

Great Ming 71

Chapter 71: Everyone Was Very Happy

The Gaojia Village at night felt somewhat eerie. Rows of oil lamps on the fortress wall flickered dimly, illuminating only a few meters around the wall itself.

Two sentinels were slowly, lazily patrolling the wall.

The fortress wall stretched over thirty zhang in both length and width. Patrols by merely two sentinels over such a vast area were clearly insufficient.

Zheng Yanfu chuckled softly. "Those two sentinels might as well not even be there."

Zhuang Guangdao also chuckled softly. "I could scramble up that fortress wall right under their noses without breaking a sweat."

Zheng Yanfu patted his shoulder. "Then it all depends on you."

Zhuang Guangdao said, "Wait for my good news."

With that, he stooped low, slipped out from the woods, and moved silently and cautiously towards the wall...

Reaching the very edge where the lantern light could reach, he dropped flat and stayed still, observing the movement pattern of the two sentinels with utmost care, searching for an opportunity to climb the wall.

What he didn't know was that there were far more than just two sentinels inside the Fortress.

Hidden within the galleries connecting the four corner towers were eight more sentinels. They observed the outside through "loopholes" cut into the gallery walls, especially focusing their surveillance on the northern hillside.

Zhuang Guangdao's attention was fixed solely on the sentinels on top of the wall. He had no idea that several pairs of eyes behind the loopholes had already locked onto him.

His stealthy approach had been spotted by the hidden sentinels long before he was halfway there.

The sentinels made no sound. Stooping low, one of them ran swiftly along the gallery, descended the fortress wall, and entered the ancestral hall. Bai Yuan and Thirty-Two, at that moment, were sleeping fully clothed inside.

The sentinel gently woke the two. "Lord Bai, Third Lady, the bandits have arrived."

Bai Yuan sat bolt upright with a grin. "Quietly inform everyone in the village. Get up silently. Prepare for battle."

The sentinel nodded and slipped out quietly.

Soon, several sentinels joined the effort. They stooped low, darted quickly through the Fortress, and woke the villagers family by family.

Within moments, everyone in Gaojia Village was awake.

But there was no commotion. That afternoon, Bai Yuan had practically shouted right into everyone's ears for a long time, commanding them to make absolutely no noise during the operation.

With extensive experience organizing militias, he knew their military discipline was extremely poor. Many were "unreasonably dense", and he'd had to bellow the simplest instructions into their ears multiple times before they'd remember.

Gao Chuwu, pulling on his cotton armor, emerged from his house. He ran straight into Zheng Daniu. The two strongest, and simplest, fellows grinned widely at each other. Raising their giant axes, they headed towards their predetermined defense positions.

The blacksmiths, Li Da and Gao Yiyi, also emerged. Donning their two-panel armor and hefting large hammers, they went directly behind the massive “Immortal’s large cannons” and sat down, staring intently at the mechanism.

The elderly and weak, along with the women, forbidden from direct combat, followed their assigned Captain. They climbed onto the rooftops beside the courtyard. Stones had already been piled there. No one had prepared boiling oil because this battle was taking place within the Fortress itself; splashing hot oil could lead to burning their own homes.

Everything was ready!

Bai Yuan also climbed onto a rooftop. Catching the eyes of the two sentinels patrolling the wall in the distance, he made a hand signal.

The two sentinels understood instantly and slowed their pace considerably. Originally patrolling far apart, they deliberately drew close to each other now and pretended to strike up a conversation.

“Eighth Brother, I’m feeling pretty sleepy.”

“Ah, me too.”

“Why do we have to patrol every single night anyway?”

“Haven’t bandits been stirring up trouble lately?”

“Our fortress wall was so tall, last time Supreme Bright King came and was beaten badly, won’t there be any thieves who dare to come?”

“Hmm, I also think no thieves would dare to come.”

“Then what are we patrolling for? I’m so sleepy, I want to find a place to sleep for a bit.”

“Yeah, sleep a bit, sleep a bit.”

The two sentinels walked while awkwardly chatting, entered the corner watchtower near the lookout tower, lay down on the ground, and began to snore loudly.

Zhuang Guangdao was thrilled in his heart: Hahaha, these fools of Gaojia Village. I was just troubled about not finding a chance to climb in, and now this, handed to me a huge opportunity for free.

He immediately crouched low and ran to the base of the fortress wall.

At that very moment, dozens of pairs of eyes were watching him through the arrow slits, and even Li Daoxuan’s big face was looking down at him from the sky, but he was completely unaware...

Bai Yuan whispered softly, “Shh! Everyone don’t make a sound, don’t scare him off.”

Under the watchful eyes of many, Zhuang Guangdao untied a bundle of grass rope from his waist, formed it into a loop, then glanced at the row of defensive positions on the fortress wall above, and flung it hard...

The rope loop soared high up in the air!

Bai Yuan and the others cheered inwardly for him: “Hit it!”

But it didn’t hit, and the rope loop fell back outside the city.

Bai Yuan and the others: “Ah?”

Zhuang Guangdao wasn’t discouraged; he retrieved the rope loop, aimed again at the top of the wall, and threw it with all his might...

Bai Yuan and the others urged him on again in their thoughts: “Hit it!”

It really hit!

The rope loop caught onto a jut-out and tightened.

Bai Yuan and the others celebrated jubilantly: “Oh yeah, he scored it!”

Farther behind in the woods, Zheng Yanfu and a gang of fierce bandits were delighted too: “Oh yeah, Zhuang Guangdao scored it!”

Even Li Daoxuan couldn't help but give a thumbs-up: “Oh yeah, scored it! Well done, young hero—a nine-meter tall wall, only two tosses to get the rope loop hooked. Why don't you join the Olympics?”

At that instant, everyone was elated, no one was upset!

Zhuang Guangdao wiped his hands on his clothes, then spat “ptui ptui” twice onto his palms, rubbed them together several times, seized the rope with both hands, braced his feet against the wall surface, and started climbing.

This guy really had some skill; a nine-meter wall. Swish swish in and out, he scrambled up it in no time.

Lightly flipping over the wall, he first peeked at the two sentinels loudly snoring in a far-off corner—of course he shouldn't disturb them—so he crouched low, descended via the stairs behind the fortress wall, and circled around to the back of the Fortress gate.

The two heavy, massive iron doors made him gasp: Just how much iron went into making these doors? How much were they worth? Robbing this village once and he'd be set for life with food.

He pushed at one door and it wouldn't budge, so he frantically found the winch behind the doors and turned it carefully, gingerly, terrified that some “creak squeak” noise might rouse the village people.

Luckily, this Hakka roundhouse was still quite new, custom-made not long ago; newer mechanisms are usually very slick, so opening the door was actually silent, with just an extremely faint scrape of metal.

After Zhuang Guangdao opened the city gates, he stood by the entrance, beaming with triumph, and waved vigorously toward the northern hillside.

Over on this side, Zheng Yanfu's gang immediately rushed out from the woods, crouching low and darting toward the city gates.

"They're coming! They're coming." Bai Yuan was ecstatic: "My foresight and calculations were truly miraculous, hahaha. As they say, 'calculating' is counting. In the Six Arts of Gentlemen, this 'counting' skill can surely be added now, right? Hahaha!"

Thirty-Two murmured under his breath: "Can this really be forced in?"

Bai Yuan: "Hmm?"

Thirty-Two: "Ahem! I said nothing at all."

Chapter 72: Night Battle at Gaojia Fortress

Bai Yuan said, "Alright, everyone to your positions. When they all reach the planned courtyard, just kill these foolish bandits."

Everyone responded softly, "May the Deity bless us."

A weak voice sounded; it was from the man who had come to report the news, Wang Er's subordinate with the bandit name White Cat, "After we finish them off, we must save Big Brother Wang Er."

"That goes without saying."

Zheng Yanfu quickly ran to the fortress gate with more than two hundred bandits and reunited with Zhuang Guangdao, saying, "Third Brother, your wall-climbing skills are truly excellent."

Zhuang Guangdao replied, “Hehe, after this job, you can call me Second Brother, and I’ll start addressing you as Big Brother.”

Zheng Yanfu was thrilled, “Hahaha, yes! Charge!”

The two bandit chiefs led from the front, charging into the fortress. On entry, there was a twisted path with walls made of iron plates on both sides, rock-hard.

After rushing along the path for a stretch, they encountered no living quarters; it was nothing but paths the entire way. Turning a corner, they saw a courtyard ahead, with another path beside it.

“It’s like a maze in here!”

“The rooms are all empty!”

“This village has only a bit over a hundred people, yet this fortress has so many houses; many must be vacant, which isn’t surprising at all.”

“Keep charging inward.”

At the courtyard’s end, there was a path to the left and one to the right. This time, the two could split up; each led about a hundred subordinates, taking the left and right paths separately.

But after traversing the paths, they each found themselves in another courtyard.

Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu both started to feel that something wasn’t right.

Just then...

Suddenly, many lanterns lit up on the surrounding rooftops, instantly brightening the courtyards where they stood.

A middle-aged man in a long white robe appeared on the roof, holding a folding fan; he flicked it open with a swish, and the fan bore two large characters: "Gentleman."

It was Bai Yuan. Pretentiously, he pointed at the bandit troops in the courtyard and boomed, "You all..."

Before he could finish those arrogant words, a fierce middle-aged woman on a nearby rooftop lifted a large stone and hurled it down directly.

"Thud!"

A bandit was hit directly by the large stone, his head burst out bleeding, and he fell.

Bai Yuan cried, "Hey! I hadn't had a chance to speak yet."

But it was too late now; with that woman throwing the stone, how could the others hold back? They each picked up prepared stones and threw them wildly into the courtyard. In an instant, large stones rained down from both sides of the rooftops.

Several villagers with bows also drew their light bows and fired erratically downward.

The bandits were caught off guard, and many fell.

Only then did Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao realize they had walked into a trap; shocked, they picked up pot lids to shield their heads.

A few bandit troops under them with bows immediately drew and shot back at the rooftops, but Li Daoxuan's hand immediately reached down and deflected the bandits' arrows, though he did not block the stones thrown by the villagers.

He played it with bias and exception.

After all, Zheng Yanfu was a fierce bandit; his first instinct wasn't to flee but to climb up to the roof. But when he touched the wall besides him, he found it was very smooth, without even a stone seam, making it impossible to climb at all.

His heart panicked, so he had to flee for his life.

Just then, ahead at the corner of the courtyard, there was a small passage that seemed easy to dart into, and Zheng Yanfu took a big stride and charged over.

Just as he was about to enter the passage, unexpectedly, a man leaped out of it, blocking Zheng Yanfu in front of him, grinning broadly with a foolish smile.

Gao Chuwu had arrived.

Zheng Yanfu shouted, "Take this blade!"

He struck Gao Chuwu with his blade in one swift motion, incredibly fast, but it was utterly useless; that strike actually produced a sharp "clang" sound as it got blocked by the iron plates in Gao Chuwu's chest armor.

"Armor!"

Zheng Yanfu was stunned with fear—did the other side have armor? Were they officials?

Gao Chuwu swung his axe horizontally, the force generated by it greatly terrifying Zheng Yanfu; in a hurry, he threw himself to the ground and rolled several times, just barely dodging that axe swing.

But although Gao Chuwu was slow-witted, his physique was top-notch—like someone with zero academic skills but excelling at sports, with top-class strength and speed; Zheng Yanfu had only rolled twice along the ground when Gao Chuwu's foot followed, delivering a kick to his abdomen.

That kick had immense power, sending Zheng Yanfu flying sideways and thudding as he crashed into two of his underlings and knocked them over.

“Damn, what kind of monster is this?” Zheng Yanfu clutched his abdomen with one hand, struggled to get up, and ran toward another side.

In another courtyard, Zhuang Guangdao was in a similarly sorry state, with stones constantly raining down from the roofs on both sides and occasional arrow shots mixed in—how the hell could a fight happen here? Like Zheng Yanfu, he also wanted to slip into a small passage.

But a group defended the passage, all wearing cotton armor, with Zheng Daniu in the lead, carrying a woodcutter’s axe.

Zhuang Guangdao charged over and only got one slash in when Zheng Daniu swept his axe at him, almost cutting his neck, terrifying him so much he didn’t dare make another attack.

Why did every person in Gaojia Village have armor? Damn it, were big groups of officials hiding in the village?

Actually, only the leading fighters had armor, but in the dark mess of a night battle, the bandits couldn’t see clearly; they just spotted the front few with armor and assumed everyone in Gaojia Village had it.

In these times, fighters with armor were officers!

At the thought of the word “officials,” everyone was terrified, losing all will to fight and just wanting to flee for their lives.

The bandit troops tried to run back the way they came, but the entry path had been silently blocked off with large stones moved by some villagers to cut it shut.

Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu passed through the passage, reunited, and with a glance saw another path possible...

A narrow, long passage.

This was the one and only escape route left.

Both men simultaneously charged into that path...

Bai Yuan shouted loudly, "Li Da, Gao Yiyi, get ready, the bandits are heading your way!"

The two blacksmiths rushed with pride, standing behind the "celestial large cannons," each holding a large hammer and wearing feverish grins.

Bring it on!

Bandits!

Let you taste the power of celestial artifacts!

Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao arrived; the passage was narrow, but it could still hold two men running side by side.

The bandit troops behind them also squeezed in after them, running frantically to keep up.

As they ran into that passage, unexpectedly, no stones were being thrown from the roof edges on either side.

This filled both Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao with wild excitement.

We must have found a gap in their defenses, right?

If we ran straight out along this path, we might actually escape to safety.

But not just those two thought that way; every bandit behind them believed the same thing, pressing after the two leaders in a frenzied run, and the narrow passage got so jam-packed with people that it could be described as bodies pressed against bodies.

It made the narrow passage seem like a large sausage stuffed full of meat.

Chapter 73: Kill Them All?

At the end of the passage, there was a dark courtyard. Inside, there were no lights; it was so black that nothing could be seen.

If it were usual times, when faced with such pitch-darkness ahead, Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao would have definitely stopped to study it, watch carefully before entering. But this time the situation was different; with “officials” behind them, the two panicked and fled recklessly, without any caution or clear observation before running.

They couldn’t care whether it was dark ahead anymore.

The two rushed desperately forward. The bandits behind them followed closely. It didn’t take long before they were about to charge into that pitch-dark courtyard.

Just then, from the courtyard came the synchronized shouts of two men: “1, 2, 3... hit it...”

“Bang!”

The sounds of two metal collisions rang out almost simultaneously. Two heavy hammers struck the mechanism of the “large cannons” at the same time, scraping out streaks of dazzling sparks.

In the instant the sparks flashed brightly, Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao saw that in the courtyard ahead stood an enormous metal object.

But their knowledge was limited; in that fleeting moment, they couldn’t recognize what it was. They only knew it was huge, filling the entire courtyard.

The next instant...

Fire came!

The barrel of the bronze cannon spewed a long tongue of flame.

It stretched over a zhang long, charging straight into the narrow little passage.

The firelight lit up the pitch-dark passage once more. At the same moment, it engulfed Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao, who were charging at the front.

“Ah...”

“Ah ah ah!”

The two only managed to cry out once before the flames swallowed them, instantly turning them into two flaming figures. The bandits following closely behind were caught at once too, perishing together in the sea of fire.

In the narrow passage, sudden chaos erupted. Those charging forward slammed to a stop and scrambled backward. But those behind kept pushing ahead. A few at the front hadn't been touched by the flames but were shoved into the fire by those behind.

“Ah ah ah!”

“Retreat!”

“Retreat quickly!”

“There's a big fire ahead!”

The bandit troops in the passage were thrown into disarray, wailing for their parents. The stench of burning flesh and cloth immediately filled the entire passage.

Luckily, the range of the “large cannons” was barely over a zhang. Only the bandits at the passage’s very front were burnt to death; those behind were unharmed. The bandits swiftly turned around, thinking to head back and attack again.

Behind them, the narrow passage entrance had long been secured by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu. They had arrived later and led armored young villagers to guard it.

The bandits couldn’t break out at all, blocked entirely in the passage.

Just then, Li Daoxuan’s hand descended from the sky once more.

The small folk couldn’t push this bronze cannon lighter, but he could.

He stretched out a finger, pressed it against the back of the lighter, and pushed forward slowly.

The cannon’s huge wheels started rolling forward. The long barrel spewed flames, slowly advancing toward the remaining bandit troops in the passage.

The bandit troops screamed in terror: “Help!”

“Help!”

“I don’t want to be burned to death.”

“What is this strange thing?”

“It’s so big, how did it start moving?”

“Heelllllp...”

“The flames are pressing forward.”

“Retribution, this is retribution, the retribution for betraying our boss.”

“Wuwuwu... I was wrong... I won’t dare to do it again...”

“Big brother, save me!”

The bandit troops in the passage completely collapsed.

Their will to resist vanished in an instant, everyone knelt down and shouted for mercy.

Had they surrendered?

Li Daoxuan’s hand that was pushing the lighter stopped.

Here, he needed to consider for a second: should he kill them all?

One...

Forget it, one second was enough, no need for such a long three seconds.

With a “snap,” he turned off the mechanism of the lighter, and the flames disappeared.

That group of terrified bandits instantly breathed a sigh of relief, their bodies went limp, and they collapsed to the ground. The few in front who were about to be burned by the fire were so scared that they soiled themselves, and the passage was filled with a foul smell.

Bai Yuan was standing on a rooftop nearby, witnessed the giant cannon moving, and saw it withdraw the flames, and understood in an instant: “The Deity spared their lives.”

Gao Chuwu asked stupidly: “Why? Shouldn’t these bad guys all be burned to death?”

Thirty-Two climbed onto the rooftop and sighed: “Although the bandits are despicable, many in the bandit army were forced into banditry. If we, having gained the upper hand, killed them all, how would that be different from them, when they gained the upper hand, raping and killing the wealthy women and maids?”

Everyone thought to themselves: Third Lady is really a soft-hearted person.

The head of Gaojia Village peeked out from the fortress wall: “So we should release them? There are still over a hundred bandits here, if we release them all, what if they attack again in the future, what should we do?”

Everyone: “...”

The situation became awkward!

Thirty-Two raised his head and looked up at the sky with pleading eyes.

However, Li Daoxuan did not speak; he was looking at the “Rescue Index” outside the box. It was interesting that although he had spared over a hundred captives without killing them, that “Rescue Index” increased by a pitiful 5 points, becoming 330, averaging only a fraction of a point per person.

As he had expected, so-called rescue was a complex proposition.

For some people, saving their lives was sufficient; for others, they not only needed you to save their lives, but also to guide their way forward.

Some people needed salvation for their bodies; for others, it was their souls that needed saving.

If a nation sat before you for you to save, it was not just to let it survive, but to let it rejuvenate.

Damn, it was so complicated; he just wanted to raise a box of pets, but there were always troublemakers wanting to force him into struggle.

Just then, Bai Yuan suddenly spoke.

He turned his head and looked at a villager beside him, then asked: "In the fierce battle just now, you picked up a stone wanting to smash it down, but then restrained yourself and threw it in another direction. Can you tell me why?"

That villager panicked: "Ah? I... didn't..."

Bai Yuan snapped open his fan, turning the words "gentleman" on the other side: "Your subtle movements might escape others' eyes, but they can't escape mine. Speak up, why did you change direction? Was it to spare someone?"

Everyone: "!"

Thirty-Two suddenly jolted awake: "Were you... from Zhengjia Village?"

The villager, recognized by Thirty-Two, became more embarrassed: "Gentle... folks... I'm sorry... I... I am indeed from Zhengjia Village. Earlier... among the people below, there was an old neighbor from Zhengjia Village... so... I didn't smash him, I threw the stone in another direction."

Only after this sentence came out did everyone suddenly understand.

Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu and their group led villagers from Zhuangjia Village and Zhengjia Village, as well as desperadoes recruited from surrounding villages. As for Gaojia Village, besides the original forty-two inhabitants, there were over a hundred others coming from various surrounding villages, like Zheng Daniu who was from Zhengjia Village—he could basically name every Zheng surnamed person in the bandit army; he might even have played in the mud with Zheng Yanfu back in the day.

A man on the rooftop suddenly knelt down and said loudly: “Deity, forgive me! I... I am from Zhuangjia Village. Earlier, I also saw an acquaintance neighbor in the crowd... so... I deliberately threw a stone off target.”

“Thump!” Another strong woman knelt down: “Deity, forgive me! Little girl also... threw a stone off target on purpose...”

“Thump!”

“Thump!”

Before long, twenty to thirty people knelt down.

Chapter 74: Labor Reform

Bai Yuan snorted: “No wonder. Though I brilliantly maneuvered, trapping those bandits in the courtyard for a four-sided assault, giving us overwhelming advantage, their losses proved minimal when they charged our artillery.”

Zheng Daniu scratched his head dopyly: “Huh? Could y’all still recognize neighbors fightin’ in dark smoke where fire? I... didn’t think o’ that.”

The crowd: “...”

You buffoon should hurry and marry Gao Chuwu!

Thirty-Two respectfully paid utmost reverence toward the sky before lowering his head: “Amongst these survivors, many are neighbors, fellow villagers, even kin of yours, yes? Your restraint in battle stemmed from unwillingness to kill them. Likewise, the Deity spared them, considering your feelings deeply.”

The twenty-some kneeling figures pressed their foreheads to the ground, not daring to speak.

Those panic-stricken within the tunnel by the fearsome “holy flames” remained utterly silent.

Thirty-Two sighed: “Since the Deity forgave them, we must forego further slaughter. Yet handling these wretches poses vexation indeed.”

He furrowed his brow, turning options over and over without resolution.

Right then, Gao Yiye—silent until now—spoke slowly: “The Deity commands labor reform for them.”

“Huh?” The crowd stirred in bafflement: “Labor reform?”

Gao Yiye explained: “It means redeeming past sins through hard work.”

Comprehension dawned on them.

Gao Yiye: “The Deity decrees: Gaojia Village, amidst urgent reconstruction, requires abundant labor. Rather than slaying these wretches before their kin—breeding sadness and distrust—organize them. Let their toil repay their crimes.”

“Those undergoing labor reform will be known as labor offenders. They’ll receive meals only, no extras. Only upon full atonement, judged by the Deity, will they regain citizen rights.”

The huddled masses in the tunnel snapped up their heads abruptly: What? Meals provided? Punishment or reward? Sign me up for this ‘labor offense’!

Thud thud thud! Frantically, they kowtowed in gratitude.

Gao Yiye turned to Thirty-Two: “Assign their labor sites per your discretion, Third Lady.”

Being addressed thus rushed Thirty-Two with pride. He straightened his posture promptly: “Urgent tasks abound indeed! Mass production of cotton textiles and iron armor required. Xin Jia Fortress lacks doors and windows! Stone quarrying, timber felling, firewood harvesting... Overwhelming need exists! These labor offenders shall fulfill such demands.”

Villagers ceased murmuring. Even the twenty-some now rising from kneeling felt moved—the Deity spared their kin, valuing their hearts.

But...

Where would these laborers dwell?

A fresh dilemma arose!

Housing them inside Gaojia Fortress felt unnatural. After all—they’d just been murderous invaders! Residing alongside? Who’d risk throat-cutting whilst sleeping?

Li Daoxuan perceived their hesitation. Solution: simple! Reinserting the Lego bricks extracted days earlier from the scenic box, he now formed not walls, but a tiny enclosure with one narrow entry.

Just as villagers fretted... whoosh! Multicolored “walls” descended from the sky outside Gaojia Fortress, encircling ground into a small courtyard space—akin to an alleyway’s breadth.

All understood instantly!

Thirty-Two waved commandingly: “Dwell within those walls! Sleep obediently by night; labor diligently by day! The Deity decrees sustenance for you—hence Common Trade shall feed you. Yet merit? Extra coin? Forget it! Only upon the Deity’s approval, regaining innocence, shall your working earn reward.”

The bandits inwardly rejoiced: Meals guaranteed? Beyond any prayer! Extra pay? Who'd dream of such?! Still ignorant of the Deity's identity yet hearing "Deity" repeated by villagers, knowing their pardon came from Him... gratitude flowed.

"Deepest thanks for the Deity's mercy!" they chanted as one.

Finishing the shout, he rose to his feet and surrendered all his weapons.

He was then escorted by the villagers of Gaojia Village to undertake the first labor reform task: clearing the battlefield.

They stripped the corpses killed by stone impacts bare, carried them out of the fortress, dug pits on the hillside, and buried them. Dealing with those burned to death by lighters was comparatively troublesome—their clothes couldn't be removed, and lifting the corpses left hands covered in black charcoal and sticky tar, the stench enough to turn one's stomach.

But...

This was labor reform!

What choice did one have about assignments?

Whether willing or not, the work had to be done.

The villagers suddenly realized how convenient it was to have a group of labor offenders to command. After previous encounters where the Deity had eliminated bandits, they'd had to clear the battlefield themselves—carrying corpses and digging pits was utterly revolting.

Now, with labor offenders taking charge, they merely needed to supervise from the sidelines. Wasn't that feeling absolutely exhilarating?

Indeed, killing all enemies outright was unwise; keeping some for labor reform was the true path of wisdom.

As this thought took hold, the sharper-minded villagers delved a layer deeper: What if Gaojia Village had more labor offenders—enough to handle every task? Couldn't they then avoid work for life, simply spending their days escorting the offenders to one job after another?

Trouble!

Once this idea surfaced, it became impossible to shake.

Overcome by shame for such unsavory thoughts, the villagers sank into profound self-reproach, slapping their own faces hard several times.

After a long while, the labor offenders finally cleared the battlefield.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu escorted them into the large circle outside Gaojia Fortress.

Once all the offenders had entered, Li Daoxuan reached out and gave the building block circle's small opening a light push. It sealed shut, imprisoning all one hundred men inside.

Everything was now in order. They'd release them safely at daybreak tomorrow.

Seeing the labor offenders securely confined, the villagers breathed a sigh of relief. They could finally return home to sleep in peace.

Just then, a man knelt before Bai Yuan and Thirty-Two, crying out loudly, "Lord Bai, Third Lady! You've forgotten... we must still rescue Brother Wang Er!"

Everyone turned to look—aha! It was White Cat, the informant.

Only then did they remember: this wasn't over after all.

Embarrassing!

How mortifying! This man had risked his life to warn Gaojia Village, yet after the defensive battle ended, they'd completely forgotten about Wang Er. The shame was almost unbearable.

Thirty-Two flushed crimson with awkwardness, casting a pleading glance toward Bai Yuan.

Bai Yuan laughed, "With the Deity's blessing, rescuing Wang Er from the mountains is nothing at all. I shall gather our men at once, storm into the hills, and bring your Brother Wang Er out. A piece of cake."

Chapter 75: Talking Business

Thirty-Two leaned in close to Bai Yuan's ear, lowering his voice. "The Deity dislikes manifesting elsewhere. Only here in Gajiacun does he personally intervene."

Bai Yuan froze instantly. "What? Is that true?"

Thirty-Two: "I'm not entirely certain, but... so far, that appears to be the case. Otherwise, have you heard of the Deity appearing anywhere else?"

Bai Yuan stiffened all over, his bravado instantly evaporating.

Without the Deity's protection, he was deeply reluctant to lead men into the pitch-black, torchless mountains at midnight to rescue Wang Er. Wang Er had no connection to him, Bai Yuan. The man was a rebel, for heaven's sake! Why should Bai Yuan risk his neck?

He didn't want to go!

But he had just grandly declared he would do so. If he backed out now, wouldn't it mean he was instantly breaking his word?

Once word got out, the world would say Lord Bai of the Bai Family Fortress was a man without honor. The 'Courtesy' part of the Six Arts of Gentlemen would be crossed right off his record.

Bai Yuan roared at Thirty-Two: "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Thirty-Two spread his hands. "Why yell at me? Are you... perhaps... afraid?"

The words "are you afraid" struck Bai Yuan like a blow to a pressure point. His face instantly smoothed back into its usual calm. "Hmph!" he scoffed. "Afraid? I, Bai Yuan, am a refined gentleman, proficient in both culture and martial skills, master of the Six Arts. How could I fear a mere few dozen bandits? Gao Chuwu! Zheng Daniu! Li Da! Gao Yiyi! And every capable young man in the village! Armor on! Weapons up! Follow This Lord! That man from Wangjia Village, White Cat, was it? You lead the way! Hmph! Afraid? This Lord, afraid? Heh heh... Ahem... Li Da! Got an extra set of armor? Suit This Lord up as well."

Everyone: "..."

Gao Chuwu grinned broadly. "I don't mind. Last time we went to the county seat, Wang Er escorted us. Now he's in trouble, we ought to rescue him."

Zheng Daniu also grinned. "You tell me to do something, I do it."

"Then let's go!"

Gritting his teeth, Bai Yuan led a large group of Gaojia Village's toughest young men, torches lit, marching into the mountains.

Li Daoxuan felt a flicker of concern. But then he thought about their current gear and the physical strength built up from daily full meals, meat, oil, and salt. He concluded it wasn't worth excessive worry. Let them have their adventure. Alright, nothing much left to watch in the box for now.

Li Daoxuan stretched. Time for him to sleep too. Right before sleeping, he'd upload the eighth video of "Daily Life in the Tiny Kingdom," which he'd just edited, to TikTok.

Click upload. Sleep!

...

Dawn hadn't yet broken when Li Daoxuan's phone rang, waking him.

He'd stayed up late last night watching his little people fight their night battle and had only managed a few hours of sleep. This call was extremely unwelcome. Part of him wanted to ignore it, but since he was already awake, not answering felt like a double loss.

Slightly irritated, Li Daoxuan answered, "Hello? Who is it?"

"Hello, are you the creator of the TikTok account 'Daily Life in the Tiny Kingdom'? I'm the Sales Manager from Ningyang Toy Company, hoping to discuss a business collaboration with you."

Li Daoxuan glanced outside. It was still pitch black. Who calls this early to talk business? Seriously! What kind of person does this?

The caller sensed the brief pause conveyed dissatisfaction and hurriedly explained, "Apologies for the timing! I was worried another sales rep might snatch this commission, so I just wanted to reach you as quickly as possible."

The man was surprisingly blunt about his motives. His honesty actually dissipated Li Daoxuan's annoyance. "Alright, understood," Li Daoxuan replied.

The caller continued, "I don't wish to waste your time, so I'll be direct. We'd like you to create a video featuring our company's building block toys. Include a link to purchase our products in the video – distribute them through a 'Little Yellow Bike'. Your commission will be..."

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly here it comes! I've been waiting for this. Out loud, his tone remained neutral. "How much commission?"

The caller answered, "Twenty-five percent of sales revenue."

Li Daoxuan had no idea if this rate was reasonable. He just knew TikTok would take 5%, leaving him 20%. It seemed doable! Make some easy money; why overthink it?

Li Daoxuan said, "I'll need to see your products first, to see if they suit the Tiny Kingdom theme. Don't send me some huge toy; that won't fit."

The caller chuckled confidently. "Rest assured! Our company specializes in miniature toys, all tiny little things! Absolutely perfect for the Tiny Kingdom theme. Guaranteed to satisfy."

"Alright!" Li Daoxuan agreed. "Send me samples to review."

The caller: "We'll send them express delivery immediately! Overnight! Delivered tonight! See? This early call was all about that timing!"

Li Daoxuan exchanged pleasantries before hanging up.

The call ended, but sleep was now impossible. He got out of bed.

A hint of dawn was just emerging outside his window. Li Daoxuan absentmindedly ordered some congee and cold noodles for delivery. His gaze habitually drifted to the scenic box beside his bed.

Inside the box, the sky was also just starting to brighten.

The first person up in Gaojia Village turned out to be the teacher, Mr. Wang.

The village's late-night battle had involved every able-bodied man and woman, leaving everyone thoroughly exhausted and sleeping in late. Only Mr. Wang, who hadn't fought but had instead huddled fearfully all night in his small room, was the first to rise this morning.

Being a poor scholar, he had no bad habits requiring servants. He cooked himself some congee, sprinkled in two salt-pickled chicken strips and some fresh greens, and savored the satisfying breakfast.

Then, Mr. Wang began organizing his teaching materials.

The children's lessons had been canceled yesterday due to the preparations for war. Today, he needed to teach them properly. Otherwise, he wouldn't deserve meals that good.

Seeing how serious and responsible Mr. Wang appeared, Li Daoxuan couldn't help but smile. Yesterday, he'd introduced the "Seventh Set of Radio Calisthenics" on a whim. It had been a spur-of-the-moment joke, but now he seriously needed to consider educational reforms. Modern teaching methods needed to spread outward from this very teacher. Ancient scholars could be incredibly rigid. Getting him to willingly accept a new teaching method would be difficult. Li Daoxuan needed a plan, a way to convince him genuinely.

Just as he was pondering this, the children woke up too.

Gao Yiye led a large group of children, bouncing cheerfully into the courtyard where Mr. Wang lived. As soon as they saw him, the bouncing stopped. They bowed respectfully in unison. "Good morning, Teacher!"

It seemed children feared their teachers just as much in ancient times as they did today.

Gao Yiye smiled at Mr. Wang too. "Good morning, Mr. Wang. This little girl would also like to learn reading and writing with the children."

Mr. Wang nodded, about to start the lesson when he suddenly remembered something. He looked up towards the distant watchtower.

Li Daoxuan knew exactly what he was looking at and smiled. He opened his phone app, reached his phone into the box so it hung suspended above the watchtower, and began the familiar routine: "Seventh Set of Radio Calisthenics... Group One... Stretching Exercises..."

Chapter 76: How Embarrassing

Stretching exercises... 1, 2, 3, 4... 2, 2, 3, 4...

Today, the children began to keep up with the motions on the screen.

Swinging their arms, swinging their legs, their little faces flushed red.

Mr. Wang watched the children doing calisthenics from the side. For some reason, he felt compelled to join. He thought: My body has always been weak. First, I haven't had a proper meal in years, and second, it's from studying hard since childhood without properly exercising my limbs. Lack of physical activity has left me without the strength to even bind a chicken.

Now that there's good food, I should exercise too.

Why not... dance along with the kids?

His feet quietly shuffled, positioning himself behind the children. That way, he wouldn't have to fear being seen and embarrassed by them. He started swinging his arms too. Shaking his hands, shaking his feet, taking deep breaths diligently. Singing and jumping like the kids won't make me grow old...

The sound of the broadcast calisthenics was deafeningly loud, radiating from the watchtower throughout Gaojia Village. Villagers gradually got up, and some spontaneously began following the exercises. Since it was started by the Deity, it must be divine gymnastics. Following along couldn't be bad.

Seeing this scene, Li Daoxuan recalled his own school days. Wait... thinking of school days seemed to remind him of something else...

Nutritious breakfast: a bottle of milk for each child.

This was extremely important! The average height of the entire Chinese nation depended on this inconspicuous bottle of milk each day.

Wait!

Most people of our dynasty are lactose intolerant. Drinking milk easily causes diarrhea. For someone with poor physical constitution, one bout of diarrhea might risk his life. If modern people are like this, let alone these people from the late Ming Dynasty, who've never drunk milk before.

Li Daoxuan walked to the cabinet, found a bag of goat milk powder, and checked the production date. Good, not expired yet.

He mixed a large cup for himself, added two spoonfuls of sugar, then scooped a tiny spoonful from his big cup into a mineral water bottle lid. He slowly placed it in front of Gao Yiye: "Gao Yiye, this is goat milk. Call Thirty-Two to arrange it. Distribute it for everyone to drink. One bamboo tube per person..."

Not long after, an amusing scene unfolded below the watchtower.

Over a hundred people of Gaojia Village, holding various bottles and jars, formed a long queue to get milk. It looked remarkably similar to the scenes in our country during the early reforms, when people holding milk tickets queued outside the supply and marketing cooperatives to buy milk.

Thirty-Two's family servant was responsible for distributing the milk. Holding a bamboo tube, he dipped it into the "big milk basin" – the mineral water bottle lid – scooped out a tube full, and poured it into the pot held out by Gao San Niang.

Gao San Niang picked up the pot, took a sip, and immediately narrowed her eyes with a look of utter delight: "Ah... Goat milk... I've heard of this since I was little, but never tasted it. This is the first time I've ever had something so good."

Thirty-Two scolded her laughingly: "Get your milk and move aside! Don't block the people behind you."

Gao San Niang: "That last bamboo tube was for me! I need another one for my son too. Come on, give me one more tube."

"Your son only counts as half a person. Half a tube."

“That won’t do! Young Lady Yiye just said, the Deity’s order is one tube per person. My son, though young, still counts as one person. You can’t reduce it by half.”

Thirty-Two laughed heartily: “Well, you, Gao San Niang! You can’t even read one character, yet you’ve learned to find loopholes in words! Fine, here’s another one for you. Next...”

Joyful sounds echoed beneath the watchtower.

By the time everyone had their milk, the two managers, Gao Yiye and Thirty-Two, were tired.

Gao Yiye remained standing, unmoving.

Thirty-Two, however, sat down on the steps below the watchtower and scooped out a bamboo tube of milk for himself. Gulping down half the tube, he chuckled happily: “Truly the goat milk of the immortal realm! The goaty smell is much milder than the goat milk from our mortal world. And it’s sweetened too! My, what a wonderful thing... If this were presented as tribute to His Majesty, I bet he wouldn’t even want to drink deer’s milk anymore... Hehe... How did I, Thirty-Two, deserve this? Now I eat better than the Emperor himself! Ha ha ha ha...”

Li Daoxuan watched with amusement. He reached over, grabbed a small handful of goat milk powder, and placed it in front of Thirty-Two.

The sudden appearance of a little white mound startled Thirty-Two. But he quickly understood: “Ah! The Deity rewards us with flour again!”

“It’s not flour,” Gao Yiye spoke up. “The Deity says this thing is called milk powder. Put it in water, add a little sugar, stir it, and it becomes the goat milk you just drank.”

“What?!” Thirty-Two was shocked. “There exists such a convenient magical item?!”

Gao Yiye: “The Deity scolds you for your ignorance. Milk powder was actually invented by the Mongolians as early as the Yuan Dynasty. You, Third Lady, boast of having seen much, yet you didn’t even know this?”

Thirty-Two hurriedly made a respectful salute: “My meager knowledge is like fireflies daring to match the radiance of the bright moon compared to the great wisdom of the Deity!”

Gao Yiye: “The Deity says you are entrusted with this milk powder. From now on, mix it into goat milk every morning and distribute one bamboo tube to every person in the village.”

Thirty-Two: “I obey!”

After accepting, Thirty-Two’s face showed a hint of distress. “Er... Young Lady Yiye, there’s another matter... I wish to report to the Deity.”

Gao Yiye laughed: “That little thought of yours? The Deity saw through it long ago. Are you going to say your tasks are too many for one person to handle?”

Thirty-Two nodded vigorously: “The Deity truly knows all! This lowly one’s little worry...”

Gao Yiye: “The Deity said, as the population of Gaojia Village grows and the tasks multiply, it’s inevitable you can’t manage alone. He authorizes you to use the surplus flour, milk powder, oil, salt, sugar, and silver coins—after distribution to the villagers—to flexibly hire some helpers.”

Thirty-Two was overjoyed: “That is... most excellent!”

Having worked in the official circles, he knew very well: the Deity allowing him to hire helpers effectively meant he was permitted to form “his own yamen.” And he would be the highest official in this “yamen,” just like the county magistrate.

Thirty-Two slapped his thigh in ecstatic glee: “Wahaha! I’m going to hire people! I’ve already thought about who to hire first!”

Curiously, Gao Yiye asked: “This next question isn’t from the Deity, it’s from me. What sort of person are you planning to hire first? Why are you laughing so triumphantly?”

Thirty-Two: "I'm going to hire a third lady."

Gao Yiye: "Pfft!"

Li Daoxuan: "Pfft!"

Ignoring Gao Yiye's bewildered expression, Thirty-Two slammed the table and roared with laughter: "Yes! I'm going to hire a third lady first! Ha ha ha ha! Make him do all the tedious tasks! The slightest dissatisfaction I feel with how he handles things, boom, I kick him between the legs! Ha ha ha ha... Ha ha ha ha..."

Gao Yiye: "..."

Li Daoxuan: "..."

People!

How do humans always end up becoming what they despised?

Li Daoxuan suddenly remembered what he said to Cai Xinzi when commissioning the Hakka roundhouse: "Right now, I'm the client!"

Ah ah ah!

Thud! He collapsed in front of his computer, rolling frantically on the floor. Chaotically rolling, tumbling, bouncing. How humiliating! How utterly humiliating...

Chapter 77: Third Ladys Merit

After finishing his moment of pride, Thirty-Two finally got down to serious business.

The village still had plenty of matters to handle; it truly needed restoration in every aspect.

Li Daoxuan reached out and parted the building blocks surrounding the labor offenders. Over a hundred labor offenders emerged timidly.

They weren't yet aware that a deity protected Gaojia Village, utterly baffled by how such massive walls could suddenly encircle them, then automatically open a gap to let them out.

In any case, sheer panic was the only appropriate response.

Thirty-Two stood before them, loudly announcing: "All you labor offenders, listen well! Starting today, you'll work to atone for your crimes..."

To themselves, the labor offenders thought: Working, huh? After fighting all last night and getting no proper sleep, our bellies are empty. Now we have to work? Looks like we're in for brutal treatment today.

Just as they finished this thought, Thirty-Two boomed: "Your first task is to cook. People of Gaojia Village don't have time to tend to your meals, so you'll only cook for yourselves."

Upon hearing this, the group of labor offenders was dumbfounded.

Their first task... was to cook their own meal?

This didn't sound like punishment. It sounded like a reward.

Stone and mud! In this severe drought, if you can fill my belly, I'd call you dear father! Yet you call this "using labor to reform one's sins"?

Soon after, villagers of Gaojia Village lent them pots, bowls, and utensils. These offenders went to gather dried wood from the hillsides for firewood, fetched water from the big pond, set up cooking pots, and began boiling water.

A servant from the household of Thirty-Two pushed forth a giant grain of white rice as large as a millstone — this single grain weighed over a hundred pounds. He tossed it before the group: “This is your rice. Divide it yourselves.”

Seeing the grain, the labor offenders froze in disbelief.

“This... what on earth is... this?”

“Is it rice?”

“B-b-b-b-big rice.”

“Why is it so enormous?”

The servant scoffed mockingly: “Ignorant fools! This is divine rice bestowed by the Deity. A single grain is enough to feed a hundred of you. Hurry up and thank the Deity!”

The labor offenders had no idea who this Deity was. Didn’t matter. Food was food, so they offered thanks.

With overlapping voices, they thanked the favor, then used borrowed chisels and hammers to break the giant rice grain into small fragments. A few pieces went into each pot, cooked into a thin gruel. Each person devoured two large bowls.

Full stomachs brought instant, immense relief.

Even with Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao, they rarely had full bellies. Though they’d stolen official grain, they dared not eat their fill, needing to conserve provisions for a long guerrilla campaign in the mountains against the officials.

Each meal only gave them a half-full feeling at best.

This was truly a long-awaited, satisfying meal.

Once fed, strength returned.

A thought of escape flitted through someone's mind: Now that I have energy, maybe I can run fast enough to escape?

Yet a hand touched their now-full belly, causing hesitation.

After escaping... where could I ever find full meals?

Ah, forget it. Better to behave and accept the labor reform.

After tidying up the pots and pans, the labor offenders headed up the hillside to chop trees and cut wood. They were to make doors and windows for all the rooms in the Gao family's enclosed residence—no small task with over two hundred rooms. Just the door panels would require more than two hundred pieces, and even more windows would be needed, keeping them busy for quite a while.

With a group of labor offenders “freely” crafting doors and windows for their homes, the villagers of Gaojia saved much time. The women continued weaving cotton cloth at an accelerated pace, while the men split their efforts: some hammered armor plates, others molded pottery jars, and some carved sculptures...

Having experienced two consecutive bandit attacks on Gaojia Village, they now understood that laziness wouldn't do. Protecting themselves required speedily equipping every village man with a set of armor—an urgent priority.

Both inside and outside the village, a scene of bustling activity unfolded.

...

At noon, the sun blazed fiercely.

Li Daoxuan held a bowl of sour-pickle pork rice noodles and sat beside the scenic box.

Now, not only the village but also the northern hillside bustled. The labor offenders, busy felling trees and crafting doors and windows, spread across the slope amid an atmosphere of intense effort.

Li Daoxuan repeatedly tapped the buttons labeled “north, south, east, and west” outside the box, shifting the view to observe each tiny figure at work and allowing the external camera to capture more interesting scenes.

After a few taps on “north,” he suddenly felt something amiss.

Hmm?

A large stone at the edge of his vision hadn’t been there moments ago—it had appeared abruptly.

Pausing a fraction of a second, he swiftly realized: the view had enlarged again.

First, he checked the value outside the box; it remained 330, unchanged. Then, he compared it with a video he’d recorded of the hillside tens of minutes earlier.

The scenic box’s view had extended outward roughly ten meters. Ten meters seemed minimal, almost unnoticeable—yet it revealed an additional large stone.

Tapping north, south, east, and west confirmed each direction’s view had expanded by ten meters.

This ten-meter expansion might have been too slight, increasing 330 by a tiny decimal fraction rounded off and hidden by the box.

When did the expansion happen?

Unknown!

But why it happened wasn't hard to guess.

Li Daoxuan silently reflected: "Seems Third Lady made headway in Chengcheng County during the past tens of minutes."

...

Meanwhile, in a side hall of the City God Temple in Chengcheng County.

Third Lady wore a dark-blue cloth Daoist robe, her hair coiled in a Daoist bun. Combined with her slightly rounded face and cross-legged seat on a cushion, she truly resembled a kindly devotee.

Her personal maidservant stood a pace behind her, holding a medicine jar, akin to a guardian acolyte.

A man clad in patched garments knelt before Third Lady, kowtowing desperately: "Thank the Deity, thank the Deity! After taking the divine medicine granted by the Deity, my son's fever dropped swiftly—his little life is spared at last. Thank the Deity."

Third Lady smiled kindly: "Since it's saved, all is well. The Deity would surely rejoice knowing this. Do you understand how to conduct yourself henceforth?"

The man kowtowed fiercely: "I dare not forget the Deity's teachings. From now on, I'll devote myself wholly to goodness, aiding others in my power."

"Excellent, you may leave!" Third Lady waved a hand.

The man exited effusively grateful and met an old woman wailing at the temple entrance, clutching a little girl.

Curious, he asked: “Old elder, why do you weep?”

The old woman sobbed: “My granddaughter suffers from dysentery for days without improvement, wasting away daily. I’m impoverished—unable to afford physicians or medicine to save her. I’ve come to beg the gods at the City God Temple.”

The man adopted a solemn expression: “Old elder, do you not know? In the temple’s side hall, a devotee acts under Dao Xuan Deity’s decree to alleviate worldly suffering without charge. Poor folk like you who cannot afford treatment should visit that devotee. Seek divine medicine from Dao Xuan Deity—it may grant your granddaughter a flicker of hope.”

The old woman brightened joyfully: “Which side hall? My vision is feeble—I fear I cannot find it.”

The man replied: “Enough. I’ve vowed wholehearted goodness—might as well aid you fully. I’ll guide you there...”

Chapter 78: The Unhealable One

Just past noon, Bai Yuan, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and others returned.

Accompanying them were the injured Wang Er, nearly a hundred wounded Wangjia Villagers, and fifty followers of Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu.

Li Daoxuan picked up his magnifying glass and meticulously examined each figure—starting with his own villagers, for this deity was fiercely protective of his own.

Thankfully, none were injured, though they looked exhausted and hungry. Their midnight mountain trek and subsequent battle had stretched from last night till noon—exhaustion was inevitable.

As for the others...

Wang Er seemed gravely wounded, covered in blood and unconscious on a stretcher. Wangjia Villagers bore various injuries, spirits visibly broken. Curiously, Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu’s men remained unscathed.

Li Daoxuan understood instantly: no battle had occurred last night. The rebels must have surrendered immediately when Bai Yuan's group arrived.

The reason was obvious—simply revealing Zhuang Guangdao and Zheng Yanfu's deaths would have shattered their will to fight.

Upon seeing the returning group, Gaojia Villagers rushed forward, with Thirty-Two leading the charge.

After a brief discussion, the fifty captives were herded toward the labor offenders, joining over one hundred prisoners seized the previous night.

Wang Er and the wounded Wangjia Villagers were ushered into Gaojia Fortress, temporarily sheltered in a large courtyard.

Thirty-Two, remembering Wang Er's earlier escorting kindness, crouched anxiously beside his stretcher. "How is Brother Wang?"

"This man is severely injured," Bai Yuan spread his hands helplessly. "Healing is regrettably not among the Six Arts of Gentlemen."

Thirty-Two pressed, "Are his internal organs damaged? Can't you at least tell that?"

Bai Yuan clasped his hands behind his back and turned away. "I remain but an unaccomplished gentleman, flawed in many ways."

Thirty-Two snapped, "Just say you don't know!"

Silently, Bai Yuan gazed skyward at a forty-five-degree angle, eyes distant.

Thus, no one could assess Wang Er's wounds.

Even Li Daoxuan's magnifying glass proved useless, leaving all helpless with worry.

Finally, Wang Er himself opened his eyes. Gratefully scanning the faces around him, he rasped, "I'm... fine. Tough as nails... won't die... Got any incense ashes? Rub it on... my wounds... If I can't pull through... just let me die..."

"We've no incense ashes, but soot from the bottom of a..." Gao Chuwu began.

Gao Yiye abruptly cut him off. "Hush! The Deity speaks."

Tilting her head attentively, she suddenly raised her hands skyward. "We give thanks for the Deity's medicine!"

Li Daoxuan had already opened his home first-aid kit. Retrieving a bottle of Yunnan Baiyao Wound Powder, he scraped a minuscule dusting onto his fingertip, then reached down into the box, depositing it before Gao Yiye.

To others, only a cluster of white orbs seemed to flutter down from the sky.

With reverent hands, Gao Yiye collected the powder from the deity's fingertip.

Her tiny fingers brushed against the colossal hand.

Inside, a thrill surged: I touched the Deity's hand!

Pulling back her trembling hands, she placed the white pellets on a table. "The Deity decrees: crush these into powder. Apply it to all wounds. Fate will decide its efficacy—if one's time hasn't come, it shall staunch blood and renew flesh; if destiny demands... even this divine medicine won't save them."

Bai Yuan and Thirty-Two clasped fists. "We obey the Decree of the Deity."

Drowsy and disoriented, Wang Er missed the commotion. But his fellow Wangjia Villagers, bearing minor wounds themselves, stared awe-struck as Gao Yiye lifted her hands—and white medicine descended from the heavens.

White Cat was the first to move, crushing the medicinal pills into fine white powder. Together, they scattered the powder over Wang Er's and the injured villagers' wounds.

Yunnan Baiyao is no joke—this healing ointment has been our dynasty's top-ranked panacea since ancient times. The moment it touched their wounds, the bleeding ceased immediately.

The Wangjia Villagers murmured among themselves, "What kind of medicine is this? So powerful!"

"I heard Miss Gao say it seems like divine medicine."

"It fell from the sky just now."

"They say it's medicine bestowed by the Deity... what Deity?"

"Seems like the Dao Xuan Deity."

"Never heard of that immortal. I've heard of Guanyin Bodhisattva and the Primordial Deity..."

As whispers rippled through the crowd, Wang Er suddenly stirred. "Eh? Am I... in Gaojia Village?"

Thirty-Two replied, "Yes, Brother Wang. We brought you to Gaojia Village. Rest and heal here now."

"No... No, I can't heal here..."

Wang Er frantically struggled to sit up, but his injuries were far too severe. With a thud, he fell back onto the stretcher. He turned urgently to the nearby villagers. "Your injuries aren't bad, right? Carry me. Let's go. Quickly."

The Wangjia Villagers startled in alarm, “Brother, in your condition... you can’t move recklessly.”

Thirty-Two added, “Brother Wang, please don’t push yourself.”

Wang Er shook his head. “I’m the great rebel who killed officials. If anyone knows Gaojia Village sheltered me, you’ll face trouble. Once the imperial army arrives, we’ll all die without graves.”

The group stiffened.

Gao Chuwu scratched his head blankly. “Lord Bai said the court doesn’t care anymore! Said to let rebels ‘loot starting next spring...’ What was that line? Anyway—he just said they don’t care! By next spring, you’ll be a law-abiding citizen again!”

The group collectively rolled their eyes at Gao Chuwu, cursing inwardly: What a fool, spouting nonsense again.

Wang Er shook his head. “Others can become citizens again next spring. Not me.”

Gao Chuwu asked with great curiosity, “Why not you? We’re all born from parents—two eyes, one mouth, two arms, two legs.”

Wang Er explained, “I’m the leader. I incited the villagers to kill the county magistrate, threw all Chengcheng County into chaos. Every rebel running wild out there now learned from me. The court won’t spare me.”

Gao Chuwu scratched his head sluggishly for the longest time before understanding finally dawned. “Ah! Why, being the leader has this bad side too?”

He grinned foolishly. “Then... if our privately crafted steel armor is discovered later, won’t everyone else get pardoned except Third Lady?”

Everyone: "Pfft!"

Thirty-Two's face flushed red instantly. "You idiot! Shut up!"

Chapter 79: I Am a Weak Person

Bai Yuan was not a native of Gaojia Village, and he had no desire to involve himself too deeply in Wang Er's affairs. After all, he needed to maintain a clear boundary with rebels. Seizing the opportunity while Gao Chuwu was speaking rashly, he grabbed Gao Chuwu's arm, dragged him out of the courtyard, and slipped away himself, washing his hands of the matter.

Wang Er: "I am forever grateful for Gaojia Village's repeated aid. I, Wang Er, owe you far too much. The greater my debt, the more I must refuse to burden you. Brothers... carry me away..."

These last words were directed at the men from Wangjia Village.

Thirty-Two approached Gao Yiye and whispered, "If the Deity is willing to protect Wang Er, he could stay in our village without issue. No matter how powerful the imperial court may be, how could it ever rival a god? But we do not know the Deity's will. Should we speak up and ask Wang Er to stay?"

Gao Yiye shook her head at Thirty-Two: "The Deity has not yet issued any divine decree."

Li Daoxuan was reflecting on a deeper question: "Should I decide this matter, or leave it to the people in the miniature world?"

He was an unshakable authority in the eyes of Gaojia Village's residents. With a single word, the villagers would obey without question and follow his every instruction.

Before this, he had never hesitated to guide them in various matters, hoping to spare them unnecessary hardship.

But Wang Er's situation was different.

Gaojia Village had saved Wang Er's life, yet he showed no joy. Instead, his face was etched with worry and an urgent desire to leave, terrified of bringing disaster to the village.

For this righteous hero, his own life seemed unimportant. He held convictions far exceeding his survival—he craved not protection in the palm of another's hand but to stand tall and shield others instead.

He needed a larger stage to perform more deeds of valor, a goal impossible to achieve merely by hiding within Gaojia Village under Li Daoxuan's protection.

Though Li Daoxuan reflected that centuries of accumulated knowledge and perspective separated him from those in the miniature world, he did not feel entitled to dictate another's life path.

In the miniature world, Thirty-Two remained hesitant: "Sister Yiye... could you perhaps... ask the Deity?"

But as soon as these words left his mouth, he abruptly slapped his own face with a sharp "crack": "Fool! How dare we trouble His Eminence with the trivial struggles of the mortal realm? His immense grace in protecting this land with divine power is already beyond generosity."

Pacing restlessly, he searched for Bai Yuan's opinion—only to realize Bai Yuan hadn't returned after dragging Gao Chuwu away and was long gone, avoiding involvement.

Just then, Li Daoxuan spoke: "Yiye, tell Wang Er: if he chooses to stay, I will ensure his protection. But if he wishes to leave, I respect his decision for his own life."

Gao Yiye rushed with pride, promptly straightening her posture and announcing solemnly: "Brother Wang, the Deity has spoken..."

After listening quietly to Gao Yiye's message, Wang Er's expression turned peculiar. He lifted his head to the sky. At a height of over sixty zhang, only a low cloud was visible—with no sign of any being overhead: "The Deity? Who—?"

Thirty-Two answered: "Dao Xuan Deity, the god who protects this land. Everything we gave you earlier came from His blessing."

Wang Er stared blankly. Unable to rise for a formal bow due to his injuries, he cupped his hands weakly toward the heavens: "I thank the Deity for his kindness... but... still... let me go."

Knew it! Li Daoxuan thought.

Thirty-Two frowned in distress: "You are not a wicked man. Your rebellion arose only because officials stole your seed grain—justifiable cause! Someone like you deserves peace... why refuse the Deity's goodwill?"

Wang Er gave a bitter smile: "Yet my own men committed murder and arson, slaughtering women and children. They even attacked Gaojia Village and tried to kill me as well. How dare I call myself a good man before you? How could I be worthy of sheltering within your village under the Deity's protection?"

Silence blanketed the crowd at these heavy words.

Thirty-Two murmured: "This world has gone astray... the imperial court is flawed, yet the rebels are as well... but where exactly lies the root of this corruption? I... I am unable to comprehend such matters..."

Wang Er said, "That Third Lady wished to help me moves me deeply." He turned and roared at the Wangjia Village men: "What are you waiting for? Lift me—now! The longer we remain in Gaojia Village, the greater trouble we invite upon this place!"

Casting timid glances at the sky, the men from Wangjia Village lifted the stretcher. Saluting deeply toward Thirty-Two and Gao Yiye, they departed.

Li Daoxuan did not intervene.

Thirty-Two also offered no resistance.

The villagers lining the path remained silent, watching somberly. Gao Chuwu took half a step forward, only to be pulled back firmly by the Village Chief.

Seeing the villagers' reactions, Li Daoxuan understood: most wished Wang Er to leave. Ultimately, they were law-abiding commoners. When Wang Er first rallied his uprising, he'd invited people from Wangjia, Zhuangjia, and Zhengjia Villages to join him. But none accepted and later followed Thirty-Two's lead to Gaojia Village instead.

From that day forth, both their bodies and souls had diverged from Wang Er's path.

As that quote from the movie *Hero Unknown* implied: they too were "weak people, unable to adapt to this era of titanic upheavals."

Yet weakness in itself is no sin—as long as it does not lead to disloyalty. And if they could remain peaceful, what harm was there in being weak?

Li Daoxuan permitted his little inhabitants their peaceful weakness! For in the ordinary world, he accepted that he, too, was no fearless hero.

Wang Er eventually passed through the outer gates of Gaojia Fortress. Crossing the northern slope, he saw the "labor offenders" pausing to watch him with shamed eyes as they chopped wood.

But Wang Er did not reproach them. Without a word, he vanished into the forest alongside his men from Wangjia Village.

"Now that they've left... will they have food?" Gao Yiye asked anxiously.

"They will!" Bai Yuan suddenly reappeared: "When we rescued him earlier, several carts of grain remained in that cave. With more than half of Wang Er's forces gone, those supplies will feed his group in the mountains for over a year!"

Gao Yiye finally relaxed.

Watching this, Li Daoxuan also felt little reason to linger. He stretched his arms and stood up from the miniature world—staring at it intensely for long spells was utterly exhausting. He ought to move about a little, he thought—perhaps perform a set of calisthenics?

Just then, his phone rang. “Sir, this is Shunfeng Delivery. We have a package requiring personal receipt at your location.”

“Oh?” Only then did Li Daoxuan recall—some sales manager from Ningyang Toy Company had phoned at dawn to arrange delivery of toy samples for his video reviews. The day’s events within the miniature world had proven so utterly engrossing that he’d forgotten all about it.

“Alright, deliver it to my door. I’m home right now.”

Chapter 80: The Toy Selling Business

Li Daoxuan carried a large box into his bedroom.

The box had the words “Ningyang Toy Company” stuck on it, and when he lifted the lid, it was filled with a heap of toys in all sorts of shapes.

However, these toys had one difference from others made by other companies—their “tiny size”.

Ordinary toys were mostly made at scales like 1:100 or 1:144.

But the toys from this Ningyang Toy Company were crafted at a 1:200 or even 1:400 scale, so ridiculously tiny it was almost absurd.

The 1:400 ones were too small for even Li Daoxuan to bother with, but the 1:200 toys caught his great interest.

A 1:200 model airplane, a 1:200 bus, a 1:200 high-speed train, a 1:200 ship...

Darn it, it was almost like they were custom-made for his little people, but the only drawback was that they were just plastic toys with no power systems—they couldn’t actually move.

A dead toy with no power was completely useless to Li Daoxuan.

The guy who had called him that morning had already added each other on WeChat. Li Daoxuan opened WeChat and sent a message to that person: “Received the samples. Your company’s toys really are super small.”

The man’s online name was A Barrel of Pudding, and he felt a bit proud: “Yes, our company has been making miniature toys for years now, deeply invested in this market. After seeing your ‘Daily Life in the Tiny Kingdom’, I knew you were the perfect TikTok vlogger for us, and our products were just right for you too. Working together would be a win-win!”

“Win-win my foot!” Li Daoxuan ruthlessly mocked: “Haven’t you noticed? My Tiny Kingdom daily videos happen in an ancient village setting, and now you’re handing me a bunch of modern toys. How am I going to film that into a video?”

“Uh... well!” A Barrel of Pudding felt a bit awkward: “You could film a bit of a modern Tiny Kingdom...”

“No!” Li Daoxuan flatly refused: “I only like filming the ancient Tiny Kingdom—modern ones are boring. You know, there are tons of vloggers on TikTok doing tilt-shift photography; why haven’t their accounts blown up while mine has? It’s because they always film modern scenes, which are too common. Even after processing into a Tiny Kingdom look with tilt-shift technique, people just glance over modern Tiny Kingdoms without much interest. Mine, with its ancient setting, huge investments, all actors in period costumes, and ancient village backgrounds—that’s what viewers love.”

This made sense, and A Barrel of Pudding fell into thought: “So what do you suggest?”

Li Daoxuan said: “Make me some ancient miniature toys! Like a 1:200 scale ancient-style small house—it’s fine if it’s empty inside—or a 1:200 castle, small attic, small garden...”

A Barrel of Pudding said: “Uh, in that case, we’d need to redo the molds, and that’d cost quite a bit.”

Li Daoxuan said: “Instead of mass-producing unsellable goods, we should remold to make stuff that sells. The high costs would pay off in profits. What do you think?”

A Barrel of Pudding said: “Uh, I’ll have to discuss this with the product team.”

Li Daoxuan said: “No problem, take your time discussing. I’m not in a rush. For these little cars and planes, I’ll start by testing them on Little Yellow Bike sales, but I can’t guarantee any sales.”

A Barrel of Pudding was overjoyed: “Great, give it a trial run so we can see how it goes.”

Li Daoxuan closed WeChat and sat in front of his computer. From his video pile, he dug out some clips of two blacksmiths making armor pieces, edited them together, and added a caption: “Another peaceful day in the Tiny Kingdom begins. Today, the blacksmiths are also working hard to forge armor...”

After uploading the video, he casually set up a Little Yellow Bike showcase for the 1:200 airplane, ship, and high-speed train.

His account ‘Daily Life in the Tiny Kingdom’ was already gaining some buzz, and as soon as the video went up, viewer comments flooded in.

“Yo, that little blacksmith’s shop today looks so realistic. See? The fire is actually burning.”

“Where did they find actors for those blacksmiths? Their acting feels so genuine.”

“Those actors are real blacksmiths working with old-school forging techniques. Look at that worn-out furnace beside them—such high authenticity!”

“Why not use an electric furnace? A home induction furnace could melt any metal into liquid in a blink.”

“Nah, forget modern furnaces—keep it old-school.”

Amid all their noisy chatter, the products on Little Yellow Bike actually sold a few items, but sales were... really pitiful. After all, those little cars, planes, and trains were everywhere online—who’d want to buy them?

Suddenly, Li Daoxuan had a brainwave. He picked up a little bus in his hand, placed it into the box, and used his own hand to push that bus, making it “drive” over to the blacksmith’s shop.

His hand was invisible to anyone, so the villagers could only see a strangely shaped car suddenly drop from the sky and run around Gaojia Village, leaving them totally dumbfounded.

But after the shock wore off, they understood—it had to be another bizarre magical car sent down from above by the Deity. No need to fear, since the Deity never meant them harm.

A group of little people gathered around and chatted excitedly about the bus.

Soon, Gao Yiye arrived too, keeping a stern face. She called out to the villagers, “The Deity orders everyone to get on and take a ride.”

After saying that, Gao Yiye hopped right into the bus. The simpleton Gao Chuwu leaped in second, followed by Zheng Daniu, Li Da, Gao Yiyi, and others—all cramming into the bus.

Li Daoxuan then pushed the bus with his hand and slowly cruised around Gaojia Village.

Gao Yiye exclaimed, “Wow, this magical car is so much fun!”

Gao Chuwu said, “I’ve never ridden in a carriage before. Is this thing about the same as that?”

“Hahaha, fun, fun!”

The bus full of people laughed and joked their way around the village. After getting off, they saw the Deity recall the car back to the heavens, feeling a bit reluctant.

Li Daoxuan took out the car and immediately opened the video he had just recorded, pleased upon seeing it—his hand was visible pushing the vehicle.

Just as he expected, while the people inside the box couldn't see his hand, the surveillance camera outside the box captured it all.

This made the scene super comical—a huge hand pushing a bus, full of tiny people in ancient costumes, drifting about an ancient village. The ancient riders looked utterly clueless.

Li Daoxuan, who was terrible at writing captions, suddenly had an inspiration surge. He quickly processed and uploaded the video, adding the caption: “The Deity gave the ancient little people a bus. For the first time, they experienced what ‘push-back feeling’ means.”

The moment the video went up... it blew up instantly!