

Great Ming 91

Chapter 91: The Dragon King Was Giving the Deity Face

Li Daoxuan had already prepared a basin of water. After letting it sit still for several days in advance, he poured it into the tank of the nebulizer and plugged it in...

Done!

He could test it now.

He dared not spray it directly over Gaojia Fortress. What if the nebulizer was faulty? If spraying wildly occurred as soon as it was turned on, who knows how many people would have been washed away.

The northern hillside wouldn't do either. During evening, many labor offenders were there taking a break during their outdoor time.

He tapped the "South" and "West" buttons on the box, shifting his perspective to the southwestern part of the village.

There was an official road leading to the county seat here. Since this area was usually deserted, he could use it for the test.

He opened the lid of the scenic box and extended the nozzle of the nebulizer inside, hovering it mid-air. His movements abruptly froze...

This wasn't appropriate.

The shape of the nozzle was downright ugly. Wouldn't the villagers be startled to see a gigantic nozzle, with its strange tubular shape, extending from the sky? They might think it wasn't rain falling, but some kind of poisonous water instead.

Glancing around, he spotted a plastic Chinese dragon on the toy shelf. "Huh, this looks quite good." He snapped off the dragon's head, concealed the nozzle inside the dragon's mouth, securing it firmly with double-sided tape. He looked left and right—it seemed passable. The appearance was acceptable.

Preparations complete!

He extended the nozzle back into the box, stopping just as the dragon head entered. Flipping the switch of the medical nebulizer, a low “hummm” buzzed, and the machine began generating mist.

Water droplets of 2.2 micrometers in diameter sprayed into the box, drifting down towards the land below...

...

A middle-aged permanent worker from Chengcheng County was heading towards Gaojia Village.

Having walked over thirty li, the sky was dark. Tired and hungry, he gazed at Gaojia Village a few li ahead, bathed in the sunset. His heart felt a mix of hope and fear.

“My sincerity is genuine! I’ve braved the dangers and walked this far to come here. Please don’t let me be fooled.”

“Does the Dao Xuan Deity truly exist?”

“Can they save me?”

Doubts filled his mind, yet equally strong was his anticipation.

The middle-aged man wiped the sweat from his forehead and dragged his weary body forward, continuing towards the enormous fortress of Gaojia Village.

As he walked, he suddenly sensed something unusual.

Coolness!

It had abruptly become cool.

Something seemed to be drifting down dozens of meters ahead of him. Ah, it was a fine, misty drizzle.

The man started violently: "It's raining ahead!"

Being a permanent worker, owning no land—a low-class individual—his feelings about rain weren't as deeply rooted as those of a farmer. He wouldn't be ecstatic to the point of ecstasy like Fan Jin passing the imperial examination. Yet, after years without seeing rain, this drizzle still brought him immense joy.

"Huh? That's not right. Why is the rain only falling in that one patch?"

He suddenly sensed something amiss. Jerking his head up to look at the sky, he saw a mass of strange low cloud hanging in the air, at most seventy meters above the ground. From within this cloud protruded an enormous dragon head, its huge maw gaping directly at the earth below, spraying a curtain of misty rain.

The dragon head even wobbled occasionally, slightly adjusting the direction the rain fell!

The middle-aged man froze completely. After a momentary daze lasting a bare second, he screamed wildly, "Dragon King! Dragon King! Ahhh, it's the Dragon King bringing rain!"

After his scream, the man flung his legs into motion and charged desperately toward the patch of land where the rain fell.

Three years—three years without a single drop! Who cared if his clothes got soaked? He was going to stand in that rain right now.

"Dragon King, your humble servant is coming! Your humble servant is coming!"

He raced madly toward the area cloaked in rain and mist.

But by then Li Daoxuan had almost finished testing. Good—the mist sprayed from the nebulizer was fine enough; even magnified 200 times, it was just a light drizzle. No harm would come to the world inside the case.

No need to keep spraying an empty spot. Spray toward Gaojia Village instead. Let everyone share the joy.

He reached over and pressed the buttons marked “North” and “East.”

The view inside the case shifted northeastward, and the mist sprayed by the nebulizer naturally drifted northeast as well.

The middle-aged man was sprinting headlong toward the rain, but he hadn't yet entered the viewable range of the case. Li Daoxuan couldn't see him, utterly unaware that an ardent little figure was desperately running toward the long-awaited rain.

As the man ran, he suddenly realized the raincloud was moving.

The low cloud drifted northeast across the sky. The dragon head within it naturally moved northeast too—the entire downpour was shifting northeast.

The middle-aged man cried out, “Ai! Wait for your servant! Dragon King, please wait for your servant!”

He pushed with all his might, chasing it! Striving to catch up!

The man pursued like a toad on the ground, while the Dragon King soared like a white swan in the sky. The toad chased for what felt like an eternity, yet never closed the gap on the swan.

At last, the dragon head moved over the fields surrounding Gaojia Village, showering the land with mist. A large crowd of villagers streamed out of the village, cheering, exulting, leaping, and frolicking in the rain.

The middle-aged man summoned every ounce of his strength. Charge!

Run! Brother!

Finally, he burst into Gaojia Village. Around him were ecstatic villagers; even the labor offenders from the hillside came running down, whirling and dancing in the rain.

Some tilted their heads back, mouths wide open, hoping to catch more droplets.

Others rolled wildly on the ground, not caring a whit about dirtying their clothes.

Still others clutched loved ones close, howling with joy.

...

Then, suddenly, these people cried out together: "The Deity is merciful!"

"The Deity blesses us!"

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Deity!"

Swept along in the crowd's ecstasy, the middle-aged permanent worker stood bewildered. He grabbed a villager at random and asked, "It's the Dragon King delivering rain—why are you thanking the Dao Xuan Deity? Worship the wrong god, and you'll anger the Dragon King!"

The villager laughed heartily, "What do you know? The Dragon King came at the Dao Xuan Deity's request! Out of respect for the Deity! Of course we thank the Deity first, then the Dragon King."

The middle-aged man: “!!!”

Sure enough, after thanking the Deity, the villagers turned to thanking the Dragon King.

“A few days of this rain will soften the soil. We can finally prepare to sow the autumn wheat.”

“My treasured seeds—they’ll finally be used! Hahahaha!”

“Thanks to the Deity—at last we can grow our own crops!”

“Last time, the Deity promised us a good harvest next year, with favorable weather and abundant grain. The Deity keeps his word! When my autumn wheat ripens, I must offer incense to fulfill my vow.”

“The Deity also promised my fields extra pecks of grain this year.”

The middle-aged man stood stunned amid the crowd. Hearing the villagers’ cheers and talk, tears suddenly streamed down his face.

He had come to the right place!

He truly had!

The senior brother hadn’t lied—coming to Gaojia Village showed him the way forward.

Yes! I must be sincere—above all else, sincere.

He turned toward Gaojia Fortress looming through the rain and mist. Straightening his appearance, he approached the great fortress with reverence and awe. At the gate, he fell to his knees with a thump. “Oh Mighty Deity, have mercy! Save your humble servant!”

Chapter 92: Would You Stay?

Li Daoxuan fixed the nozzle's position, letting the nebulizer work on its own, and then he became free to wander his gaze around.

Coincidentally, he noticed a middle-aged man in the crowd who was quite strange; he didn't celebrate with the other villagers in the light rain but walked alone out of the group with a dazed look, taking heavy steps one by one towards Gaojia Fortress.

Li Daoxuan shifted his attention and saw the middle-aged man kneel at the fortress gate and kowtow several times: "Deity, please save this lowly person."

"Eh?" Li Daoxuan said: "Is this one of my figures?"

He could recognize each of the first forty-two figures in the box, but after Thirty-Two lured over a hundred more with flour, he lost track of most of them. Later, nearly two hundred labor offenders arrived, making him completely forget their faces.

For a moment, he wasn't sure if this figure kneeling before his statue was his own. Only when he saw the pack on the man's back did Li Daoxuan realize: "This isn't my figure; he's a wild figure who just ran in from outside."

"Deity, save me! Deity, who rescues from suffering, pull this lowly person out of the sea of misery."

The middle-aged man kowtowed rapidly, then began rambling about himself. He turned out to be a permanent worker in the official workshop of Chengcheng County, just like Li Da, a lowly artisan household.

After seeing two clay sculptors get rich, he firmly remembered the name Dao Xuan Deity. With great effort and guidance from a lay believer he finally reached here, seeking only the deity's mercy.

Li Daoxuan spoke: "Yiye, call Li Da to the fortress gate."

Gao Yiye, playing outside in the rain, immediately set aside her child-like mood, found Li Da in the crowd, and ran with him splashing to the fortress gate. Their cotton clothes were half wet, but the thickness prevented any risk of indecency.

As soon as they arrived, Li Da recognized the middle-aged man and exclaimed: “Luo Leg Hair?”

The man’s surname was originally Luo, but thick leg hair earned him the nickname Luo Leg Hair from coworkers since they lacked education and gave awful nicknames.

Seeing Li Da, Luo Leg Hair stiffened entirely: “Li Da, what are you doing here? You vanished after Wang Er’s rebellion—we thought you were dead...”

Li Da sighed: “Ah, it’s awkward... I used Wang Er’s uprising to escape, to stop being treated like a dog daily.”

Luo Leg Hair was shocked: “Aren’t you afraid? That makes you a ‘runaway peasant,’ without your artisan registration. You can’t return to cities now.”

Li Da chuckled: “Here I eat like royalty and live blissfully every day—who needs cities? Let someone else take the artisan registration. Being a runaway peasant here beats being an artisan household.”

When he first arrived, his dream was to become a free commoner.

But after living here awhile, he found status unimportant—just staying in Gaojia Village brought happiness without care for labels.

His words left Luo Leg Hair thoroughly baffled.

Li Da asked: “How did you come? Escape like me? Abandoning your artisan registration?”

Luo Leg Hair looked embarrassed: “I... heard from two clay sculptors that they got rich under Dao Xuan Deity’s blessing. So I... followed clues to get here.”

Li Da paused, then laughed aloud: "So that's it—you came just in time. You're Chengcheng County's best paper maker; your arrival is perfect."

Luo Leg Hair stared blankly: "How is it perfect?"

Li Da pointed at Gaojia Fortress: "This fortress is newly built with over two hundred rooms, but no paper to paste on the windows—all bare. Third Lady plans a trip to the county to buy some for villagers. Your coming now? Perfect timing."

Luo Leg Hair sighed: "You mean, make paper for villagers to paste on windows?"

Li Da nodded: "Yes, isn't that your specialty?"

Luo Leg Hair stammered: "But... I only have ten days... to return to the official workshop—just ten days..."

Li Da scoffed: "Why go back? You've no wife or kids. Since you're out, stay like me—settle as a runaway peasant and enjoy life."

Luo Leg Hair shook his head wildly: "No, I can't be a runaway peasant... I'm not brave like you..."

As he spoke those words, Gao Yiye beside him suddenly declared: "The Deity has issued an oracle: If you agree to stay and make paper for Gaojia Village, teaching villagers the techniques, you'll receive one hundred catties of rice or flour, ten catties of meat, one catty of salt, one catty of sugar, and one catty of oil every month."

Hearing this, Luo Leg Hair froze completely and turned stiffly to Gao Yiye: "Miss... did... you... just say what?"

Gao Yiye smiled.

Luo Leg Hair trembled: “Truly?”

Li Da laughed loudly: “How could it be false? I get the same monthly, with extra rewards for achievements—but... Luo Leg Hair, your frail self might struggle for that, hahaha.”

Luo Leg Hair asked: “But who is this miss?”

Li Da said solemnly: “She is the Saint Lady of Dao Xuan Deity Teachings, the divine envoy proclaiming heavenly edicts to all, Miss Gao Yiye.”

Luo Leg Hair gasped: “!!!”

Li Da teased: “Look how provincial you seem, hahaha—I was just as crude when I arrived. So, stay and be a runaway peasant?”

The choice wasn’t hard. Luo Leg Hair instantly abandoned his artisan registration and became a glorious runaway peasant.

Gao Yiye said: “Come with me. The Deity assigns you a house near Li Da and the two clay sculptors. All craftsmen in our village now live in the artisans’ well.”

Li Da chuckled: “The Hakka roundhouse has nine halls and eighteen wells. We craftsmen have one well exclusively, the ‘artisans’ well.’ It’s equals to others—but folks there get the most supplies monthly, hahaha.”

Baffled, Luo Leg Hair trailed Gao Yiye and Li Da into Gaojia Fortress.

To him, the Hakka roundhouse was a tall, majestic fortress brimming with dignity, making him feel insecure inside.

After winding through corridors, they reached the artisans’ well.

Luo Leg Hair spotted two clay sculptors seated under an eave manipulating strange-figured statues, “crafting miniature figure faces.”

At the sight of Luo Leg Hair, they laughed knowingly—as if saying “you showed up”—then ignored him to focus on their customizing, too busy for small talk.

Chapter 93: Providing Them Work

Luo Leg Hair truly hadn’t expected this—he’d just arrived without having made any contribution, yet he was already given a splendid house. Sturdy and solid, he couldn’t even tell what the roof and outer walls were made of. It resembled thick wooden planks yet felt far sturdier. The inner wall was shockingly crafted from enormous iron plates, leaving him utterly dumbfounded.

It was ten thousand times better than the dilapidated wooden shack he used to live in back at the county town.

“Li Da, this fine house... it’s truly for me?”

“It’s yours, of course.” Li Da laughed. “I have one too, identical to yours.”

Luo Leg Hair stammered, “But... I haven’t done a single thing for the Deity yet.”

Li Da corrected, “Just ‘Deity’ is fine. Adding ‘Lord’ sounds odd. If the venerable one hears it, he might descend a divine decree to scold you.”

Luo Leg Hair: “!”

He’d never heard of an immortal issuing divine decrees just to scold someone. Unheard of!

Li Da leaned close, whispering with a chuckle, “In this village, there are two young lads named Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu. The Deity issued a decree chastising them, calling them ‘two idiots’. Now the whole village refers to them as idiots. That’s the consequence of being reprimanded by divine decree. You’d best not follow their example.”

Luo Leg Hair inhaled sharply. What bizarre situation was this?

Gao Yiye glanced around his empty room. “No furniture yet. You’ll need to sleep on the floor temporarily for a couple of days. Later, I’ll send a few labor offenders to cut timber and make you some furniture.”

Luo Leg Hair questioned, “Labor offenders?”

Gao Yiye explained nearby, “Those who commit crimes are apprehended by the Deity for labor reformation. They cleanse their sins through labor.”

Those words sent a jolt through Luo Leg Hair’s heart. He hastily bowed. “Saint Lady, please be assured. This humble man is a law-abiding person.”

Gao Yiye dismissed, “Don’t call me Saint Lady. It sounds strange.”

Li Da chuckled beside her. “Most address her as Saint Lady, though... she herself isn’t fond of the title. Many still call her Miss Yiye.”

Lately, after hearing Third Lady’s advice, Gao Yiye had tried maintaining poise and striking poses. But ever since Li Daoxuan personally told her to stay true to herself, her lively spirit returned. She shed the pretense of formality, radiating much more of her natural charm. Villagers had gradually shifted back to calling her Yiye.

She much preferred this!

Reading the mood, Luo Leg Hair probed cautiously, “Miss Yiye, though the Deity has tasked me with making paper, I have absolutely nothing here—no tools, no materials. How should I begin?”

Gao Yiye smiled. “Simply name whatever tools and materials you require. The Deity is listening from above.”

Luo Leg Hair started. He looked skyward but saw nothing, his heart uneasy. Timidly, he suggested, “My specialty is crafting bamboo paper. First... a large pool is needed... for soaking bamboo pulp.”

“A large pool?” Li Daoxuan casually grabbed a mineral water bottle lid, filled it with water, and placed it into the artisans’ well.

Luo Leg Hair was still gazing upwards when suddenly he saw a strange red object descend from the sky. It landed with a clang in the artisans’ well, revealing a large water basin filled with clean water.

Others seemed utterly unfazed. They merely bowed swiftly towards the sky before resuming their tasks.

But Luo Leg Hair was terrified. With a loud “plop,” he landed hard on his backside, legs weak, momentarily unable to rise.

Gao Yiye burst into laughter. “Don’t fear! Now we have a large basin. What else do you need?”

Luo Leg Hair stammered, “N-need... bamboo... lots... of bamboo... and lime... lime...”

Bamboo wasn’t a problem. Li Daoxuan instructed Gao Yiye, “Designate one labor offender. Their future reformation work will be to supply bamboo for the paper mill.”

Gao Yiye acknowledged crisply.

Next was the lime!

Li Daoxuan could easily descend his building, grab a handful of lime from any construction site, and effortlessly provide Luo Leg Hair with a small mountain of it.

But one thing occurred to him. Lime was different from food.

During the severe drought, villagers truly couldn’t source food themselves. Him providing sustenance was essential aid, no issue there.

But lime? Villagers had the capability to produce it themselves. Supplying it ready-made wasn't necessary. Assigning people to make it would create valuable labor opportunities instead.

Li Daoxuan commanded, "Yiye, ask the villagers who among them knows how to produce lime."

As it turned out, this task didn't stump them at all. The three master mud craftsmen who took charge during the temple construction last time knew lime production techniques.

While building the temple, these three men, leveraging their "specialized skills," received many extra rewards, enjoying substantial benefits. However, they'd been idle since, their "additional bonuses" ceased. Surviving daily solely on Deity-provided basic rations filled them with a tinge of regret.

Upon hearing this need for lime production now, all three jumped excitedly, pleading towards the sky, "Deity! We can do it! Please entrust this work to us!"

Seeing their eagerness, Li Daoxuan felt his earlier reasoning confirmed.

Every person needed to realize their self-worth. Feeling useless eroded one's spirit.

"Very well. The three of you shall be in charge of making lime."

With lime arranged, tools like hammers, pounders, and wooden frames were needed. Simpler still—ancient times were never short of carpenters. Any villager knew basic woodwork. Assign these tasks entirely to the labor offenders.

Thus... the papermaking operation was set into motion.

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Early morning. Li Daoxuan sat before his computer, editing a video.

Within his enclosure box below, all was serene. The medical nebulizer continued misting the chamber. Outside Gaojia Village fields, a continuous drizzle enveloped everything. Tiny figures busied themselves, digging and ploughing the earth, making final preparations for sowing autumn wheat.

He polished the captured papermaking footage, adding text: "A paper maker uses ancient techniques to craft bamboo paper..."

Finishing the edit, he clicked 'Upload'. Oh, right. Link it to the Little Yellow Bike shop.

Just then, his QQ flashed. It was the toy factory manager, A Barrel of Pudding: "Mr. Li, regarding the microscopic ancient toys we discussed previously, we've produced our first batch of samples. Sending you photos now. Physical samples will arrive soon. Please assess their market viability."

A flurry of photos rapidly flooded his screen.

Li Daoxuan scrutinized them and chuckled inwardly. The toy factory played it fun. They'd crafted a whole array of ancient miniatures: 1:200 scale antique plastic houses, miniature castles, tiny waterwheels, small windmills, miniscule horse carts, diminutive catapults, tiny siege rams, little crossbow carts...

It was an overwhelming feast for the eyes.

The most Cola-like part was that many actually had firing mechanisms. For example, the tiny catapult had elastic plastic limbs and could shoot mini pebbles. The little crossbow cart utilized an incredibly fine rubber band to fire miniature plastic arrows.

Chapter 94: New Toys Arrive

The toy samples arrived in the evening.

The first things Li Daoxuan set his eyes on were the 1:200 scale miniature catapults, capable of firing projectiles. These were smaller and far more meticulously crafted than the ones he bought last time, making them much easier to transport and handle.

There were also pint-sized bolt throwers that proved incredibly fun. Strapped with rubber bands, they shot one-centimeter plastic arrows—utterly adorable. He planned to supply these to the villagers for defending against the bandit army, expecting excellent results.

Next, his attention shifted to the 1:200 scale antique plastic houses and small castles.

The people of Gaojia Village were hardworking and brave, typically making everyday items themselves. Yet, constructing structures like “castles” or “houses” presented considerable difficulty.

Over a hundred labor offenders remained living within circles enclosed by Lego bricks, without even roofs. While this posed no problem during dry spells, Li Daoxuan’s recent “rainfall” inside the scenic box made the Lego enclosures somewhat awkward.

While welcome rain after long drought was wonderful, having no roof overhead felt anything but wonderful.

Li Daoxuan had to place a plank over the Lego circle to shield them from the rain.

With plastic houses provided by the toy company, he now had a viable solution to accommodate the labor offenders.

Li Daoxuan lifted the lid of the scenic box and commanded, “Yiye, go inform the labor offenders that their recent work performance has been satisfactory. Therefore, I’ve decided to shorten their sentences and bestow some rewards.”

Gao Yiye hurried off to deliver the news.

The labor offenders were drenched from the rain as they chopped trees on the hillside. Upon hearing the command, they immediately set down their tools and expressed gratitude.

Li Daoxuan reached into the box, removed all the Lego bricks, and tossed them aside. He then grasped one of the 1:200 antique plastic houses and gently lowered it.

The labor offenders looked up to see a house plummeting from the sky. With a duang, it hit the ground, wobbled twice, and steadied. Another followed, duang...

Over a dozen houses descended one after another, arranged across a barren patch of land unsuitable for farming near Gaojia Fortress. They formed an entirely new small village.

The labor offenders exchanged bewildered glances: "What's this...?"

Even the villagers of Gaojia watching from a distance felt a sense of disbelief: "What's happening?"

Li Daoxuan wished he could add more houses, but he had limited samples—only about a dozen sent by the toy company. He'd have to settle with these for now and later buy more through his Little Yellow Bike app.

"Labor offenders shouldn't think one house per person," Li Daoxuan announced. "Twelve will share one house. Only after completing their sentence can they regain their freedom."

Upon hearing this, the labor offenders protested: "We feel great! We could labor for life—no need to regain freedom."

Li Daoxuan: "..."

Seriously? A bunch lacking ambition.

He almost retorted, then reconsidered. No—no point.

Having recently shifted from inconsistent meals to having full bowls every day, they considered their current lives ideal. But once he found the hardest-working among them, shortened his sentence, released him early, and showered him with rewards, setting him up as a role model for others who witnessed his better life—they'd change their tune instantly. All would fight to shorten their own sentences and reclaim freedom.

Want to slack? Dream on! Roll to death for me!

Just like pet owners, seeing their cats sunbathing idly on balconies, might dream of saddling them with 30-year mortgage debts—forcing them to work at cat cafés to earn their own kibble.

Kitties, you can't escape your owners' vicious intentions—Mwahahaha!

Li Daoxuan cackled like a villain, hands on hips and face turned skyward.

Gao Yiye glanced upward and said solemnly to the labor offenders, "The Deity is laughing with joy. He seems very pleased with your efforts."

Overjoyed, they shouted, "If being model labor offenders makes the Deity happy, we'll embrace this promising work for a lifetime! We'll keep pleasing him!"

...

Autumn winds, autumn rains—chilly breezes swept in!

Every autumn, as the first rain cools the temperature, it signals the ideal window for sowing autumn wheat.

However, this year, autumn rain never fell—not a single drop.

The newly appointed Chengcheng County Magistrate Liang Shixian was wracked with anguish. Oh, my goodness; his head hurt so bad—so excruciatingly bad!

He sat in the county office reviewing reports from his Clerk, who'd journeyed a thousand li from Shaoxing alongside him. His brow furrowed deeply in frustration.

“The granaries were all looted by Bai Shui Wang Er?” Liang Shixian exclaimed. “So I, the new magistrate, step in to clean Zhang Yaocai’s mess? I must collect the taxes he failed to—and even bigger ones than his? Otherwise, we can’t fill the granaries?”

The Clerk nodded. “Yes.”

Suppressing the urge to flip his desk out of sheer rage—lest he betray his scholar’s dignity—Magistrate Liang clenched his teeth.

“Not a drop of rain falls from heaven, and still we tax more? That’s forcing commoners toward rebellion! Zhang Yaocai deserved his death. I cherish the people like my sons and serve with integrity. I refuse to follow his path.”

The Clerk wiped sweat from his brow. “However, County Lord, if you fail to collect taxes, you’ll be dismissed and prosecuted. Your head—whether chopped off by bandits or by the Emperor—will roll just like Zhang Yaocai’s did.”

Liang Shixian frowned. “I’ve stepped into a dead end?”

Heavy-hearted, the Clerk said, “Indeed! County Lord, let us resign and return home. Though we lose the official hat, at least we keep our heads.”

Liang Shixian shook his head. To fix this crisis, he needed strategy.

With wagonloads of knowledge and governance experience, his mind spun furiously like a carousel for solutions. All his studies and training scrambled for an answer.

Then—ding—one solution surfaced.

“This... must be forced upon Chengcheng County’s local gentry.”

The Clerk gasped, “Huh?!”

Liang Shixian ordered, "Impose levies! Place the peasants' impossible-to-gather grain tax onto the local gentry and wealthy families. Let them pay silver to fill the gaps. As magistrate, I will owe them favors. Once this crisis passes, I'll reward them amply."

The Clerk pondered. "This might be the only escape from a dead end. But will they agree?"

Liang Shixian snorted. "Your earlier report noted that after Bai Shui Wang Er stirred riots—causing bandits to rise everywhere—even the local gentry suffered deeply. Bai Family Fortress was stormed and looted clean; they're victims too. Approaching them now? They might cooperate... Prepare my mount. We'll travel through neighboring villages to discuss this with the richest among their gentry."

Chapter 95: Newly Appointed Officials Create Big Splashes

Liang Shixian swiftly organized an inspection patrol, including the Clerk, ten newly recruited constables each accompanied by three assistants, forming a large group of over forty people.

They first circled the county town, but found few wealthy families remained. Wang Er's previous uprising had decimated most of them. The scant survivors could contribute little financial relief.

Liang Shixian then led them beyond the city walls, wandering aimlessly through the countryside.

Their path took them through Stone Family Village, Du Family Village, Chegai Village, Daxian Village... Each area was desolate. Among ten residential buildings, scarcely one still housed inhabitants. Everywhere was cracked yellow soil; starved corpses lay bleaching by roadsides.

Occasionally, a structure resembling the residence of a wealthy family appeared. Approaching revealed ashes left by bandit uprisings – debris and ruin instead of erstwhile glory.

The rare human survivors they encountered were withered like fallen leaves, their eyes hollow and numb.

Witnessing this, Liang Shixian felt his heart ache. Tears welling, he took brush to paper: "Dingmao Year. Chengcheng suffers drought, famine devastates the land. Unable to shoulder burdens, corpses litter the paths. Some seized grain from the wealthy; fearing capture, they turned bandits. Banditry worsened hunger. Barren land continues for years, a dou of rice costs a thousand coins beyond reach. Men

consume men; joining the bandits as if returning home – refugees become rebels, chaos begins. Remote regions see Chengcheng as a sea of misery...”

His writing trailed into choking sobs. “The people of Chengcheng suffer bitterly. Having taken office here, how can I save them? Forget paying taxes; life itself is their struggle.”

The Clerk whispered, “Could we request funds from the imperial court to aid the victims?”

Liang Shixian shook his head. He knew the court was penniless; managing a small county like Chengcheng was beyond their means.

The disheartened procession moved onward, weighed by melancholy. Suddenly, a constable loudly announced, “County Lord! Ahead lies a village that... prepares for autumn sowing!”

“What?” A rushing pride swept through Liang Shixian. “Such a village survives?”

He hastened to higher ground for a view. Beside an embankment stood a village of considerable size. At its heart rose an enormous fortress. Only the wealthy could build such a thing – its fortress wall alone stood three zhang high. Surely, only an immensely powerful family possessed such resources.

Beside the fortress huddled several simple dwellings forming a smaller enclave. Clearly, poorer residents lived here – tenant farmers serving the wealthy lord of the fortress.

Yet, this was peripheral to the main discovery: vast tracts of land centered upon the fortress appeared moist. Sprouting green shoots marked places where rain had recently fallen.

Numerous peasants labored: ploughing, hoeing, digging channels – undertaking last preparations before sowing.

Liang Shixian rejoiced. “Heaven never seals all paths! Rain fell here; life persists!”

The Clerk joined his elation. “County Lord, that fortress signifies extraordinary wealth. Consulting its lord might yield financial assistance.”

Liang Shixian regained focus. True – demanding contributions from the rich was his mission. But such a fortress meant formidable connections behind its builder. Likely nobility, perhaps generations of imperial officials. An immensely influential lineage.

As a mere seventh-rank County Magistrate, could he command such a lord's attention?

The thought truly unsettled him!

Still, despite fear, he must proceed. His purpose was for Chengcheng County's countless commoners! Integrity stood his foundation; righteousness straightened his spine. Nothing warranted dread.

Liang Shixian set his jaw. "Forward! We seek an audience."

—

Inside Gaojia Fortress

Thirty-Two lounged on a chair, legs casually crossed, an air of utter satisfaction. He watched his newly hired Clerk, Tan Liwen, scribble feverishly as he inventoried the second-floor granary stores.

Since the bandits dispersed, smoother routes allowed easier travel to and from the county town. Thirty-Two had visited several times recently, reuniting with his wife. He recruited the Clerk, assistants, and other personnel too. The fortress now boasted several horses, assembled carts, and ample supplies of chaotic equipment.

Tan Liwen was a scholar who repeatedly failed imperial exams. Poverty clung to him; patches adorned his clothes. A decade of intense study earned only repeated rejections. He abandoned scholarly pursuits for a Clerk's position – a novice still clumsy in duties.

"Ah! An error here!" Tan Liwen panicked, scratching urgently but unable to correct it. Flustered, he discarded the spoiled sheet and rewrote the entire entry.

Thirty-Two scowled. “How incompetent! One error every few words? Wasting precious paper! Our paper workshop just started production; paper remains scarce!”

Tan Liwen offered an apologetic smile. “My most sincere apologies, Dong Weng. I shall exercise utmost caution henceforth.”

“Humph!” Thirty-Two snorted.

Though outwardly critical, inner glee threatened to overflow. Only iron restraint hid his desire to sing aloud. “From Clerk to Dong Weng” – the reversal brought ecstatic satisfaction.

Just then, a recently hired assistant rushed in. “Dong Weng! The newly appointed County Magistrate approaches – within two li of our village!”

“Eh?” The shock jolted Thirty-Two upright. “Quick! Alert all villagers! Conceal the armor! Hide every divine relic bestowed by the Deity! Keep them from greedy officials’ eyes to forestall unnecessary trouble!”

The assistant grinned. “The Deity could smite the corrupt official flat with one blow! Why fear?”

Thirty-Two snorted again. “After time here, don’t you grasp the Deity’s nature? He doesn’t strike indiscriminately. Only the utterly vile merit his intervention. Spare the chatter and act!”

The assistant hurried away. Across the village, shouts quickly sounded. In moments every divine artifact vanished. Even the colossal solar-powered vehicle wore coarse cloth to hide it completely.

Thirty-Two swiftly climbed to the third floor and summoned Gao Yiye. His tone lowered to urgent instructions: “That Cheng Xu was a martial ruffian; easily deceived – told him Lord Bai funded building this fortress, and he believed it. Yet this new County Magistrate appears knowledgeable in many matters, keen-witted and un-foolable. Our usual tactics won’t sway him.”

“Fortunately, he’s newly appointed, unfamiliar locally. I concocted a story: This fortress belongs to Lord Li. Remembering the Deity shares the surname Li places him as the owner. This is the Li Family Fortress. Remember clearly: In this guise, I will stand as the Li Family’s senior Steward; you’ll impersonate the master’s wife. Memorize your role thoroughly – no mistakes permitted.”

Chapter 96: Such a Noble Origin

Gao Yiye heard this, her small face slightly flushed: “Huh? The Deity’s master’s wife? I... I... this... I, little girl, what ability do I have?”

Thirty-Two said anxiously: “Why are you blushing? Can you grasp the main point? I am asking you to act as Madam Li, not as the Deity’s wife. This Lord Li here will be a fictional character, one that doesn’t exist at all.”

Gao Yiye said: “That is still the Deity’s incarnation.”

Thirty-Two: “...”

He dared not mock this sentence.

He could only say with a mix of amusement and helplessness: “Miss Yiye, in any case, just observe more and speak less. Leave the situation to me to handle. If the Deity has any instructions, you can say them quietly, and I will adapt accordingly.”

Gao Yiye wasn’t sure whether to agree, as this matter hadn’t been approved by the Deity—wasn’t it too shameless? Her small face flushed red all over again.

Just then, she heard the Deity’s gentle voice ring out from the sky: “Quite interesting, go and give it a try.”

“Ah?” Gao Yiye jerked her head upward: “Deity, this... this kind of thing... You... really permit it?”

Li Daoxuan’s voice drifted down: “Permission granted.”

Gao Yiye’s face flushed so red it seemed about to drip blood. She lowered her head and whispered softly: “I, little girl, obey... the command...”

Li Daoxuan shut the lid of the scenic box with a snap, hiding himself from Gao Yiye's view, then chuckled delightedly: "That little girl is still shy, amusing, truly amusing."

Thirty-Two heard the Deity had approved, rushing with pride. Actually, ever since Cheng Xu inquired about the origin of Gaojia Fortress, he had been pondering this question. Such a large fortress, with its nine-meter-high fortress wall taller than many county town walls, was impossible to avoid attracting official attention. Finding a way to explain its origin took much mental effort.

Not explain it? Kill anyone who came? That certainly wouldn't do! That was demonic cultivation, not heavenly cultivation, and the Deity would never allow it.

Lately, he had spent considerable time devising a complete explanation.

Now it was time to test whether this explanation could pass muster.

He hurriedly had Gao Yiye put on the outfit given to her by Third Lady, the finest clothes in the whole village, applied the most beautiful makeup in the village, and assumed the most dignified posture in the village. Indeed, as long as she didn't speak, she did bear a slight resemblance to a master's wife.

...

Liang Shixian and his group soon arrived before Gaojia Fortress.

The ten yamen runners and thirty assistants were newly appointed and hadn't yet developed arrogant traits. For now, they remained orderly, with no wicked or unruly behavior, following Liang Shixian obediently.

Liang Shixian's eyes kept darting around.

The commoners of this village showed no signs of sallow, thin faces. Every one appeared robust and full of vitality; some even looked slightly plump. What kind of bizarre situation was this?

He had just been penning a tearful petition lamenting the wretched state of the people in Chengcheng County, yet this village had fat people?

The secretary whispered beside him: "This village is extremely affluent."

Liang Shixian nodded: "That is actually good. It gives me more confidence to seek some assistance here."

As he spoke, the doors of Gaojia Fortress opened. Thirty-Two emerged, dressed in a long robe, wearing a smug grin and stepping forward with full confidence: "County Lord visiting brings great honor to our humble home."

Liang Shixian wore official garments, so it wasn't odd that he was instantly recognized as the newly appointed county magistrate. He cupped his hands: "Your family here is?"

Thirty-Two smiled: "This place is called Gaojia Village, and this mansion belongs to Lord Li of Gaojia Village. I am the Steward of the Li Family, surnamed San with the given name Twelve."

Liang Shixian had only taken office a few days earlier and didn't know all the local gentry in Chengcheng County. So he didn't doubt it, but upon raising his head to gaze at the ten-meter-high fortress wall, he lowered his voice involuntarily: "Your Li Family's foundations are rather substantial."

Thirty-Two chuckled, his face brimming with pride: "Of course, naturally. Our Lord Li is no ordinary man. Hehehe, the Li Family has been established here for over a thousand years..."

Liang Shixian had prepared himself mentally when he saw the mansion, expecting a big backer, one large beyond belief. But hearing of over a millennia of inheritance still shocked him immensely.

A thousand years? Going back a thousand years? That would be the Tang Dynasty era.

A great family clan that rose in the Tang Dynasty? Surnamed Li? And this was Shaanxi?

Connecting these key points startled Liang Shixian to his core. Just who on earth was this? Could they be descendants of the Tang Dynasty royal house?

Thirty-Two clasped fists: "County Lord, our master is away on divine travels and not at home now. Thus, I, the Steward, must be the one to welcome you. Please forgive any neglect."

Liang Shixian was thoroughly intimidated, so of course he forgave it. But he didn't want to leave empty-handed: "Is there anyone in the mansion who can make decisions?"

Thirty-Two said: "Our master's wife stays behind in the mansion and did not accompany our master on his divine travels."

Liang Shixian thought: Excellent. Getting some disaster relief silver from his wife should be possible. He said: "Then please do us the favor of an introduction, Steward Thirty-Two."

Thirty-Two said: "County Lord, please follow me."

He led the way, and Liang Shixian's group followed.

The path they took was exactly what Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao had used when they attacked Gaojia Fortress. The narrow passage, lined by smooth walls, combined with the recent rain, gave Gaojia Village a chilly feel.

In such conditions, walking through this passage brought a slight sense of pressure.

Liang Shixian was fine, but his yamen runners and assistants behind him held their breath in fear. Strolling through this wealthy mansion, they dreaded saying the wrong word and being executed.

After turning past several halls and courtyards, the group arrived before the watchtower.

The third floor of the watchtower housed Gao Yiye, the second floor was entirely used as storage for supplies, and the first floor was meant to be the family's ancestral hall.

This should have held “spirit tablets of the family elders,” but Gaojia Fortress wasn’t a landlord’s residence—it had no illustrious forebears to worship. So Thirty-Two had the sculptor recreate a Deity’s statue instead and placed it in the hall.

When Liang Shixian’s group walked in, they saw the statue of Li Daoxuan seated solemnly inside the hall. Beside it hung a couplet: the upper line “Thousand-year incense endures through heaven and earth,” the lower line “Ten thousand generations of smoke glow as long as sun and moon.” In the center stood a plaque reading: “Devoted to the Divine Position of Our Ancestor Dao Xuan Deity.”

Liang Shixian understood instantly: this place should have been a hall for worshiping Li Family ancestors, but instead, they enshrined a deity position. That meant it was a household deity.

The name of this household deity was “Dao Xuan,” surname “Li,” together forming “Li Daoxuan.”

Time to think carefully!

The one knowledgeable in many matters, Liang Shixian, immediately launched a mental search mode. All the knowledge he’d acquired, all the history books he’d read, transformed into vast characters flashing through his mind like lantern lights before stopping with a “ding” on one particular page.

Li Daoxuan: Tang Dynasty royal descendant, one of the Eight Pillar Generals of Western Wei and Northern Zhou, a cousin of Tang King Gaozu Li Yuan.

Liang Shixian exclaimed inwardly: Wow, my goodness, such a noble origin.

Thirty-Two saw his expression and knew he was intimidated. He stifled a chuckle: “County Lord, please follow me upstairs. The master’s wife lives on the third floor.”

Chapter 97: Reverse Tactics

Liang Shixian was thoroughly intimidated by the “welcome” ceremony that Thirty-Two had orchestrated.

Frightened by the experience, he suddenly felt that his seventh-rank County Magistrate status wasn’t quite worthy to meet the master of this household.

Their social standing wasn't on the same level.

If he hadn't been carrying heavy responsibilities, he would have beaten a retreat then and there, refusing to venture further inside. Yet, recalling the refugees he'd witnessed along the way—living amidst unspeakable suffering—he steeled himself and summoned his courage.

The people from all distant lands look toward clarity as if toward liberation from a bitter sea.

Now, only I am capable of saving them.

Do not retreat. Advance!

He straightened his official hat, smoothed the wrinkles in his official garments, adjusted his belt, and squared his posture before turning to his clerk, bailiffs, attendants, and hangers-on: "Wait for me here. Do not act recklessly."

Then he followed Thirty-Two up the stairs to the top level of the watchtower.

Upon entering the hall, he saw a dignified young woman clad in a splendid white gown, seated perfectly upright in a chair, an expression of solemnity on her face.

In truth, Gao Yiye's heart was in turmoil. She was just an ordinary peasant girl. For her, the County Magistrate seemed a vast, unapproachable title—she'd never dared imagine she would one day face a County Magistrate, let alone remain seated in his presence.

Fortunately, she had practiced!

The more dignified she appeared, the more respect they would show the Deity. She repeated this to herself relentlessly, clinging to her composure, forcing her expression not to crack.

Liang Shixian, looking at this woman, thought inwardly: She won't even meet my eyes in these official clothes. Clearly, a seventh-rank County Magistrate is too lowly in her esteem. The mistress of such an ancient, established household must have seen wealthy nobles as numerous as hairs on an ox.

He felt a flicker of nervousness!

I must stay composed. Weakness will ruin negotiations.

Locked in mutual tension, the two sat across the hall from each other.

Thirty-Two made a show of introductions:

"This is the master's wife of our household."

"And this is Liang Shixian Liang, the newly appointed Magistrate of Chengcheng County."

Gao Yiye dared not speak. She only gave a slight nod. "Hmm."

Liang Shixian thought: What an arrogant air. Is a mere "Hmm" all I get?

Thirty-Two: "County Lord, for what purpose do you grace us, traveling all the way here?"

Liang Shixian had no patience for pleasantries. He stated plainly: "Upon arriving in Chengcheng County, I immediately heard it had recently faced banditry. Fortunately, the Inspector Cheng Xu fought valiantly and succeeded in beheading Wang Er, thereby quelling the rebellion. However, this battle severely depleted Chengcheng's vitality... refugees fill the countryside. During my approach today, I witnessed villages deserted nine out of ten, livelihoods devastated, and people suffering unspeakably. My heart truly... truly..."

He trailed off, a glistening tear forming at the corner of his eye.

Li Daoxuan, using a high-definition camera trained through a window and magnifying the image on his phone screen, saw this tear's streak. He wondered to himself: Is this a crooked official playing a part, or a good official shedding genuine tears? Too early to tell.

Liang Shixian sighed, then shifted his tone: "My unannounced visit is born of desperation. Chengcheng County hasn't finished remitting this year's tax silver, yet the bandits like Wang Er have already ransacked the official warehouse stockpile. Even the most resourceful housewife cannot work without rice. After meticulous thought, the only way to save the county's refugees is to turn to the local gentry for aid..."

Upon hearing this, Thirty-Two—long experienced in the machinations of the yamen—immediately understood: Apportioning!

Apportioning taxes had existed since ancient times. Usually, officials shifted taxes from the rich onto the backs of the poor to let the wealthy pay less. This Liang Shixian, shockingly, intended to do the opposite—apportioning the portions the poor couldn't afford onto the rich!

Such an act is turning truth and justice on their heads!

Wait... No!

Shouldn't it be... Setting things right after chaos?

Thirty-Two felt his brain whirl in confusion.

Even Li Daoxuan outside the box paused, stunned. He truly hadn't anticipated such a reverse tactic from an official.

Seeing Thirty-Two's startled expression, Liang Shixian knew he had once again taken someone aback. He was quite used to surprising people because he often stood outside the circle of "his own kind."

His posting to Shaanxi was precisely because he'd offended officials in the Eunuch Party within court politics. They'd "exiled" him to serve as Magistrate in this nearly "hopeless" land.

The Eunuch Party wanted him dead. They hoped the Emperor would execute him.

But he still intended to resist.

Liang Shixian gestured toward the window:

“Madam, with your Li Family’s immense wealth—rich enough to build this opulent Fortress, peasants under your care so well fed, blessed enough to have rain fall specifically on your land, favored so by Heaven—shouldn’t you then shoulder even greater responsibility?”

The people of Chengcheng County are now mired in bitter poverty, unable to sustain themselves. Levying taxes on them now is akin to demanding their lives. Might your Li Family spare a portion of silver? Pay the taxes in their stead? Assist them through this trial?

Performing this great act of charity will accumulate blessings for your descendants. What say you?”

Thirty-Two was utterly confused. Usually incredibly sharp-witted, he was equally flustered encountering Liang Shixian’s reverse tactics.

Li Daoxuan spoke instead: “Refuse him!”

Gao Yiye looked toward Thirty-Two and slowly shook her head.

Thirty-Two abruptly snapped to attention. The Deity’s instruction had arrived. Yet this time, he felt puzzled: The Deity had always been merciful and magnanimous, constantly bestowing necessities to rescue people, practically answering every plea. Why was He refusing to pay the taxes on the people’s behalf now? How strange.

Faced with two successive reverse tactics, Thirty-Two was completely at a loss.

He said stiffly to Liang Shixian:

“County Lord Liang, concerning your demand, we of the Li Family regretfully cannot comply.”

The rejection came, but Liang Shixian wasn't surprised. Successfully demanding money was never easy. Thirty-Two's reaction was within his expectations. He added promptly:

“I understand this matter isn't simple. Yet, might the Li Family consider: If the common people cannot survive, they will inevitably rebel. Once they rebel—gathered in mobs, burning, looting, killing—are you truly unworried of being drowned beneath the tide of insurrection? Along my journey here, I've already seen multiple wealthy manors burnt to ashes.”

His voice grew darker:

“A wealthy family like yours becomes an easy target for the rebels. Truly, no fear of becoming the next consumed by flames? In these troubled times, best to spend silver to pacify the masses—consider it money spent to avert disaster.”

Indeed, what he said resonated with Thirty-Two. Not long ago, he himself had fervently advised Zhang Yaocai against pressing for taxes!

But the Deity had refused just now....

Thirty-Two wavered.

Just then, Li Daoxuan spoke again:

“Tell him paying their taxes is impossible. Not a single copper coin of ours reaches corrupt officials. But we are willing to distribute grain to aid the refugees. Every single grain must land in their stomachs.”

Chapter 98: Are You of the Donglin Party?

Gao Yiye leaned in slightly and whispered verbatim into Thirty-Two's ear what the Deity had just said.

To Liang Shixian's eyes, this gesture meant, "This woman refuses to speak directly with a mere seventh-rank County Magistrate like me, so she has her steward relay the message." Such arrogance!

Thirty-Two had been wavering earlier, but upon hearing the Deity's words, he instantly felt a wave of pride rushing through him. Ah! I thought the Deity no longer wished to save the impoverished good citizens, but I was overthinking it. He remains the benevolent Deity he always was. This time, I haven't followed the wrong man—no, the wrong god!

Now invigorated, Thirty-Two declared, "County Lord, my master's wife has just stated: the Li Family will provide grain. But every single grain we give must reach the bellies of the famine victims. As for the tax silver..." He chuckled coldly. "Surely County Lord Liang knows that most tax silver ends up in the pockets of corrupt officials. So I must apologize—not a single copper coin will be paid."

Liang Shixian was speechless.

Thirty-Two's words caught him off guard. He shot to his feet, exclaiming urgently, "I am no corrupt official! If you pay the taxes on the people's behalf, I swear every coin will reach the imperial treasury!"

Thirty-Two wore a strange expression. "And after it reaches the treasury? Whose hands will it fall into? Can you guarantee it all enters the national coffers? And even then, will it truly serve the people?"

Liang Shixian fell silent, utterly deflated. After a long pause, he managed stiffly, "Without the tax silver... this hurdle... is insurmountable..."

Gao Yiye listened to the voice from above, then leaned close to Thirty-Two to whisper two brief sentences.

Thirty-Two's spirits soared once more. "County Lord, you've been sent to this wretched place, Chengcheng County, at such a critical moment. You must have offended someone powerful?"

Liang Shixian stiffened, then sighed. "The Eunuch Party wishes me dead."

Thirty-Two raised an eyebrow. "The Eunuch Party wants you dead? Then... are you of the Donglin Party?"

Liang Shixian straightened abruptly, fury flashing across his face. "I am nothing of the sort! Only petty men engage in factional strife. I merely attended a few lectures at the Donglin Academy and found shared ideals with some scholars there!"

Thirty-Two was speechless.

Li Daoxuan nearly snorted. Naturally, Donglin affiliates never call themselves a "party." In their eyes, they're merely upright officials who formed no faction.

The earliest Donglin adherents might truly have been noble-minded. But after toppling the Eunuch Party, their power swelled. Their goals shifted. They forgot their original aspirations, burying their former ideals.

This was "The demons he fought eventually took the shape of himself."

Seeing Liang Shixian's anger, Thirty-Two tactfully avoided the term "Donglin Party." "Since you have friends at the Donglin Academy, this hurdle isn't necessarily insurmountable."

Liang Shixian frowned. "How so?"

After listening to Gao Yiye's hushed words, Thirty-Two explained, "County Lord, write a memorial detailing what you've witnessed here in Chengcheng. Send it to your Donglin Academy friends. Let them see this devastation. They are learned men who care deeply for the nation and its people. Once they read your account, their hearts will ache for these citizens. Then they'll... gather a large group of Donglin academics..." He nearly said "party" but caught himself. "...They'll rally those scholars to jointly petition the court. Chengcheng County's tax silver can then be waived. If not waived entirely, it can at least be deferred for a long while."

Liang Shixian sank into deep thought. After several seconds, he looked up sharply. "Do my Donglin Academy friends truly hold that kind of influence?"

Thirty-Two, merely a humble county Clerk, knew little of the Donglin Party's reach. But the Deity immediately relayed a message through Gao Yiye. Thirty-Two straightened, replying with conviction, "Yes. Their influence is immense."

Liang Shixian struggled to see it. Most of his scholar friends were despised by the Eunuch Party, persecuted, scraping by. Why did this Li Family believe them so formidable?

He needed to think carefully.

Knowledgeable in many matters, Liang Shixian plunged into deep reflection. Memories surged—scenes, experiences, faces—spinning like a lantern show through his mind. Suddenly, with a mental ding, one image crystallized: a group portrait of the Donglin Academy lecturers.

Gu Xiancheng, Gao Panlong, Qian Yiben...

He recalled each man's status, and a jolt of realization struck him. These were not merely scholars. Every one held high office at court!

If these friends combined their efforts to speak for Chengcheng's people... it truly might succeed.

"Fine!" Liang Shixian declared. "I shall draft several letters to my Donglin Academy friends. They must petition the court to waive Chengcheng County's tax silver!"

Li Daoxuan chuckled. This Donglin-affiliated official is fascinating! He genuinely intends to do it. Excellent. Prove yourself willing, and I shall consider you a potential ally for now.

"Yiye, tell Thirty-Two to discuss famine relief specifics with the Magistrate. Ensure every grain we give reaches the victims, untouched by corrupt clerks."

Inside the miniature realm, Thirty-Two and Liang Shixian dove into relief details—a morass of minutiae. Li Daoxuan listened for a few minutes: locations for distributing congee, cooks, daily portions, preventing graft, informing villagers across the county...

His head throbbed. Nothing but drudgery!

But such drudgery was Thirty-Two's specialty. Former Clerk to Magistrate Zhang Yaocai, he knew Chengcheng County's inner workings far better than its newly arrived County Lord. His intricate plan soon baffled Liang Shixian, who couldn't grasp its finer points.

Flustered, Liang Shixian summoned his own Clerk. Round two began. Both stewards marshaled their expertise, debating furiously in exhaustive detail—every logistical inch, every trivial constraint.

Li Daoxuan stopped listening. Such granular affairs were beyond his concern.

Time to check my TikTok account...

Yesterday, he'd uploaded new footage: the Village Chief of Gaojia Village weaving a bamboo basket. The clumsy caption read: "The Village Chief is growing old. The few tasks left to him are weaving small bamboo baskets, hampers, chairs..."

The video panned slowly from above Gaojia Fortress, zooming onto the Old Village Chief's close-up weaving work before sweeping back out over the entire fortress.

Would viewers respond?

He opened the app. Beneath the video, countless comments flooded in:

"Love the Tiny Kingdom aerial shots! Ha! This 'Gaojia Fortress' is clearly just a model. I saw through them instantly."

"Yeah, obvious model. That roof is composite material board. Even spotted poorly concealed wheels! A real fortress with wheels? Hilarious!"

"I recognize that model kit! It's from 'Chonglin Noble Houses.'"

Chapter 99: Giving Some Benefits to the Old Man

“The blogger is too funny. They actually attached wheels to the base of the Chonglin Family Manor model. There must be motors and stuff inside too, right? Probably remote-controlled. This kind of model has no collectible value at all; it’s purely a prank!”

“No, no, you’re focusing on the wrong thing! Watch the video: it starts with an aerial view, dives straight into the village, and zooms right onto the old man. The transitions are fantastic! It’s one continuous shot from start to finish, no cuts at all. How did they do that?”

“Exactly! The old man is probably a real actor, but the video shows him sitting inside a model weaving a bamboo basket in one seamless shot. The video quality is consistently amazing!”

“That’s why I keep watching his videos. His effects aren’t cheap visual effects.”

“In this last segment where the old man weaves the bamboo basket, that’s real skill. He’s not acting; he’s genuinely weaving.”

“That bamboo basket looks so well made! I want to buy one.”

“Where can’t you buy a bamboo basket?”

“It’s not an ordinary bamboo basket I want. It’s the bamboo basket from the Tiny Kingdom!”

Li Daoxuan read these comments and had a sudden thought. Interesting. I found work for the sculptor, helping them earn good money. The village’s blacksmiths, carpenters, and paper makers have also earned extra rewards by providing labor for other villagers. It’s time I showed some care to the Old Village Chief now.

He spoke down at the box, “Yiye, go to the Village Chief and bring some bamboo handicrafts – some bamboo baskets, bamboo hamper, bamboo chairs, things like that. I want to show them to other friends.”

Gao Yiye hurried off. When she explained her purpose to the Old Village Chief, the old man was instantly overjoyed. He never imagined something as insignificant as his little creations could catch the Deity’s attention, let alone be shared with other heavenly beings! So, of course, he quickly offered them up.

Soon after, Li Daoxuan reached his hand into the box, very carefully picking up a pile of the offerings placed beside the Village Chief.

The Village Chief himself was just 0.8 centimeters tall. His woven bamboo hamper was only two millimeters in diameter, the bamboo basket about the same size, and the bamboo stool measured just three millimeters long. Only the bamboo chair was slightly larger, about one centimeter.

This heap of tiny bamboo crafts rested in his palm, utterly adorable and miniature.

Li Daoxuan edited the video, adding the clip of his hand taking the bamboo items, and uploaded it to TikTok. He pinned it with the Little Yellow Bike function: “Handmade bamboo handicrafts ‘grabbed’ right out of the Tiny Kingdom. Crafted by the Tiny Kingdom’s Village Chief! Miniature art showcasing traditional culture’s charm.”

The video went viral instantly.

“Wow, this video... Holy crap! That huge hand just snatched the items made by the little folk in the Tiny Kingdom!”

“The visual effects are incredible!”

“Is this stuff really for sale? How big actually is it?”

“Didn’t you see the final shot? The tiny things are laid out in the creator’s palm – seriously that small!”

“The workmanship is so fine! Is it really woven from individual bamboo strips? At that size?”

“Too cute! I want one!”

“Checking the price... Whoa! One set for 1,288,888 yuan? Can’t afford that!”

Li Daoxuan hadn't dared to set the price too high. Selling something at that price on TikTok was already outrageous. To truly fetch a high price, he'd need specialized art sales channels or auctions, but that wasn't simple. He decided to just list one set experimentally.

Sure enough, the price was shockingly high for TikTok viewers. A day passed with zero purchases; though the Little Yellow Bike was clicked countless times, not a single person paid.

Ironically, the Ningyang Toy Company's plastic houses and plastic miniature furniture, priced at only a few dozen yuan and also featured under the Little Yellow Bike, were selling like crazy.

Li Daoxuan thought for a moment. Forget the two-millimeter bamboo baskets and hampers. He'd leave them listed at a high price. He decided to sell the one-centimeter bamboo chair separately.

He listed it at 88,888 yuan!

This time, it worked. After about fifteen hours, the one-centimeter bamboo chair sold.

Li Daoxuan called the courier pickup service downstairs to collect the item. Then he looked down at the box, "Yiye, tell the Village Chief that the bamboo chair he wove was very much liked by my friend here. I specifically reward him..."

He was about to say 'reward him with some rice, flour, oil, and salt,' when he suddenly reconsidered. The Old Village Chief is part of the 'original management team.' He's already received quite a bit of extra stuff from me and is relatively well-off.

Stacks of rice, flour, oil, and salt filled his house like mountains. He probably wasn't very interested in those anymore, right?

What reward could I give him?

Something that would bring him joy and contentment.

He scanned his desk, and suddenly his eyes lit up: chocolate, smooth milk flavored.

Heh!

This was it.

He sliced off a tiny piece of chocolate, scooped it up on a fingertip, and gently placed it before the Old Village Chief.

The Old Village Chief only saw a huge, black, strange object plunging from the sky to land in front of him, about one circle larger than his own body. He was utterly bewildered: “Deity, what thing is this?”

Li Daoxuan: “Try eating it.”

The Old Village Chief fetched a chisel, chipped a small flake off the massive chocolate chunk, and popped it into his mouth.

Instantly, the old man’s expression became extraordinarily animated.

“Wow!”

“So delicious!”

Just like any child tasting chocolate for the first time, the worn face of the Village Chief broke into a joy-surpassing-smile grin.

“This humble one has never something so delicious in his life. It’s truly celestial fare, heavenly Deities must eat this! It really is incredibly tasty, and it doesn’t tire the teeth—an old fellow like me can eat it too.”

Li Daoxuan: "This large piece is all yours. You can distribute it or handle it as you wish. Oh, and about that bamboo chair... make a few more when you have time."

Village Chief: "Many thanks, Deity."

With such a commotion, it wasn't long before everyone in Gaojia Village knew the Village Chief's creations had won the favor of a sky deity, who specially rewarded him with something delicious only immortals got to eat.

The villagers of Gaojia quickly gathered around.

Zheng Daniu, the most gluttonous, piped up: "Village Chief Grandpa, could this immortal treat be sampled by this little one too?"

The Village Chief chuckled wryly: "How could you get to taste it for free? Knead the muscles of this old man's legs, then maybe a small morsel shall be bestowed upon you."

Zheng Daniu immediately switched into dutiful-grandson mode and began massaging the Village Chief's legs. Before long, the chief was thoroughly pampered and blissful, finally handing Zheng Daniu a minuscule piece.

Zheng Daniu tossed it into his mouth, and his expression instantly exploded: "Aaaaahhh, this tastes way better than happy fat water!"

The Village Chief was immensely pleased: "Hahahaha, delicious, right? Gone! None more for you!"

Zheng Daniu: "I'll trade! I'll trade everything edible in my house!"

Village Chief: "Not trading!"

"Exchange it, exchange it!" Zheng Daniu persisted: "I still have a very large piece of cured meat over there! I'll give it all to you! Just grant me another tiny piece... a really tiny piece will do!"

The other villagers suddenly realized what to do. They hurried home to find their extra items and flocked to the Village Chief's place hoping to trade, turning his home into a bustling marketplace-like scene.

Chapter 100: Improving the Soil

The entrance to Gaojia Fortress bustled with activity.

An endless procession of transport teams arrived from the county seat.

Liang Shixian had personally vowed "not a single grain would be embezzled," fueling his intense focus on the matter.

It was the first day of grain shipments. Riding his horse, he arrived alongside his scribe, guards, and the grain convoy, standing before Gaojia Fortress' gate. One by one, wagons entered the fortress, loaded with flour, then exited.

"This Li Family's strength is truly unfathomable," the scribe murmured beside him. "This is the thirtieth wagon already. Unbelievable."

Liang Shixian nodded inwardly: Descendants of the Tang Dynasty royalty, a clan with roots stretching millennia—how could they be lacking? That such a grand lineage extends its aid to me is incredible luck. Without it, I'd have been ensnared in a fatal trap and doomed by the Eunuch Party.

After precisely forty wagons had departed, Thirty-Two emerged from the fortress. Claspng his hands respectfully, he addressed Liang Shixian: "County Lord, we of the Li Family have delivered the promised forty wagons of flour today. The rest now depends on your capacity to relieve the people's suffering."

Liang Shixian returned the gesture, his expression grave. "This official will personally oversee this grain. Should any dare to embezzle even a morsel, execution will be their fate, no leniency granted."

Thirty-Two smiled slightly. "The countless eyes of Chengcheng County's people are fixed upon you, County Lord. If you prove upright, you will win their devotion. If not... Heh..."

Liang Shixian retorted proudly, “If I were to steal even a grain from this relief grain, may the heavens strike me down with lightning, and let me die a wretched death.”

Thirty-Two saluted. “Then we leave it to you.”

Liang Shixian tugged the reins of his horse with a proud air and rode off with the grain convoy.

Meanwhile, Li Daoxuan was preoccupied with autumn wheat.

As the time approached for autumn wheat sowing in Gaojia Village, this ‘city kid,’ who couldn’t tell grains apart, found the whole process fascinating.

He adjusted his view over the village’s wheat fields within the miniature world. An array of cameras—long lenses and all—pointed through the glass at the fields below.

Opening his laptop, he searched for information on autumn wheat cultivation and read intently: “Ah, first comes deep plowing...”

He peered down at the tiny figures. Gao Chuwu was helping his parents plow their field, his ox-like strength turning the soil with ease.

“Seems basic knowledge like deep plowing is second nature to them, a hundred times over. No need to teach them,” Li Daoxuan tapped his forehead, chuckling. “This is like teaching a fish to swim.”

Damn it, Thirty-Two’s rubbed off on me. I’m done.

He skimmed past the traditional farming advice online—those farmers clearly knew far more than he ever could. Only when he reached chemical fertilizers did his focus sharpen.

“The soil PH needs to be around 6.5? How the hell do I even figure that out?”

He frantically searched again and discovered instruments sold at gardening stores specifically for testing soil pH.

Adjusting soil pH required all sorts of chaotic equipment: potassium sulfate, potassium dihydrogen phosphate, sheep manure, microbial agents, and more.

The sheer complexity overwhelmed him.

Crap. Disaster. The villagers wished for more harvests this year. I thought buying them fertilizer would be simple, but now... Misusing it could be disastrous. Failing to deliver now would mean I'm no man at all.

Li Daoxuan's 'true man' spirit blazed. Failure was not an option today.

Read every article!

Watch every video!

Phone that relative back in the countryside!

Post on military history forums... Forget that, those replies are useless anyway.

After exhausting every avenue, his country relative offered the most practical advice. After all, it was the laboring folk who battled on the frontlines; their experience was gold.

Armed with a pH probe bought from the gardening market, Li Daoxuan carefully inserted it into the miniature field below...

At that moment, Gao Chuwu's family was toiling hard at plowing. Suddenly, a colossal silver pole descended from the heavens and plunged deep into their field with a resonant THUD.

The family froze in stunned silence: "Huh?"

Thankfully, they were residents of Gaojia Village, accustomed to strange celestial objects dropping without warning. Otherwise, such a sight would have scared them half to death.

Gao Chuwu raised his head skyward. “Deity, what kind of game is this? Is that giant pole the Golden Cudgel you borrowed from Sun Wukong?”

His parents hastily clapped a hand over his mouth. “Fool! Show proper respect when addressing the Deity!”

Li Daoxuan didn’t explain. Without Gao Yiye nearby, his voice was unheard. He focused on the probe’s LCD screen, which displayed: PH 7.5.

He immediately relayed the value to his country relative, describing the specific field conditions, surrounding environment, water sources, and every relevant detail.

After pondering, the relative replied in detail, outlining a solution along with precise fertilizer quantities.

Li Daoxuan calculated the exact size of the Gao Chuwu family’s plot, meticulously measured the required fertilizer amount, and only then summoned Gao Yiye: “Here is celestial fertilizer. Instruct Gao Chuwu’s family to measure precisely two jin of it—no more, no less. Dissolve it in water and irrigate their land. This autumn, their wheat will yield a bountiful harvest.”

Overjoyed, Gao Yiye rushed to Gao Chuwu’s home. “Chuwu! Chuwu! The Deity has bestowed celestial fertilizer upon your family! He promises you a bumper harvest this year!”

Gao Chuwu’s father was ecstatic. “We thank the Deity!”

To this middle-aged farmer, a fruitful field meant more security than anything else.

Great, one family’s field managed. On to the next.

Whish! Li Daoxuan extracted the probe. The Gao family watched in awe as the 'Golden Cudgel' rose into the sky before crashing down (THUD!) into another family's plot.

Moments later, Gao Yiye ran to those farmers. "By the Deity's command: Measure precisely three jin of this celestial fertilizer. Dissolve it in water and irrigate your entire field evenly. Understood?"

That family, too, burst into praise and gratitude towards the Deity.

Soil pH modification commenced across every field in Gaojia Village...

Villagers who had come from Zhengjia Village, Wangjia Village, Zhuangjia Village, and other neighboring settlements watched, eyes filled with longing, as the miraculous giant pole zipped from one field to another.

"Ah, these Gaojia villagers are blessed," one sighed. "They have fields to sow. Our villages... there's still no rain there... alas."

Hearing their laments, Li Daoxuan paused momentarily, sighing inwardly: A pity. My haven't expanded to your villages yet...

As the thought formed, he noticed the 'Rescue Index' display outside the miniature world suddenly flicker. It jumped sharply, climbing a whole 5 points in an instant.

Understanding dawned on Li Daoxuan: Liang Shixian had begun distributing congee.