

Rise 37

Chapter 37: The Battle for Water with the Neighboring Village

Rice, oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, and tea—how could a large family living together avoid quarrels? The Zhu family courtyard didn't quiet down until dinner, and even then, it only ended because of Grandfather's strong intervention.

It was a pity, though, for the five fish that had been caught. Fourth Aunt, in her discontent, had cooked the meal, and the fish ended up burned in the pan.

It was the worst fish anyone had ever tasted.

Eldest Uncle didn't appear at the table, as he had taken money and gone off to town early in the morning for his studies. In truth, when you think about it, Eldest Uncle wasn't very loyal. He took the money and left to enjoy himself, leaving behind Eldest Aunt to deal with the suspicions and questions of the other sisters-in-law. Eldest Aunt defended him vigorously, not allowing a single bad word to be said about him. You could only say Eldest Uncle was truly skilled—not only a scholar, but also quite adept at maneuvering the household dynamics. He certainly knew how to stir things up.

At dinner, Grandfather gave Zhu Ping'an an extra cake and Zhu Pingjun half a cake, telling the two grandsons to eat their fill.

"Old man, cakes don't come free, you know." Grandmother, already fuming from the daughters-in-law's arguments, saw the old man generously giving the grandsons cakes. It was understandable for Jun'er, since

he was attending school, but especially for the youngest grandson—he had already gotten half a cake, and now he was getting a whole one. That was practically an adult's portion.

"What do you women know? In just a few days, it will be time again for our village to fight with Shanghe Village over water. Today, one of the village elders came to tell me that Jun'er and Zhi'er will both participate this year. They are both vital forces for our village, and this concerns the very livelihood of the entire village. The land is our lifeline. Last year, we didn't win the water fight against Shanghe Village, and our harvest took a big hit. Especially in these days ahead, we need to make sure Zhi'er and Jun'er are well-fed and supplemented with the best food."

Grandfather twisted his neck and glared at Grandmother, frustrated that she, being a woman, didn't understand the situation.

Mother Chen's face brightened upon hearing this. Although the village had lost the last water fight, Zhu Pingchuan had performed well and earned a lot of praise from both inside and outside the village. It would likely make it much easier for him to find a wife in the future. Now that the two little ones could participate at only five years old, there would be plenty of chances for them to make a name for themselves in the future.

After dinner, Zhu Ping'an learned from his father, Zhu Shouyi, what this so-called water dispute with Shanghe Village was all about.

Living by the mountains meant relying on the mountains; living by the water meant relying on the water. But with both villages depending on the same mountain and the same water, conflicts over interests between the two villages were inevitable. The mountain wasn't much of an issue—it was big enough for both villages to make use of without running into problems—but the water was different. Both villages relied on the Qingxi stream to irrigate their fields.

Shanghe Village was upstream, while Xiahe Village was downstream, and for generations, the two villages had relied on the same stream for irrigation. But when the crops needed watering, or during droughts, the water from the Qingxi stream wasn't enough for both. Whenever this happened, Shanghe Village would cut off the flow of Qingxi, ensuring their own village had water for irrigation, which Xiahe Village wouldn't tolerate. With the stream already running low, cutting it off meant that Xiahe Village would get nothing, leaving their crops dry and their fields barren. Naturally, this was unacceptable.

And so, one village would try to block the stream, while the other refused to let it be blocked. If you cut it off today, tomorrow, I'll bring people to dig it open and let the water flow again. When no agreement could be reached, the two villages would engage in physical fights—forks, sticks, hoes, and shovels flying everywhere. Once the fighting heated up, things would spiral out of control, leading to bloodshed, injuries, and even death. Every year, the water disputes resulted in over a dozen casualties between the two villages. Even after the main conflict, the losing families would sometimes seek revenge, sparking smaller skirmishes that continued to cause harm.

The village elders of both villages felt that things couldn't continue this way. So many people had died or been injured, causing too much loss to their villages, and the constant fighting over water was delaying the crops, reducing the harvest significantly.

The elders of the two villages came together to discuss a solution. To avoid unnecessary harm, they established a water dispute tradition that has been observed ever since.

Children aged 5 to 10 from both villages, 30 from each side, would participate in the water dispute. This way, no matter how much the children fought, no serious injuries would occur. At most, they might end up lying in bed for a day or two before bouncing back, unlike adults, whose disputes often resulted in severe injury or death.

There was also a set of rules for the 60 children to follow during the water dispute; otherwise, how would they determine a winner?

Each village had ten flags, with one side attacking and the other defending. The defending side would be stationed on a small hill, while the attacking side would be below the hill, attempting to capture the defending village's flags. Within the time it took for one incense stick to burn, the attacking side would capture as many flags as they could and deliver them to their village elders. After the incense burned out, the roles would switch—the attackers becoming the defenders and vice versa. The new attackers would then try to capture flags for the same duration of one incense stick. The flags they captured would also be handed to their village elders.

The village elders would count the flags in their hands to determine the winner and decide which village would have the water rights for the next year. The village with more flags would win, and each flag represented five days of water access. For each extra flag, the winning village would gain an additional five days of priority irrigation. The victorious village would then have the right to use the water from the Clear Creek first, while the other village could not obstruct or irrigate until the winning village had finished using their allotted water days.

Last year, the Upper River Village won two flags, putting the other village at a disadvantage for irrigation. Fortunately, there was no drought this year, or the consequences would have been disastrous.

As the time for this year's water dispute approached, the village elders began selecting participants for the competition. Since the number of children aged 5 to 10 was limited, they carefully chose the best candidates. Zhu Ping'an and Zhu Pingjun were both selected. Zhu Ping'an, who had just turned five, was likely chosen because of his chubby build. His older brother, Zhu Pingchuan, was not selected because, according to the village's age calculation method, he had just turned 11 and was too old.

This water dispute tradition had been followed by the two villages for over a hundred years. By now, it had become more like a social gathering for the villages, and a chance for the younger generation to show off. Children who performed well during the water disputes had a great advantage when it came to finding a spouse. Matchmakers would often praise them, and the families of potential brides would hold them in higher regard.

Every year on the water dispute day, the surrounding area would turn into a small gathering. The younger generation would fight for flags on the hill, while the elders cheered and joked nearby. The village chiefs and elders would sit on raised platforms, sipping tea, drinking, and laughing. The event even attracted vendors, who set up stalls to sell goods, making it one of the most lively festivals for both villages.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't particularly excited about a bunch of kids fighting over flags, but seeing how excited his mother, Chen, looked, he wisely kept quiet.

That night, Zhu Pingchuan also shared his water dispute experience with Zhu Ping'an before bed. Usually a man of few words, Zhu Pingchuan rambled on for quite a while, but Zhu Ping'an fell asleep while listening.