spoke those words, they drew stares filled with envy and resentment.

Who wouldn't want to pay for freedom?

But few could afford it.

The artisan registration holders were each poorer and more miserable than the last; never mind finding cash for the artisan registration fee, most had to mortgage their children just to scrape by.

Hearing that the two sculptors had actually made money to pay the "artisan registration fee," a group couldn't help but gather: "Where did you two strike it rich? Got any connections? Do tell us as well; we're dying to hand over the 'artisan registration fee' and just skip away without looking back."

The two sculptors weren't fools; this was something to whisper in private, not shout before a crowd, so they chuckled, "We've gained the protection of Dao Xuan Deity."

After saying that, without another word, they walked straight into the inner hall and met the steward artisan master.

"Artisan Master, we're here to pay the artisan registration fee," they said.

The artisan master was an old leader; he snorted through his nose, "How many years' worth are you aiming to pay in one go? I must remind you both, you're rotating workers with a three-year cycle. If you plan to miss the next rotation, you'll need to pay a full three years' fee upfront—that's thirteen qian five fen—and that's no small sum."

The old leader had just finished speaking.

The two sculptors replied at once, "We're paying for thirty years, so we won't need to show for ten cycles, Artisan Master. Chances are, you'll never set eyes on either of us again."

"Pah!"

The old leader nearly sprayed out his tea: "Thirty years? That's eight liang five qian of silver! How could you two paupers ever lay hands on eight liang five qian?"

The two stood stiff-backed, wearing a smugly confident smile; they reached into their robes, pulled out two large sacks, and slammed them onto the table with a jingling clatter of silver.

Just hearing that noise, the old man knew the bags held good.

Opening them to look, sure enough, they brimmed with pieces of silver; weighing them by hand, he knew it was more than enough, and he could skim some kickback for himself.

The old man was convinced; he yanked out a thick ledger, flipped to the page for “clay sculptors,” located their names, wrote in the margin, “Artisan registration fee paid in full for thirty years,” then marked the date and circled it.

The two sculptors took the receipt and boasted haughtily, “Artisan Master, let’s bid farewell here; for the rest of our lives, no more meetings.”

The old man waved a hand, unsure what to say; he could only watch as they strode away briskly and vanished outside the official workshop.

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Chapter 62: He Offered Far Too Much

When Thirty-Two and Third Lady returned to their home in the county town, they discovered that all their belongings had been completely looted.

Days earlier, due to Bai Shui Wang Er’s rampage, every residence in the “wealthy district” had been ransacked. The entire neighborhood was in ruins, with several houses burned down, leaving only charred timbers behind.

Thirty-Two was clearly a benevolent man who often spoke out for the common people, yet his home hadn’t escaped the plundering. The door had been kicked in, and anything of value had been taken, leaving it utterly empty.

Other kind-hearted families he knew had met the same fate.

When the scattered troops swept through, did they care about who was good or bad? Blinded with the urge to kill, they had no patience to discern. The rich and cruel were cut down with a slash; those who built bridges and repaired roads were cut down with a slash; even the quiet and moderate were cut down with a slash.

Third Lady thought it over carefully: “I simply won’t live at home anymore. I’ll go straight to the City God Temple to seek lodging.”

Third Lady continued: "I often visited the City God Temple to offer incense, giving robes and provisions like rice and flour to the monks. Today, if I bring more silver, the monks will surely be willing to let me stay."

Thirty-Two chuckled: "That's true indeed. With money, nothing is impossible to accomplish."

Third Lady patted the jar containing the divine medicine: "Once I move into the City God Temple, I'll put on a robe and use the god of the Deity to treat the illnesses of some impoverished good citizens who can't afford medical care. That way, I'll be saving the world."

Thirty-Two said: "I'm just worried the monks at the temple won't permit it..."

Third Lady smiled: "The City God is an immortal of the Daoist, and so is the Deity. Since they belong to the same Daoist tradition, why wouldn't they allow it? I've never heard of the Temple of the Primordial Deity forbidding offerings to the Supreme Lord of Dao."

Thirty-Two replied: "Ah, I see."

His eyes rolled thoughtfully, and he grinned: "Use more effort, save more poor commoners. If anyone here finds life unbearable, urge them to come to Gaojia Village. Our village still needs a lot of hands."

Third Lady retorted: "I don't need you to tell me that."

With their plan settled, they made their way to the City God Temple. True enough, money made lodging seem as easy as lifting a finger. The monks welcomed their benefactor with deference. No, not "benefactor" — Benefactor Mother settled in.

With his wife comfortably arranged, Thirty-Two prepared to start his own task.

He walked to a private school in the eastern part of town.

To be precise, it wasn't a private school but a "family school."

It lacked official certification; it was simply run by a poor scholar with no wife who had set up a few desks in his own home and enrolled a handful of children from the nearby community as students.

The scholar wore a faded blue robe, its hem patched in places. As soon as he saw Thirty-Two, his face lit up with surprise and relief. “Sir Thirty-Two! Since Bai Shui Wang Er’s uprising days ago, your precious daughter hasn’t attended class. I’ve been very worried. I went to your home to inquire, but saw... ah... it truly frightened me...”

Thirty-Two said: “Thank you for your concern, Mr. Wang. At that time, my family fled the county town and took refuge in Gaojia Village. My daughter remains there still and hasn’t dared return to the county.”

Mr. Wang clasped his hands respectfully: “Safe and sound, that’s what matters. That villain Bai Shui Wang Er is truly despicable, disrupting your daughter’s studies. When she returns to the county, I will dedicate my full effort to catching her up on the missed lessons.”

Thirty-Two shook his head: “My daughter likely won’t be returning to the county any time soon.”

Mr. Wang sighed: “Ai!”

This sigh carried profound disappointment. Fewer students meant less tuition income. The patches on his robe weren’t for show; Mr. Wang’s life was truly hard.

Thirty-Two shifted the topic: “Mr. Wang, the reason I’ve come today is to request a significant favor. I’d like you to come and stay temporarily in Gaojia Village to help with my daughter’s education. Naturally, I will show substantial gratitude.”

Mr. Wang shook his head: “This... I’m afraid... that’s not appropriate. I still have several other students here. If I go to Gaojia Village, abandoning those others... my heart couldn’t bear it.”

He was unwilling to venture outside the city. What awaited out there? Rebels running amok, killing everywhere! With the Chengcheng County Magistrate dead, and the Inspector Cheng Xu holed up into a Sharp Knife Troop, and the Provincial Governor of Shaanxi ignoring the turmoil – leaving the city was a death wish!

Thirty-Two knew it was time for silver to enter the stage.

He reached into his bundle, pulled out a lump of silver the size of a big fist, and placed it firmly on the table.

The sight of the silver made Mr. Wang seem to shrink physically: “Aiya? Sir Thirty-Two, what... what is the meaning of this?”

Thirty-Two replied: “How could we ask Mr. Wang to travel over a dozen miles to Gaojia Village, enduring the toil of the journey, without some compensation for your hardship? This silver is solely meant to ease your burden. As for your other students, I will visit their families myself and refund their tuition fees.”

Mr. Wang grew agitated: “How could this possibly be done? Though the tuition fees from those students are meager, I have already accepted them and thus have a responsibility to see them through! How could I abandon them halfway just because you offer me more money? This behavior, Sir Thirty-Two, is unworthy of a sage! It insults propriety! We scholars bear brushes, ink, integrity, and fists! We never...”

Thirty-Two reached into his bundle again. With a soft brush, he pulled out an even larger lump of silver, bigger than a fist. The two massive blocks of silver glistened side-by-side on the table, blindingly bright.

Mr. Wang declared: “I will go!”

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Meanwhile, in Shuangqing City.

Li Daoxuan carefully carried a large box over to his scenic box.

He lifted the lid gently. Inside lay a miniature version of a Hakka roundhouse. His custom-ordered Hakka roundhouse was finally complete.

This model was meticulously scaled down based on the famed “Chonglin Manor.” Measuring 0.54 meters long and 0.64 meters wide, its enclosing walls stood an impressive 4.5 centimeters tall. Inside, it boasted 262 rooms, 9 main halls, and 18 courtyard wells.

While real roundhouses lack a base, Cai Xinzi had created this “model” for Li Daoxuan with one. It was securely mounted onto a large, thick, and sturdy composite material board. Underneath this base, Cai Xinzi had installed a motorized electric control system featuring two rows of tires, each tire boasting a diameter of 6 centimeters.

The internal dividing walls within the roundhouse were made of thin sheet metal. However, Cai Xinzi hadn’t used metal for the roofs or outer walls. The demanding client, Li Daoxuan, had altered his specifications multiple times! He’d thrown out a chaotic list of requirements like “sunlight resistant” and “lightning proof.” Consequently, roofs and outer walls employed composite material board coated with waterproof sealant. Only the interior partitions used thin sheeting to conserve space.

This project cost Cai Xinzi at least 500 silver.

Chapter 63: Moving to a New Home

Li Daoxuan meticulously checked every part of the Hakka roundhouse. He even reached in and pulled with his hand, ensuring the structure was solid. Every wall, every piece of iron, was securely fastened, preventing any chance of collapse.

People were going to live inside. If the building were unstable, collapsed, and crushed them, it would turn into a disaster movie.

Once satisfied with the stability, Li Daoxuan picked up the remote control. He nudged the control stick and set the speed to gear 1. The Hakka roundhouse began to slide across the floor at an extremely slow pace.

Gear 1 was very slow, moving only a dozen or so centimeters per second.

This speed was entirely sufficient for Li Daoxuan’s purpose.

After placing this model in the Ming Dynasty, its crawling speed of over ten centimeters per second would translate to a staggering 100 kilometers per hour, easily rivaling a tank.

After confirming everything was correct, it was time to put it into the box.

Li Daoxuan lifted the lid of the scenic box and peered inside. The villagers were going about their usual activities: some were forging armor in the blacksmith's shop, others were weaving cloth. Some were sawing wood for furniture, one was shaping bamboo sticks into baskets, and another was molding clay into jars...

Those lacking a specific trade, relying only on their strength, had little to do these past days. They were sitting on the open ground in the middle of the village, chatting cheerfully.

Li Daoxuan spoke towards Gao Yiye's house, "Yiye, notify all villagers, we have work to do."

As soon as his words faded, he saw Gao Yiye jump up from beside her weaving machine through the hole in the ceiling, fumbling in a flustered attempt to hide it.

But she quickly realized – the Deity was omniscient; hiding was useless. She pitifully lowered her head. "As you command, Deity... you caught me weaving cloth... you... you're not angry, are you?"

Not angry. Quite adorable.

But of course, he didn't voice that thought. Li Daoxuan skipped the topic and got straight to the point. "Gather all the villagers. Get everyone to retreat to the edge of the village, the corners. Within a radius of fifty zhang (roughly 166 meters) around the central clearing, leave not a single person."

Gao Yiye hastily acknowledged and ran out of her house, loudly proclaiming the Deity's command.

The villagers quickly set down their tasks and followed Gao Yiye, retreating to the village's corners. Pressed against the city wall, they looked puzzled at the empty ground in the village center.

Li Daoxuan sized up the central clearing...

It wasn't spacious enough. The villagers' grass houses were in the way.

Moving the structure outside the village would ruin the farmland.

Although the fields currently lay barren – nothing planted, just cracked yellow earth – come autumn, that same farmland would be a vital production tool that should never be recklessly destroyed.

Therefore, demolition of the village's grass houses was unavoidable.

Very well. The first "demolition households" were about to be born.

Li Daoxuan lowered his voice. "I intend to bestow upon you a fine, large dwelling. To do so, your old houses must be cleared. Each of you will receive compensation for the demolition. Any objections?"

The villagers froze slightly for a moment upon hearing this, then beamed with delight. "Whatever the Deity says!"

"Good. First, I will relocate your houses, striving not to damage your belongings."

Having spoken, Li Daoxuan reached down and grasped. He lifted one villager's grass house, along with a large patch of ground beneath it.

All the villagers witnessed a house, complete with the earth it stood upon, soar into the sky. It sailed through the air and landed gently near the hillside outside the village, settling down onto the spot.

"Wow!"

"The Deity's power... unmatched!"

"Huh? My house... my house flew up too... it's flying towards the village outskirts..."

The houses inside the village flew out one by one.

Soon, the buildings in the village center—all except the “Dao Xuan Deity Cave”—had been cleared away.

As for this Dao Xuan Deity Cave... Naturally, it needed clearing too!

Yet since the villagers had painstakingly built this shrine, removing it outright might hurt their feelings. Li Daoxuan simply declared, “This shrine is well-built. I shall take it up to the heavens to admire.”

Hearing the Deity was pleased and would take the shrine skyward, the little people cheered, thinking their creation delighted him.

Li Daoxuan scooped up the Dao Xuan Deity Cave, set it inside its case, and placed it on his desk. Hmm, it truly was a fine craft—featuring a one-centimeter statue of himself, a set of miniature tables and chairs, meditation cushions, and more. This would surely fetch a good price later.

Alright, with all central buildings cleared, it was time to lower the Hakka roundhouse.

The villagers gazed upward as immense structures slowly descended through a rift in the clouds.

From afar, it was hard to discern, but once grounded, its scale became clear: an enormous fortress stretching over 108 meters long, 128 meters wide, with walls towering 9 meters high.

Strangely, two rows of gigantic black wheels supported it, each wheel 12 meters tall. These massive wheels propped the entire fortress over 3 meters off the ground.

The villagers stared dumbstruck—a house... with wheels?

Li Daoxuan frowned too. Damn, adding wheels did make it awkward. With the house hovering this high, how would villagers enter? Build ladders to climb each time?

Far too inconvenient! Maybe temporarily remove the tires? Only attaching them when movement is needed?

He considered—then, an idea.

Bury the bottom halves of the wheels underground.

He reached into the case, scraped out two rows of trenches just wide enough for each row of wheels. Then he lowered the roundhouse, sliding its wheels perfectly into the trenches...

Now the composite material board base sat flush with the earth. Scooping loose soil, he packed it around the chassis until it was firm. A test shake—steady as stone.

The Hakka roundhouse was successfully installed!

Though they couldn't see his hand, the villagers saw sudden pits form, saw earth shift, and the colossal structure shift as if molded by giant palms—stirring waves of awe.

Li Daoxuan instructed, "With Thirty-Two absent, Yiye and the Village Chief shall manage this. Assign one house per family."

After Gao Yiye relayed the message, joy erupted!

Especially those from other villages—many had sheltered under city walls until the Dao Xuan Deity Cave was built. They'd planned to throw up shacks before autumn, saving house-building for later.

No one expected the Deity's grace: gifting such a grand fortress, with a room for every family!

We gave him a temple; he gave us each a home!

Cheers swelled through the crowd.

Li Daoxuan cautioned, "Celebrate later. None of these rooms have doors or windows yet—you'll build those yourselves."

Villagers chanted louder:

"Praise the Deity!"

"Blessings to the Deity!"

"Long life to the Deity!"

"You fool!" one shouted, "Wishing 'ten thousand years' curses the Deity to mortal limits! Gods are infinite!"

"Agh! Forgive this humble one! Deity... grant us long life and great blessings..."

Amid the soaring praise, doors and windows seemed minor—easily handled by hardworking folk. No one worried about it.

Chapter 64: Assigning Houses

After the Hakka roundhouse had been lowered, the outer Lego brick city walls became useless.

The roundhouse itself came with walls three zhang tall, so the Legos' paltry two-zhang walls were completely redundant.

Moreover, when those walls were first placed, they had encroached upon some farm fields. With September steadily approaching and autumn sowing imminent, those fields urgently needed to be freed up.

Li Daoxuan reached into the box and removed the Lego bricks. The cola can temporary house for Li Da could naturally be taken out too. The big pond made from lock-lock containers wasn't an immediate

priority; it could stay in the open space next to the roundhouse, continuing to provide water for the villagers.

Gao Yiye and the Village Chief began assigning residences.

The village now had over 150 people. Divided by families, including three generations (grandparents, parents, grandchildren), this actually amounted to just over forty families. However, in his mercy, the Deity allowed a family to be counted as “a married couple.”

Meaning: grandparents counted as one family, entitled to one house. Parents counted as one family, entitled to one house. Children, if underage, lived with their parents as part of that one household. If they were adults, even if unmarried, they too were entitled to a separate house.

This way, for the over 150 people, only sixty-four houses were occupied, with many rooms remaining vacant.

Gao Yiye, as the high-status Saint Lady, was allocated the top floor of the tallest building situated in the deepest part of the roundhouse. This position allowed her to conveniently look up and speak to the Deity from her balcony. This building was called the Watchtower. Standing three stories high, it overlooked the entire roundhouse, its architecture somewhat resembling a city wall’s gate tower.

Once assignments were complete, the villagers began moving their belongings from their old homes into the new ones. Door and window openings were temporarily covered with cloth curtains.

The entire village buzzed with enthusiastic activity.

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Thirty-Two was back!

Accompanied by a teacher, a group of young men including Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, two sculptors, and Bai Shui Wang Er who was responsible for escorting them back, the party hurriedly arrived outside Gaojia Village.

Mr. Wang was silently suffering inside!

After accepting Thirty-Two's silver, he had thought himself wealthy. Little did he expect, not far out of the city, Thirty-Two suddenly led them into a forest where they were met by a group of fierce-looking men.

The leader? None other than the notorious rebel hunted by the authorities – Bai Shui Wang Er!

Mr. Wang's soul nearly fled his body. I've been lured into a bandit lair?

He trembled in fear, not daring to speak, obediently following without even a thought of escape. His mind raced with speculation: Why would these bandits trick me into joining? Maybe... to make me a strategist in their mountain stronghold? Like the Military Advisor Wu Yong?

But I'm a righteous scholar! I refuse to become an outlaw! Remember Wu Yong's tragic end? I'll pretend to cooperate until I find a chance to slip back to the city.

He spent the entire journey pondering these worries, having no idea how far or long they'd walked. From dawn until noon, hot and exhausted, he felt on the verge of collapse. Suddenly, Thirty-Two announced, "We've arrived. Eh? The village... it seems changed again?"

Bai Shui Wang Er was also startled. "Eh? Your Gaojia Village truly never looks the same! First time I came, no walls. Second time, a two-zhang wall. Now, the third time, you have an enormous fortress!"

Thirty-Two didn't need brains to guess the Deity must have worked his magic again, something not to explain deeply to Wang Er. He chuckled and cupped his fists. "Brother Wang! We've reached our destination. Thank you for your escort, but we'll manage from here."

Wang Er also cupped his fists. "Then I shall return to the mountains."

Thirty-Two pulled a bag of salt from his pouch. "Brother Wang, last time I offered silver and you refused. This time, please accept some salt. Living in the mountains, silver isn't that useful, but salt... is truly indispensable."

Wang Er couldn't help but lick his lips. Thirty-Two was right; his bandit army faced a genuine salt shortage. Their raid on the official grain supplies had secured plentiful food for a good while, but salt was a different, troubling matter.

Humans cannot endure long without salt. Given the circumstances, polite refusal wasn't an option. Wang Er reached out, accepted the salt bag, and cupped his fists. "I owe Gaojia Village yet again. A deep debt like this requires more than mere words of thanks. If you ever require Wang Er's assistance in the future, just send someone calling into the mountains."

The two groups parted ways then. Wang Er led his men back into the mountains and soon vanished from sight.

With his departure, while others seemed unaffected, Mr. Wang relaxed instantly, as if his bones turned to liquid. He crumpled to the ground with a soft thud.

Thirty-Two turned around, puzzled. "Mr. Wang! What's this about?"

Mr. Wang weakly gasped, "I... I feared Third Lady tricked me into joining mountain bandits! Only seeing Wang Er leave eased my mind. I... I went limp... couldn't stand..."

The group around him stared blankly for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"Mr. Wang, fancies you get!" Thirty-Two helped him up. "We're all upright citizens here! None of us aspire to outlawry. Come now, Gaojia Village lies just ahead. Once inside, you'll understand how wonderful it truly is. It might even be called a land of peach blossoms!"

The group soon approached the outskirts of Gaojia Village.

Once they entered his line of sight, Li Daoxuan could see them. His figures had been gone two days; naturally, he worried – as mothers fret when travelers journey far. He watched them carefully.

One look identified the man in the cyan Daoist robe following Thirty-Two – definitely the new teacher. Li Daoxuan watched even more delightedly.

Gao Chuwu was the first to loudly exclaim. Pointing at a dilapidated grass hut perched strangely on a hillside, he yelled, “Oy! Ain’t that my house? What’s it doing up there?”

He bounded towards it in great strides. Just as he reached the doorway, the door creaked open. Gao Chuwu’s parents, a middle-aged couple, were carefully lifting a large wooden bed out.

The three met face to face in the doorway.

Gao Chuwu urgently asked, “Father! Mother! What on earth happened? How’d our house end up on the hillside?”

Gao Chuwu’s father beamed happily. “The Deity gifted everyone in the village new houses! Look, right over there in that mighty fortress! Your mother and I are moving our furniture... Son! Just in time! Take over for your mother. We men will carry this bed together.”

Gao Chuwu quickly replaced his mother. Father and son lifted the bed and carried it away at a brisk trot.

As they dashed along, Gao Chuwu’s father chuckled. “Son! You get your own house too! The Deity decrees every adult villager, married or not, gets one! The Village Chief allocated your room right next to ours! Heh heh. Later, move your bed into your own place!”

Gao Chuwu grinned foolishly. “Huh? I’ve got my own place? Does that mean I can marry?”

His father roared with laughter. “Who’d marry you, simpleton?”

Gao Chuwu retorted, “Simple maybe, but I’ve got strength! I’ll do more physical work for the Deity, earn lots and lots of rewards! Then I’ll have money to marry!”

“Your reward is here!”

Gao Yiye called from a distance. "Brother Chuwu! The Deity says, for safely escorting Third Lady back and forth, he rewards you with five jin of white sugar, fifty jin of flour, ten jin of pork, ha..."

She cut off with a "ha," stifling a laugh. The Deity had added 'to help you get married,' but Gao Yiye couldn't hold back her giggles and missed the final part.

Gao Chuwu stammered, "Huh? Huh huh? That much?! Wow! Mother! Please find me a wife! These rewards can be the bride price!"

Chapter 65: Favoritism

The dozen or so young fellows escorting Thirty-Two all received rewards, then helped their families move as quickly as possible.

The two sculptors also rushed home. Their wives and children were moving, so the sculptors hurried over to take on the heavy work, smiling as they said, "We paid the artisan registration fee for thirty years, so we never have to take shifts in the official workshops again."

Their wives were overjoyed at first, but soon looked worried. "Our children will be rotating workers too. Once they grow up, they'll have to take shifts."

The two sculptors laughed. "What's the big deal? We'll just help the Deity make more statues, and we'll set aside the artisan registration fee for our sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons too."

Their wives then beamed happily. Before, life was unclear and gloomy, with no future in sight, but now, it felt infinitely bright and hopeful.

Thirty-Two accompanied Mr. Wang, slowly entering the brand-new Hakka roundhouse. It had a sturdy foundation, thick fortress walls, and internal partitions made of metal coated with thick paint that clanged when struck. The newcomer Mr. Wang looked utterly bewildered.

This isolated village, whose name he hadn't even heard of, actually had the resources to build such an intimidating fortress.

“With you teaching here, sir, there’s no need to worry about bandits,” Thirty-Two said triumphantly. “Not long ago, bandit chief Supreme Bright King led over a thousand rebels to attack, but we at Gaojia Village defeated him. And as for the fierce bandit Wang Er, well, you saw how close he is to us at Gaojia Village. Here, you can sleep soundly without any worries.”

Mr. Wang listened half-skeptically yet half-convinced. Seeing how impressive the fortress was, he couldn’t help but feel partly reassured.

It was noon now. Many villagers started cooking, with aromas of rice, flour, and even chicken and cured meat wafting through the roundhouse...

Mr. Wang couldn’t help but swallow hard. Although he was a scholar, he was quite poor. He hadn’t married and rarely ate well. Smelling the chicken and pork made his mouth water.

He couldn’t resist asking, “Third Lady gave me quite a lot of silver, but I don’t see a marketplace here. Where can I buy food?”

Thirty-Two laughed loudly. “The Deity is asking to hire you, sir, so naturally, He is responsible for your meals.”

Mr. Wang was deeply puzzled. “The Deity? Who is that?”

Thirty-Two didn’t explain. He pointed toward a distance where Gao Yiye was trying hard to remain poised. “That’s the Saint Lady. I’ll take you to see her, and she’ll arrange all your living needs right away.”

Mr. Wang had to brace himself and approach Gao Yiye.

Before he could speak, Gao Yiye smiled faintly. “The Deity already knows you’ve arrived. Please follow me.”

Mr. Wang was utterly baffled but followed Gao Yiye.

Gao Yiye led him to a courtyard with houses surrounding an open space. She pointed to one room. "You can stay here for now, sir, and we'll set up desks and chairs in this courtyard area for teaching reading and writing."

"As for your daily needs, you need not worry at all. Just step inside to see."

Mr. Wang curiously stepped into his room. Looking closely, he saw half the space filled with piles of rice, flour, oil, salt, and cured meat. Even if he ate his fill every day, it could last him a year or more.

"This...all this is for...me?" Mr. Wang stammered.

"Yes! The Deity said if you teach here with peace of mind, you'll surely get more benefits later."

...

Meanwhile, a dozen miles away in the mountains:

Wang Er led his most loyal subordinates back to their hideout.

It was called a hideout, but it was really just a large cave. Inside, there were no proper furnishings, only a few jumbled-up grain carts, with dry grass spread on the ground. His bandit army of several hundred rebels lived temporarily in this crude cave.

Their spirits weren't high; the harsh conditions wore people down, and living like this for long could mess with their minds.

Wang Er held up the salt bag Thirty-Two had given him and announced loudly, "Brothers, look what I've brought back. A whole bag of salt!"

Everyone cheered!

Second Leader Zheng Yanfu and Third Leader Zhuang Guangdao hurried over, faces lit with excitement. "We've got salt?"

Wang Er laughed heartily. "Third Lady from Gaojia Village gave it to me—a big bag full, enough for us for quite a while."

"And Gaojia Village sent it again?" someone whispered from the bandit army group.

"That village sure is rich."

"Hmph, they gave us flour before, now salt. It seems they've still got plenty in store."

"They must have even more good stuff there."

The direction of their chatter was off.

Wang Er's brows furrowed deeply. He whipped around and glared at the speakers. Sensing their leader's displeasure, they ducked their heads back and slunk into the deeper parts of the cave.

Wang Er backed off and told Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao to distribute the salt, then walked over to lie down fully clothed.

Zheng Yanfu glanced sharply at Wang Er. Seeing him apparently asleep, he pulled Zhuang Guangdao aside and whispered, "Third Brother, don't you think our leader is too biased toward Gaojia Village?"

Zhuang Guangdao shrugged. "Gaojia Village did Wangjia Village a favor. The night before we rose up, they sent dozens of barrels of flour to Wangjia Village. Knowing the leader's personality, he'd take their side."

Zheng Yanfu murmured, "That village is rich and wealthy, full of grain and salt, yet because of our leader's bias, we can't touch it. Last night, brother Yang who went out to loot came back saying he had a dozen fat sheep lined up—but our leader let them go just because they were from Gaojia Village."

Zhuang Guangdao said softly, "I heard about that too. If we'd taken those ten-odd fat sheep, we'd have gotten way more than this little salt. It would've been a huge haul."

Zheng Yanfu chuckled darkly. "Seems we're thinking alike again, Third Brother. So, are you in?"

Zhuang Guangdao also grinned. "Of course I'm in!"

Zheng Yanfu suggested, "We'll need to avoid the leader and anyone from Wangjia Village."

Zhuang Guangdao replied, "In a few days, we'll pick the right moment and make up an excuse to coax the leader into taking the Wangjia Village folk north. Once he's far enough away, we'll strike Gaojia Village hard."

Zheng Yanfu cautioned, "I've heard that village has high fortress walls. Not long ago, Supreme Bright King got wrecked beneath them. Dozens of his troops came to join us. Any great ideas, Third Brother?"

Zhuang Guangdao said, "Supreme Bright King was an idiot who only knew hard charges. We're smarter. Get me a long rope. At night, I'll sneak up the wall alone, take out the sentinel, then open the gate from inside. We'll flood in and catch Gaojia Village off guard. That way, everything in the village will be ours."

Zheng Yanfu was thrilled. "That's a brilliant strategy, Third Brother. Let's do it. After it's done, our leader won't be able to say much. Just like when we strung up the wives and maids of those wealthy families in Chengcheng County in all sorts of positions—once it's finished, he can only glare and fume."

Zhuang Guangdao nodded. "You bet it will."

Their plan settled, both felt confident and shared a smug laugh. But as they turned, they saw Wang Er standing right behind them, face twisted in anger. "Second Brother, Third Brother, this is outrageous..."

He was about to roar at them when, unexpectedly, Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu pulled out daggers simultaneously and lunged at him.

Chapter 66: The Deitys Divine Mirror

Early in the morning, Mr. Wang climbed out of bed.

He had eaten heartily the night before, even enjoying meat and sugar, which he hadn't tasted in a long time, making him full of energy today. He looked back at the half-room filled with various foods, then touched the two big fist-sized silver pieces hidden under his pillow.

There was food aplenty and plenty of money!

Suddenly, Mr. Wang felt as if he had reached the pinnacle of life.

Taking someone's money meant carrying out their tasks; since the Third Lady had treated him well, he would teach her daughter properly. He opened the small bundle he had carried from the city, where the teaching materials—like "Four Books," "Five Classics," and "Hundred Surnames"—were all present.

Mr. Wang confirmed the teaching materials were complete, patted his face to perk himself up, and walked out of his small room.

Outside was a large courtyard, one of the wells in the Hakka roundhouse. As soon as Mr. Wang entered the courtyard, he saw Thirty-Two and Gao Yiye with about eight or nine children standing before him, with the Third Lady's daughter naturally among them; behind them were several youths.

These were all the people in the village willing to learn reading and writing.

Mr. Wang was startled and said, "Huh?"

The Third Lady smiled and said, "Mr. Wang, please put in a bit more effort and teach all these people together."

Mr. Wang was a bit stunned: These children were from peasant families, weren't they? The Third Lady was actually paying out of her own pocket to let others' children learn reading and writing; was she such a selfless person?

But however she felt, the tuition he had received was more than enough to teach a hundred times more children, so he cupped his hands and said with a smile, "I will certainly do my best."

"Then let's start teaching..."

Mr. Wang had just uttered a word when Gao Yiye suddenly said, "Ah, sorry, Mr. Wang, please wait a moment; the Deity has spoken. The great one says the children need to do some morning exercises to stretch their bodies before the reading and writing lesson; that is scientific."

A huge question mark slowly appeared above Mr. Wang's head: What does "scientific" mean?

Gao Yiye said to all the children, "Everyone turn around and look in the direction of the watchtower."

The watchtower was the highest three-story building in the Hakka roundhouse, and also Gao Yiye's residence. She lived on the third floor, which was the place closest to the Deity; standing on the balcony, one could overlook the entire compound.

The children all obediently turned around; even those youths turned together and looked solemnly at the watchtower.

Then they saw a rectangular, strange metal object slowly descending from the clouds and hovering right above the watchtower. It was ten zhang wide (about 30 meters) and over four zhang tall (about 14 meters), quite frightening.

Mr. Wang was greatly startled and said, "What is this thing?"

This thing was actually Li Daoxuan's phone; he had placed the phone horizontally and stuck it into a box, so it hovered above the watchtower. Then, pressing his finger on the screen, it recognized his fingerprint and unlocked, and the phone's screen lit up suddenly.

Mr. Wang exclaimed in surprise, "Ah? This thing is glowing."

Gao Yiye said, "That is the Deity's divine mirror, used to teach the children techniques for strengthening their bodies. Everyone, watch carefully."

What appeared on the phone screen was a group of children dressed in odd clothes, lined up in a square formation, looking serious.

Then music started playing: "Begin now doing the Seventh Set of Radio Calisthenics, first group, stretching exercises... 1, 2, 3, 4... 2, 2, 3, 4..."

Gao Yiye said loudly, "By the Deity's order, all students, follow along."

The children quickly started following the video, but it was their first time learning this, so their movements were nowhere near standard, twisting and turning haphazardly, messing around in various ways; some were even doing the wrong directions, and one motion knocked the person next to them over.

The scene was chaotic.

In fact, not only the children were in disorder: throughout the entire Hakka roundhouse, people everywhere were following along, so chaos reigned everywhere.

After a while, the video finished playing; the "Deity's divine mirror" began to rise, flew into the clouds, and disappeared.

Everyone's movements came to a halt.

Gao Yiye spoke loudly: "Today was the first time, so it was okay if things weren't done right. The Deity didn't blame everyone. From now on, every day before class, everyone must do one set of the Seventh Set of Radio Calisthenics."

Every person said together: "We will respectfully follow the Decree of the Deity."

Mr. Wang: "Huh? What? What what what? What happened? What exactly is going on?"

Thirty-Two patted Mr. Wang on the shoulder and said with a chuckle: "Our Gaojia Village has always been under the protection of a deity called Dao Xuan Deity. We can witness the Deity appear holy anytime, anywhere. You just saw it and will see it often in the future."

Mr. Wang: "The Master did not speak of ghosts and gods!"

Thirty-Two: "The food and silver you got weren't actually mine; they were rewards given to you by the Deity."

Mr. Wang: "Ah, the Deity truly is a kind and good deity."

Thirty-Two: "..."

It was awkward; the scene was just very awkward.

After a good while, Thirty-Two came out of his stiff state and said: "Alright, now it's up to Mr. Wang. I have a lot to do. After being at the county town for two days, plenty of mess piled up in Gaojia Village—it's chaotic everywhere. And there are many people being lazy about working or stealing cotton. I need to go scold those worthless troublemakers."

When he spoke the words "stealing cotton," Gao Yiye beside him instantly blushed, backed away two steps guiltily, and thought to herself: Oh no, I'm about to be yelled at. Third Lady clearly hadn't been in Gaojia Village for two days; how did he know I stole cotton?

Then Thirty-Two said: "Miss Yiye, before, the cotton was stored in a broken house and people always came to steal it. I want to move the cotton into the watchtower and keep it on the second floor. The third floor above is where you live, and below that, the first floor is the ancestral hall. We'll place the statue of the Deity on the first floor, so no one will dare to steal again. I don't believe anyone would risk sneaking past the Deity's statue to take things. What do you think?"

A surge of utter confusion hit Gao Yiye: Oh no, you're asking me? If the cotton stays right under my home, won't that let me steal to my heart's content? Ahhh! Are you doing this on purpose? You must be testing me intentionally!

Thirty-Two had no clue about Gao Yiye's busy mind: "Miss Yiye? What's wrong? Say something!"

Gao Yiye gathered her courage and thought to herself, "Fine, so I'll be the fool; might as well go all out," and then said: "Okay! Let's put the cotton on the second floor."

After getting the Saint Lady's agreement, Thirty-Two waved to gather the villagers: "Come over here, move the cotton! Shift all of it to the second floor of the watchtower. From now on, items granted by the Deity will be stored on the second floor. The first floor will display the Deity's statue, and on the third floor lives the Saint Lady. I want to see who of you still dares to steal cotton from the second floor."

The villagers responded: "Where would we dare steal? We wouldn't dare."

Thirty-Two laughed and scolded: "Still saying you wouldn't dare? After I was gone for two days, there's a huge hole stolen from the big cotton ball. Do you all think I'm blind?"

The villagers replied: "We truly wouldn't dare! With deities watching over us, we wouldn't dare act wildly."

Thirty-Two demanded: "Then where did the cotton go?"

The villagers answered: "We don't know either."

Thirty-Two huffed: "Humph! The one who stole the cotton—the Deity will punish them."

Gao Yiye listened to their talk, sweating bullets.

Amidst the uproar, a sentry on the wall of the compound suddenly yelled out: “Hey, someone in the mountains is running over here, stumbling along like he’s hurt!”

Chapter 67: They Will Attack Tonight

Early in the morning, Li Daoxuan had just retrieved his phone from the crate. Clutching the soy milk and fried dough sticks delivered for breakfast, he eagerly tucked in.

Watching the little people perform calisthenics was genuinely amusing. Perhaps he should order the entire village to participate? But no—the elderly likely couldn’t manage. Maybe introduce square dancing instead?

Then again, square dancing caused endless disturbances and was a societal plague. Best not corrupt ancient villagers with modern nuisances.

As he pondered new activities, sentinel cries erupted from the village. Dozens scurried toward the northern fortress wall. Thirty-Two also dashed up the ramparts, peering outward.

Li Daoxuan’s finger immediately hovered over the crate’s control panel. He pressed the “North” button.

Instantly, his view shifted to the northern hillside.

A young man in tattered clothes, sun-scorched skin gleaming darkly, stumbled downhill. Blood stained his garments. After a few strides, he tripped, scrambled up, and lurched onward...

Li Daoxuan grinned. Expanded vision truly delivered!

He fine-tuned the controls, locking the viewpoint onto the man as he fled.

Minutes later, the man collapsed at the base of Gaojia Village’s thirty-foot fortress wall. Lying on his back, he gasped toward the defenders above: “I... serve... Brother... Wang Er...”

Exhaustion choked his words. Each syllable fought for breath.

Hearing “Wang Er” and “serve,” Thirty-Two scrutinized the figure. Recognition struck—this was the petty bandit who’d once ambushed him en route to the county town. The one bearing the bandit name “White Cat.”

Thirty-Two’s brow furrowed. He turned to Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu. “Bring White Cat inside. Now.”

The two descended the wall and circled to the gate.

Crafted by Cai Xinzi from one-millimeter iron sheets, these gates manifested in the late Ming era as twenty-centimeter steel plates. Village strength couldn’t budge them. Only by repurposing an ancient gate’s pulley system could they heave the doors open.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu hauled the man inside, propping him before Thirty-Two and Gao Yiye.

Thirty-Two demanded urgently, “Warrior White Cat, what happened?”

Gasping, White Cat wheezed, “Zhuang Guangdao... Zheng Yanfu... planned... to raid... Gaojia Village... Brother opposed them... So they... betrayed him...”

Thirty-Two: “!!!”

Villagers: “!!!”

The man continued, “Brother’s wounded... locked... in a cave... by those traitors... Wangjia Villagers... all imprisoned... Only I escaped... Begging Gaojia Village... save him...”

Thirty-Two’s face darkened like cast iron.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu roared, “Outrageous!”

Even the sculptors shoved through the crowd. “What? Brother Wang Er—such a good man!”

Li Daoxuan found himself frowning. Damn this cruel world. Why must good men suffer?

Alas, kindness and mercy rarely forged overlords. A righteous soul like Wang Er might command armies but never empires. Even without this betrayal... Best not dwell on ill omens.

Villagers buzzed with panicked chatter.

Thirty-Two bellowed, "Silence! This isn't just about rescuing Wang Er. Before that—we defend ourselves."

Everyone: "?"

Thirty-Two snapped, "Fools! Didn't you hear? Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao plotted to attack Gaojia Village. That's why they turned on Brother Wang."

Everyone: "!!!"

Thirty-Two roared, "It won't be long before Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao attack. Damn his mother, why are you still zoning out? Prepare for battle, prepare for battle everyone! Immediately prepare for battle, quickly get your weapons ready!"

White Cat gasped, "It... won't be that quick... They know Gaojia Village... has high walls... They... would only come... for a night raid."

Those words snapped Thirty-Two awake. Yeah, we had walls three zhang high. As long as Zheng Yanfu and his lot weren't fools, they wouldn't charge at Gaojia Village foolishly in broad daylight. Otherwise, they would share the fate of the Supreme Bright King.

A night raid?

Thirty-Two felt a bit nervous.

Gao Chuwu clamored beside him, "Third Lady, we've learned a bit about fighting during the day, but how do we fight at night?"

Zheng Daniu also said, "They could launch a night raid any moment, but we can't stay up all night. What should we do?"

Thirty-Two bellowed, "I know jack shit! I'm a damn clerk, not a commander."

The villagers around grew panicked once more.

Li Daoxuan chuckled. What was so scary about a night raid? He would just switch on the motion alert of the Surveillance Camera. Once it sensed any movement, it would sound the preset music alarm. Then he would shine a fluorescent lamp into the box, and they could instantly fight as if it were daytime.

Yet his method was like "Deity Cheating." If he started cheating like that early on, the villagers wouldn't learn anything.

No need to rush for now. He would see how they handled it.

Thirty-Two hesitated repeatedly, then suddenly snapped awake. "Right, it was still early morning, far from dark. Quick, someone go to Bai Family Fortress and invite Mr. Bai Yuan over. He's the militia instructor, he knows how to deal with this."

Gao Chuwu said, "I'll go!"

"Then be careful along the way," Thirty-Two said. "Outside is very risky. If you run into bandits, don't be brave. Flee like mad. Those bandits don't have horses; they won't catch you."

Gao Chuwu grinned foolishly. "Don't worry, I've eaten well lately, I'm strong. Those weaklings won't catch me."

He grabbed some dried meat wedges and a white flatbread, then dashed out of the fortified house. Gao Yiye yelled from the city wall, "Brother Chuwu, don't run so fast right away. It's a two-hour journey; save your strength."

Gao Chuwu said dumbly, "Huh? Oh! Right!"

The crowd was silent.

Entrusting such an important task to a simpleton, could it be okay?

Thirty-Two spun around sharply and looked at the two blacksmiths. "The armor? How many sets do we have now?"

The two blacksmiths grinned. "Plenty now. These past days, we got cotton fabric. The women pitched in too, attaching those stored armor pieces onto cotton coats, making several sets of cotton armor."

Thirty-Two said, "Count them fast! Hand out the armor to the toughest young fighters in the village. Quick, quick, quick! Also, stones, oil—get all that ready. Ah, right, what about our catapults?"

Zheng Daniu said, "After the last fight, the Deity took all the catapults back to heaven."

Thirty-Two said, "For night fighting, catapults probably aren't useful, right? Ay! I don't really know either. Forget about that for now. Everyone, get moving! Quick, quick, quick! Do what you need to do."

The villagers said, "But what exactly should we do?"

Thirty-Two was silent.

The scene grew awkward again.

Chapter 68: Inviting Lord Bai

The entire Gaojia Village fell into chaos again!

Villagers ran around completely aimlessly.

However, this time the situation was much better than the last.

At least the villagers knew to prepare war supplies.

No one knew whether stones and oil worked for night fighting, but they prepared them anyway.

Two blacksmiths rushed back to their blacksmith's shop and brought out the armor they had made in recent days.

Most of the female villagers in the village had been weaving cloth these past few days; although they slacked off a bit when Thirty-Two was away—after all, the diligence of laboring folk from our dynasty was no exaggeration—even with slacking, their efficiency remained impressive, leaving plenty of cotton cloth in the village. So, the two blacksmiths gathered some skilled and nimble-fingered women to help thread the previously forged iron pieces together.

There were eight sets of cotton armor.

Compared to those fancy iron armors, this actually suited the current Gaojia villagers better. Iron armor was too heavy, and without proper military training, the villagers would feel overwhelmed and immobile if worn.

But cotton armor was light, so the villagers could bounce around freely while wearing it.

“Zheng Daniu, here's a set for you! You're the main fighter.”

Zheng Daniu grinned widely.

“Save one for Gao Chuwu since he's also a main fighter. For these others, come forward, a few of the strongest young men...”

A woman dashed over from the side and pushed a thick bundle of cotton cloth on Li Da: “Blacksmith Li, I still have a bundle I hadn’t passed on yet—the bandit army won’t come for a few more hours, so see if there’s time to hurry and make one more armor set.”

“Blacksmith Gao, I have extra cotton cloth too.”

In less time than half an incense stick burns, the two blacksmiths collected several more bundles of cotton cloth.

The two were about to rush off to expedite armor-making, when suddenly an awkward, melodious female voice spoke: “I... here... also have cotton cloth.”

On hearing this voice, everyone froze and turned to look—actually, it was the Saint Lady.

Gao Yiye cradled a big bundle of cotton cloth in her hands and said guiltily: “I... wove a bit too...”

The crowd snorted dismissively!

Thirty-Two had been gone for two days, and the Deity hadn’t manifested either, leading to chaos and disorder all over the village—even the Saint Lady neglected her proper duties.

Never mind; it wasn’t the time to mock the Saint Lady now. The two blacksmiths quickly dashed into the blacksmith’s shop, rounded up the other village blacksmiths, women who could thread needles and sew, and with a whole day still ahead, they might just manage to hastily produce a few makeshift sets in time.

A big crowd rapidly got to work on the cotton armor.

...

Gao Chuwu left the Gaojia walled house and strode speedily toward the Bai Family Fortress. He only knew the rough direction, not the exact spot, but it was fine as long as he inquired politely.

Along the way, he stopped anyone he met to ask. Once, he even asked a group of bandits. Those villains whipped out their knives in a flash, but before they could swing them, Gao Chuwu sprinted away over ten meters—leaving the bandits utterly confused—how could he run that fast in this severe drought with everyone starving?

Where others took two hours, Gao Chuwu needed just an hour and a half.

The Bai Family Fortress came into view.

To their eyes, it looked surprisingly busy, like one big construction site.

Bai Yuan wore a flowing white robe, standing straight with hands clasped behind him, like a refined gentleman, supervising his staff, tenant farmers, and nearby hired villagers as they repaired the fortress wall that the Supreme Bright King had damaged earlier.

On the grounds outside the Bai Family Fortress, a large group of young men clutched long sticks and practiced a thrusting move.

After returning home, Bai Yuan rebuilt the militia. This time, he spent more money and recruited more people, swearing to protect Bai Family Fortress and prevent bandits from breaching its walls again.

Seeing his men train diligently, Bai Yuan felt inspired and shouted, “Bring me a bow!”

A servant promptly handed him a light bow.

Bai Yuan drew an arrow and shot it toward a straw dummy nearby, hitting its face dead center.

“Hahaha! The ‘Archery’ skill from the Six Arts of Gentlemen has returned to me—hahaha! Restored, wonderfully restored!”

Just as he rejoiced, a simple and honest voice yelled from afar, “Lord Bai! Lord Bai!”

Turning around, Bai Yuan spotted the caller. “Ah, isn’t that from Gaojia Village... Gao... Gao Shiwu? Gao Wuwu? Gao Yi? Gao Er? Gao San? What exactly is your name?”

Gao Chuwu dashed toward him. “Gao Chuwu!”

Bai Yuan nodded. “Yes, yes. I remember clearly. You’re Gao Chuwu. What’s the matter? You look quite exhausted.”

Gao Chuwu panted quickly, “Bandits are planning to raid Gaojia Village tonight. Third Lady is no warrior, so we beg Lord Bai for aid.”

Bai Yuan’s face immediately darkened. “Damned brutes! Gaojia Village once saved me. Their business is mine now—failing to repay kindness violates the ritual of gentlemen. This is what we call ‘reciprocity.’ I hold the ‘Ritual’ art from the Six Arts in great esteem.”

“Bring two horses!”

Servants arrived promptly, leading two fine horses.

Previously, Bai Yuan had fled with his family in a carriage. But with Bai Family Fortress secure now, he didn’t need to bring them along. Traveling by horse was faster and more comfortable. “Gao Chuwu, do you ride?”

“No!”

“Then hug the horse’s neck and hold on tight.”

Gao Chuwu stammered, “Huh? Hold—?”

Bai Yuan mounted and said to his servants, “Guard Bai Family Fortress as trained. Await my return.”

“As you command, Lord Bai!” the servants chorused.

Watching Gao Chuwu clumsily climb onto the horse and grip its neck, Bai Yuan chuckled. He held Gao Chuwu’s reins in one hand, his own in the other, and nudged the horse sharply with his heels. “Let’s ride!”

Both horses burst forward together. Once they picked up speed, Bai Yuan tossed Gao Chuwu’s reins to him. From then on, Gao Chuwu’s horse followed Bai Yuan’s steed instinctively. Mounted and racing intensely, two man-horse pairs galloped furiously toward the village.

Horses moved leagues faster than human legs. Gao Chuwu took three hours running to Bai Family Fortress, but they returned to Gaojia Village in just ninety minutes. When the village walls came into view, it wasn’t even noon yet.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan tinkered with a surveillance camera setup. He had much to handle: the anticipated night battle needed prime viewing. Multiple HD cameras required installation, night surveillance alerts had to be activated, and everything demanded painstaking calibration.

He polished the glass walls meticulously, positioning each camera for wide coverage from diverse angles. This way, he could later edit a high-quality battle documentary. Just as he finished adjusting the camera group, two horse specks—no larger than finger segments—appeared near the village. Li Daoxuan murmured in delight, “How adorably tiny. Ah, so Mr. Six Arts, Bai Yuan himself, has arrived.”

Chapter 69: The Celestial Artifact Appeared Again

Bai Yuan rode swiftly to the foot of the roundhouse. He looked left and right, feeling bewildered. “Huh? I haven’t been here for just a few days. How has it changed again? The multicolored city wall vanished, replaced by an enormous Fortress. This fortress wall must be ten meters tall, right?”

He had been expanding his Bai Family Fortress and thought it was well-built. But upon seeing this Fortress of Gaojia Village, Bai Yuan instantly felt his own Bai Family Fortress looked shabby and dilapidated.

Gao Chuwu caught up from behind him. “Deity took back the old wall to the heavens and bestowed upon our village a new Fortress. Everyone moved into new homes. I... I now have my own house. I can finally get married, heh heh.”

Bai Yuan rolled his eyes. He had zero interest in hearing about marriage plans.

Thirty-Two peeked his head out from the fortress wall. Spotting Bai Yuan below, he beamed with joy. "Mr. Bai has arrived! Mr. Bai has arrived! Hurry! Open the iron gate! Invite Mr. Bai inside!"

The villagers erupted in cheers. Seeing Bai Yuan felt like finding their backbone. They quickly opened the gate, ushering Bai Yuan into the Hakka roundhouse.

As Bai Yuan entered the large roundhouse, his focus shifted entirely to "defensiveness." He glanced around. At each of the four corners stood a "turret." Guarding these turrets and shooting down from them would be highly efficient.

The four "turrets" were connected by "galleries," allowing defenders to move swiftly between them and provide mutual support.

Both turrets and galleries had "loopholes" designed for shooting. Defenders could attack enemies safely through these gaps.

"Incredible!"

Bai Yuan clicked his tongue in admiration. "This Fortress is brilliantly made. Once I return, I'll build my Bai Family Fortress just like it."

Thirty-Two stepped forward to greet him. "Mr. Bai, let's postpone that fortress-building talk. First, figure out our battle strategy. According to our informant, the bandits plan to climb the wall secretly at night and open the gate from within."

Bai Yuan rolled his eyes. "Isn't it simple? Install more lanterns and braziers on the wall, station extra sentinels to patrol, and deny them any chance. Done."

As soon as he uttered this, he snapped to his senses. "No, we can't do that."

Li Daoxuan chuckled to himself. "Bai Yuan reacts so sharply."

“The enemy hides in shadows, while we stay exposed,” Bai Yuan said rapidly. “If the bandits notice our tight defense, they’ll hold off attacking. We’d waste lamp oil, firewood, and sentinel manpower nightly. All villagers would be too anxious to sleep. Waiting endlessly would exhaust us. When fatigue weakens our defenses, the bandits strike—and we’re doomed.”

Thirty-Two sighed. “True. You can rob daily for a thousand days, but you can’t defend against robbers daily. It’s just too draining.”

Bai Yuan’s eyes darted around. He then climbed the fortress wall and peered in every direction, memorizing the whole layout. He grinned. “Exactly. We can’t defend daily. We lure them out instead. Pretend we’re oblivious and defenseless. Draw them all inside the Fortress. Then, exploit the terrain to trap and annihilate them here. Only total eradication stops their plots.”

“The enormous Fortress gifted by Deity has fierce defensive power. It even partitions defenses seamlessly. Look...this Hakka roundhouse features nine halls and eighteen wells. This well...this well...and that one...they naturally form defensive zones. If we let bandits enter and lure them to these three wells, we only block here...here...and here...to trap them inside. From the adjacent rooftops, drop stones. No bandit escapes that.”

The others didn’t understand but pretended they did, shouting, “Oh, that’s how it works.”

Li Daoxuan gazed downward from “high altitude,” seeing clearly. Connecting Bai Yuan’s pointed spots, he realized this Hakka roundhouse wasn’t simple. Its nine halls and eighteen wells were layered defenses.

If enemies broke one layer, defenders fell back to the second. If they breached that, defenders retreated to the third. Layer by layer, they’d whittle enemy forces down. Finally, defenders could withdraw to the watchtower where Gao Yiye lived. Like an ancient citadel, it loomed high, easily defensible—a final holdout.

Tsk tsk. The wisdom of the Hakka people truly amazed one.

This being Bai Yuan's first encounter with such an extraordinary enormous fortress, he vibrated with excitement. Rubbing his hands, he declared, "Hah! I've got a plan now! All able-bodied men follow me! We practice first!"

"Gao Chuwu, take ten men. Guard this passage."

"Also, send ten strong women onto the flanking rooftops. Have them drop stones to aid Gao Chuwu."

"Zheng Daniu, take ten men. Guard this passage."

"Put some strong women on both sides' rooftops above the passage. Task them with rock-dropping."

"Li Da, lead five men. Circle around through this passage..."

"Gao Yiyi, lead five men. Ambush this lane. When the bandit army crosses that passage, rush out at once. Shut this gate and bolt it."

"Ah, this path..." Bai Yuan hesitated. "It's the bandits' sole escape route. But the village has no manpower left. What now?"

Li Daoxuan studied the passage and the courtyard beyond, grinning. An idea flashed in his mind.

As Bai Yuan pondered, Gao Yiye suddenly spoke up. "Everyone, step back. Deity will lend us a magical artifact."

Hearing this, the crowd hastily backed away.

Bai Yuan hastily bowed deeply toward the sky.

An enormous bronze cannon slowly descended from above. It landed softly in the courtyard at the end of that unguarded passage, its barrel tilted downward, aimed directly up the path.

Measuring meters in length, the cannon touched down without even a quiver. Deity's gentle placement spared them any tremors.

The cannon occupied vast ground, filling one entire well of the Hakka roundhouse. Its size terrified.

Villagers had never seen a cannon before, so they weren't fazed. But Bai Yuan and Thirty-Two had witnessed red cannons in cities. They instantly knew: this "magical artifact" from Deity was a cannon—however...

An impossibly huge one!

Thirty-Two murmured, "Deity does everything on a grand scale!"

Bai Yuan voiced his worry: "How do we handle such a giant cannon? We can't budge a cannonball! When fired, the blast will level mountains. Its force alone could kill us all. Deity, this sacred weapon...is beyond mortals like us."

Chapter 70: The Night Assault Comes

Li Daoxuan was immensely amused. This was just a windproof lighter, not a real cannon.

"Yiye, tell everyone that no person should stand within three zhang in front of the cannon mouth, and no flammable objects should be placed there."

Gao Yiye quickly relayed this. The area directly ahead of the cannon mouth was a passageway—the very same one Bai Yuan had described as "undefended." The little people standing in the passageway hurriedly moved away.

The walls flanking the passageway were made of composite material boards, and there were no other flammable materials nearby.

Seeing they were ready, Li Daoxuan instructed, "Yiye, tell Li Da and Gao Yiyi to pick up their big hammers and strike the mechanism at the back of the cannon simultaneously with all their strength."

Upon receiving the order, Li Da and Gao Yiyi swiftly grabbed their massive blacksmithing hammers.

In the previous battle, Li Da and Gao Yiyi had been ordered to strike a mechanism on the catapult, performing admirably and gaining valuable experience in such tasks.

Now tasked once again, the two were quite familiar with it. They counted, "One, two, three!" and swung their hammers together, aiming squarely at the mechanism and smashing down with force.

"Clang!"

A tremendous metallic clang rang out. A blast of purple-blue flames erupted from the muzzle of the large cannon with a "Bang!", jetting out over three meters.

The visible flames alone stretched that far; ahead of them was an invisible zone of intense heat, extending another three chi.

The sudden gout of fire startled everyone, making them jerk in fright.

Even Bai Yuan, the most knowledgeable among them, staggered backward several steps in shock.

After a long moment, Bai Yuan recovered, ecstatic, "The magical artifact of the immortals is indeed incredibly powerful!"

Thirty-Two gulped, "Holy mother! If I were caught in that blaze... poof, I'd be reduced to ashes instantly."

Bai Yuan was overjoyed, "This passageway... it seems we just need these two blacksmiths stationed here. Even if a thousand troops and ten thousand horses come charging, they'll be incinerated clean away!"

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu exclaimed together, "Wow! Such an amazing immortal's artifact! We want to try it too! Let us guard here!"

Bai Yuan glanced sideways at them, “You two are idiots! I fear your clumsiness might cause you to miss the mechanism entirely. Imagine: Gao Chuwu smashing the hammer onto Zheng Daniu’s foot, Zheng Daniu whacking Gao Chuwu’s hand... and then this passage gets breached by the bandit army.”

Both men immediately broke out in a cold sweat; that was indeed a very real possibility.

Swinging the big hammer overhead, mustering all one’s strength to strike down—not only was there a high chance of missing the mark for fools, but even ordinary, non-idiotic individuals had a significant risk of striking off-target. Even a perfect swing might not generate enough force, or one could throw out their back.

Only those who spent their days wielding big hammers, practiced and trained, could land each blow accurately and powerfully. Naturally, this task belonged solely to the two blacksmiths.

Bai Yuan stated, “I need to reassign people to cover their positions guarding the other two passageways. Heh heh heh... With the blessings of the Deity, it feels impossible to lose! But a stunning victory would truly live up to the Deity’s expectations!”

Everyone chorused, “All thanks to the Deity’s protection!”

Bai Yuan waved his hand, “Everyone, start drills! Memorize your assigned paths for attack, defense, advance, and retreat! Fighting at night, in pitch darkness, the last thing you need is to get lost within your own Fortress. That would be hilariously pathetic!”

Everyone shouted, “All thanks to the Deity’s protection!”

Thus, Gaojia Village once again bustled with fervent drills. Those previously timid souls, seeing the “immortal’s large cannons” bestowed by the Deity, realized their backing remained incredibly powerful. As long as they held tightly to the Deity’s mighty leg, all worries vanished.

Instantly, spirits soared! Backs ceased aching, legs stopped hurting... fear utterly dissipated...

...

Night fell, yet Shuangqing City remained noisy; its vibrant nightlife had just begun.

Li Daoxuan sat at his computer, editing a video.

Episode eight of “Daily Life in the Tiny Kingdom”: Inside a small, thatched grass house, Gao San Niang sat before the weaving machine. Ji ji, Ji ji... the little woman wove by the door...

Right then, his phone suddenly emitted an urgent, staccato beep—Ding ding ding, Ding ding ding!

It was the alarm from the camera app, triggered by its nighttime motion monitoring!

He stopped his work and moved to the box’s edge. He had earlier adjusted the box’s viewpoint slightly, no longer centered entirely on the village, but shifted northwards by a few hundred meters. It now covered about half of the village and a large swathe of north slope bordering the village.

The camera activating the alarm was precisely the one monitoring this slope.

Li Daoxuan’s gaze naturally fixed on the slope.

Trees covered the hill, sparse and struggling. Many were stripped bare of bark, likely scavenged for food by the villagers.

These trees obstructed part of Li Daoxuan’s view, yet he could still clearly see a group of people stealthily moving through the woods...

Heh. Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao had arrived.

...

A full moon hung high in the sky. The Mid-Autumn Festival had just passed days prior; the moon was still intensely round. Combined with the years-long drought and zero cloud cover, the moonlight cast a surprisingly bright luminescence across the land.

Leading over two hundred followers, Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao lay concealed on the hills just north of Gaojia Village. Shielded by the woods, they had no fear of the village sentinels spotting them.

People in ancient times often suffered from night-blindness, making night movements difficult. However, the bright full moon provided ample light, making the night assault on Gaojia Village feasible.

Zheng Yanfu scowled as he looked at the imposing Fortress ahead and spat, "Damn this place! How has it changed again?"

Zhuang Guangdao replied, "It seems this village is Rich and Wealthy! Probably harboring some immensely wealthy lord. He must have spent a fortune to rebuild Gaojia Village into this..."

Zheng Yanfu chuckled darkly, "Wouldn't that be perfect? The richer that grand lord is, the more rewarding our plunder!"

Zhuang Guangdao echoed the malicious chuckle, "Wang Er got bought off by the damn rich dogs in this village. A bit of flour and he became a bootlicker for those wealthy fools!"

Zheng Yanfu nodded, "I wanted to chop Wang Er to pieces! But you insisted on stopping me. Locking him and the people of Wangjia Village up... Now we have to leave fifty men guarding them! What a waste of manpower."

Zhuang Guangdao reasoned, "Wang Er's prestige still stands. Killing him outright now would ruin our standing among the greenwood brotherhoods, the other rebel forces. They'd scorn us. We have no choice but to keep him imprisoned. After we conquer Gaojia Village, kill the damn wealthy lord within, seize the money and grain to share with our brothers, prove our mettle—only then can we tell everyone Wang Er was in the pay of the rich, that he was ready to betray us, just like that traitor Song Jiang! Execute Wang Er right then, in front of the assembled outlaws of the realm! No one will dare say we did wrong."

Zheng Yanfu pondered this carefully. It made sense. Surviving in the greenwood world wasn't just about ruthlessness; one had to play by the unwritten rules too. Killing your own leader without justification? That marked you as dung underfoot for everyone to trample.

"Fine. We take Gaojia Village, and fast."

Their gazes sharpened as one, fixed intently on Gaojia Village ahead.