

Great Ming 1021

Chapter 1021: The Freedom to Choose One's Own Life

Lao Huihui felt a trace of curiosity stir within him.

"Labor reform camp?" he asked. "What does that mean?"

Old Luo did not hesitate. "It is a place where people cleanse their past misdeeds through labor. The bandits captured in the Shangnan battle are all held there. Every day, they work and reform."

Lao Huihui raised an eyebrow. A hint of caution flashed through his eyes.

Old Luo continued calmly, as if he had already anticipated this reaction. "However, General, you and your men will not be sent there. Since the beginning of your uprising, your discipline has been strict. You have not burned villages, slaughtered civilians, or looted at will like other rebel groups. You only attacked imperial cities and seized imperial grain."

He paused, then added, "The Dao Xuan Tianzun has ruled that your actions count as demanding wages owed by force, not committing evil through violence. The nature is different. Therefore, no labor reform is required for you."

Lao Huihui listened quietly.

Terms like labor reform, wage collection, and classification of actions were all unfamiliar to him. They sounded strange, almost like some local jargon. He did not fully understand them, but the meaning was clear enough.

Most importantly, the Dao Xuan Tianzun did not see them as villains.

That alone brought a deep sense of reassurance.

Old Luo did not lead them through the main gates of the Tianzhu Mountain Labor Reform Camp. Instead, he guided them along a side path nearby. The group climbed higher, gradually separating from the camp itself.

Before them stood rows of newly built houses.

Old Luo smiled. "General, you and your men may stay here for now. Daily necessities and provisions will soon be delivered by the Dao Xuan Tianzun's envoys."

Lao Huihui stepped forward and bowed deeply. "Many thanks for your assistance."

Old Luo said nothing more. He simply laughed, turned his horse around, and made his way back down the mountain toward his village.

Lao Huihui immediately began arranging lodging for his men.

Three thousand soldiers selected their houses and settled in one after another. Not long after, a low rumbling sound echoed through the mountain paths.

Massive iron vehicles appeared.

They climbed the winding, S shaped road with ease, carrying enormous quantities of grain. The carts rolled to a stop, and sack after sack was unloaded and stacked high.

This was the first time Lao Huihui had ever seen such iron vehicles up close.

He had imagined many possibilities, but none prepared him for the shock. With just one glance, his scalp tingled.

If these things were used on the battlefield against cavalry, horsemen would have no chance at all.

While Lao Huihui's thoughts drifted toward military implications, his subordinates were fixated on something far more immediate.

The grain.

They gathered around the wagons, circling them again and again.

"All this grain," one man asked in disbelief, "is it really free for us?"

"Yes," the transport team captain replied with a smile. "For now, it is provided free of charge. Everyone receives a standard ration."

He added, "All soldiers will be supplied with beef. Soldiers of other ethnicities will receive pork. Please count how many Hui soldiers and how many of other backgrounds you have. That will help us prepare the next delivery."

There was a brief moment of stunned silence.

Then cheers erupted.

The feeling of having one's customs respected was deeply moving. It was not about meat alone. It was about being understood.

And only those who understand each other can truly become friends.

Lao Huihui, however, caught a subtle phrase.

For now.

He stepped forward and clasped his fists toward the captain. "Brother," he said, "there is a saying that no reward comes without merit. We are all able bodied men. It would not be right for us to accept aid forever without contributing. May I ask, in the future, what can we do to deserve this support?"

It was a carefully chosen question.

Instead of asking when the aid would stop, he offered his willingness to work. Only in this way could he accept the food with dignity.

The new generation of Gao Family Village transport captains were men with basic education. They could read, write, calculate, and express themselves clearly. The captain smiled faintly.

"Those blessed by the Dao Xuan Tianzun do not have their lives dictated by others," he said. "They choose their own path."

Lao Huihui frowned slightly, puzzled.

The captain continued, "If you wish to fight, you may join us as soldiers. If you do not wish to fight, you may join us as laborers. And if you choose not to join us at all, you are free to leave at any time. No one will restrain you."

He paused. "There is no need to decide immediately. Stay for a while. Observe. Then decide."

With that, he clasped his fists once more and led his team away.

Lao Huihui sat at the edge of a cliff, watching the iron vehicles disappear down the mountain road. Questions churned endlessly in his heart.

Very well, he thought. Since they told us to observe, then we will observe.

Early the next morning, Lao Huihui began.

He stepped out of his residence and immediately saw streams of labor reform prisoners emerging from the nearby camp. Each carried tools in hand. Some headed toward the fields to plow and fertilize. Others entered the textile factory, where the rhythmic clatter of looms echoed without pause. Still others went into the communal mess hall to prepare meals.

Tianzhu Mountain suddenly came alive.

From peak to foothill, people were working everywhere.

These were the laborers the captain had spoken of.

Lao Huihui's gaze swept across them. He recognized many faces. They were former subordinates of Guo Tianxing, Yi Dou Gu, and Wa Guanzi, captured during the Shangnan battle.

Once, they had been fierce rebel soldiers under the Chuǎng King.

Now, they swung hoes with energy and purpose.

Logically speaking, having fallen so far in status, they should have been miserable. But reality was the opposite.

They looked better than before.

Their clothes were clean. Their bodies were stronger. It was obvious they were eating full meals every day, no longer living hand to mouth, waking each morning wondering where food might come from.

Most striking of all were their expressions.

They were smiling.

Not forced smiles, but relaxed ones.

Lao Huihui looked at them. They noticed him as well.

One man waved excitedly. "Brother Lao Huihui! Have you been caught and sent here too?"

Lao Huihui did not correct him. He had come voluntarily, but there was no need to ruin the man's enthusiasm. He simply nodded, tacitly agreeing.

The prisoner beamed. "That's great! Brother Lao Huihui is a good man. You shouldn't be wandering outside anymore. It's really good here. After arriving, we all regretted not coming sooner."

Lao Huihui asked, genuinely curious, "What is so good about labor reform? Isn't it just being captured and forced to work?"

The prisoner snorted. "You're thinking about it wrong. When we were bandits, weren't we also forced? Forced to fight, forced to flee, hunted by government troops. No home. No safety. Never knowing if we'd eat tomorrow."

He continued, "Here, we don't worry about food or shelter. We have a place to live. Our lives aren't constantly at risk."

Lao Huihui fell silent.

He had never looked at it that way.

But compared like this, the difference was undeniable.

Chapter 1022: If Only I Had Followed Your Path

The labor reform prisoner continued, his eyes bright. "And there's something to look forward to. In another six months, my term will be finished. I'll be released. After that, I'll be paid for my work. I heard that even someone like me, with low skills, can earn one or two taels of silver a month."

Lao Huihui pondered this. "So labor has rewards here. That's not bad at all."

The prisoner laughed. "That's just the pay in a poor area. I heard that if you take one of those big trains to a major city like Luoyang, wages are even higher. And if you're willing to take a bit of risk and ride a big ship down to Jiangnan, working at ports or shipyards, the pay is even better."

His voice dropped slightly. "It's just... going that far makes me nervous."

Lao Huihui clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. "What were we before? Bandits. We roamed the entire land, afraid of nothing. And now you're scared of traveling far?"

The prisoner scratched his head and sighed. "I'm honestly tired of wandering. Settling down in one place sounds better than anything. But the wages out there are so tempting. I've been struggling with this every day."

He counted on his fingers. "Six months left. Where should I go? I need to decide before then. I want stability, but I'm afraid it'll just be a poor, dull life. I want to go out and make money, but I worry I'm not capable. Still, if I succeed, I could earn enough to come back, build a decent house, marry a good wife..."

He let out a long breath. "It's hard to choose."

Lao Huihui fell silent.

This man was not merely surviving. He was planning his future.

Just that alone already made him stronger than Lao Huihui's three thousand subordinates.

Those three thousand men followed him blindly every day. Their only hope was to fill their stomachs. They never had the chance, nor the energy, to think about what kind of life they wanted.

I have failed them.

A wave of guilt washed over Lao Huihui's heart.

At that moment, the labor reform prisoner pointed toward a distant hillside. A soldier stood guard there, holding a flintlock rifle.

"See that guy?" the prisoner whispered.

"I see him," Lao Huihui replied. "What about him?"

"He used to be one of Wa Guanzi's men."

"Oh? Is he also a labor reform prisoner?"

The prisoner shook his head quickly. "No. Look at the rifle. He was released a year ago for good behavior. After that, he joined the army here. Now he's stationed at Tianzhu Mountain and receives a military salary."

"They pay soldiers here too?" Lao Huihui asked in surprise.

He recalled the transport captain's words from the previous day. Laborers or soldiers. This man had clearly chosen the latter.

The prisoner nodded. "They do, and the pay is high. With allowances and bonuses, it adds up to at least five taels of silver a month. Almost double what ordinary laborers earn."

"That much?" Lao Huihui murmured.

"It's incredible," the prisoner said. "We're all jealous. But we came from bandit life. We know how dangerous fighting is. That money isn't easy to earn. When I'm free, I don't want to be a soldier. I'm afraid I'll earn it, then die before I get to spend it."

Lao Huihui nodded slowly. "Mm."

A sharp whistle sounded in the distance. Someone shouted, "A few of you, come move this rock."

The prisoner jumped. "Brother Lao Huihui, I've got work. We'll talk later."

He ran off, shouting as he went, "Captain, I'll take it. I'll move it."

The captain laughed. "You little rascal. Always trying to stand out. You're only six months from release and you're already so impatient?"

The prisoner grinned. "Even one day earlier is worth it. Captain, you have to pick me as a model labor reform prisoner this month. You've seen how hard I work."

The captain waved his hand. "Alright, alright. Keep it up. If you're chosen, you'll get at least three months cut off. Maybe even the full half year."

The prisoner whooped with joy. "Great. Just watch me."

Lao Huihui watched the man's back as he carried the heavy rock away. Then his gaze shifted to the sentry standing guard, rifle in hand, already free and employed by the Gao Family Village militia.

He let out a quiet sigh and walked over.

The sentry noticed him and immediately straightened, saluting. "Brother Lao Huihui. Long time no see. The last time I saw you was during the battle at Shangnan County."

Lao Huihui looked him over carefully. This man was clearly doing better than the labor reform prisoner. His clothes were finer, his posture confident, his spirit lively.

This was what it meant to truly turn one's life around.

"You're doing well," Lao Huihui said. "You look like a proper man now."

The sentry smiled. "Life's been good to me."

Then his expression turned earnest. "Back when I was still with the bandits, I was young and ignorant. I thought you had thousands of cavalry but didn't know how to use them. I didn't understand you at all."

He lowered his voice. "Only after coming here and learning things did I realize that among all the bandit leaders, you were the best."

Lao Huihui gave him a puzzled look. "What makes me so special?"

"Your discipline," the sentry said without hesitation. "You never plundered civilians. You only attacked cities held by government troops. And you were truly skilled in war. Whether brute strength or tactical cunning, you stood above the rest."

His admiration was obvious. "If only I had followed you back then. Instead, I followed Wa Guanzi..."

Lao Huihui shook his head. "Following him wasn't entirely bad. You were captured early, sent here, reformed, and now you have a new life. You corrected your path faster than any of my men."

The sentry laughed awkwardly. "Maybe. A misfortune turning into a blessing. If my luck had been worse, I'd have been shot dead in Shangnan and be meeting the King of Hell by now."

He sighed. "Following you would have been the straighter path. I could stand taller now."

After a pause, he continued, "A few days ago, I heard you were coming. Not as a labor reform prisoner, but as an allied guest commander. I was so envious. If I hadn't made mistakes, I could've walked into Tianzhu Mountain with my head held high."

He shook his head. "But there are no 'ifs' in life."

Then his eyes lit up. "Brother Lao Huihui, why don't you lead your men and all join the militia here? I'll request a transfer to your command. I want to follow you from now on."

Lao Huihui did not answer.

Chapter 1023: The Profligate Noble

Lao Huihui lowered his voice, instinctively glancing around before speaking, as if the very air might be listening to him.

"I still don't even know what kind of force you people represent," he said slowly, his brows tightly knit. "How could I possibly agree to join just like that? Are you agents of the imperial court? Another bandit faction hiding in the mountains? Or perhaps some prince secretly plotting rebellion?"

The scout stared at him for a moment, then let out a short, incredulous laugh.

"Huh? What kind of wild nonsense are you imagining now?"

He raised his hand and deliberately tugged at the emblem embroidered on his chest. The symbol shimmered faintly in the light, unmistakable in its design.

"We are people of Dao Xuan Tianzun," the scout said with a straight face. "United under Dao Xuan Tianzun's protection, acting according to his will, bringing salvation to the people of the world."

Lao Huihui fell silent.

His expression froze, as if his thoughts had slammed straight into a wall.

"...."

Bloody hell.

Wasn't this just a cult?

After everything he had seen and heard, after all the buildup and mystery, the answer turned out to be a cult?

For a moment, Lao Huihui genuinely did not know whether to laugh or curse.

The scout, however, seemed to completely misunderstand the look on his face. He waved his hand dismissively, his tone casual and even slightly amused.

"Judging by that expression, you're definitely getting the wrong idea. Staying here on Tianzhu Mountain, you can't really see Dao Xuan Tianzun's true benevolence. How about this. Tomorrow morning, you go take a look at Xi'an for yourself."

"Xi'an?" Lao Huihui repeated reflexively.

"It's not far," the scout continued. "Only about three hundred li in a straight line. If you take a vehicle, you'll be there in about half a day."

Lao Huihui frowned deeply. "By vehicle?"

The scout nodded as if this were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Every evening, a long-distance solar car comes from Xi'an. It stops overnight at the station here, then sets off again at sunrise the next morning. You can take that car straight to Xi'an and see everything with your own eyes."

Lao Huihui stared at him, disbelief creeping into his voice. "Something like that actually exists?"

"You'll know tomorrow morning," the scout said with a grin. "Oh, and one more thing. You'd better disguise yourself a bit. With your face and your current attire, you'd stand out too much. Xi'an isn't entirely populated by our own people yet."

The next morning, Lao Huihui woke before dawn.

He carefully changed his clothes, disguising himself as an ordinary Han Chinese man, and quietly made his way to the entrance of Luoja Village. As soon as he arrived, he froze on the spot.

Sure enough, a strangely shaped vehicle was already waiting there.

Its form was unlike any carriage he had seen before, neither pulled by horses nor pushed by men. It sat there silently, yet carried an indescribable sense of restrained power.

A few passengers were already seated inside. There were not many of them, not even half the carriage was filled. Lao Huihui chose the most inconspicuous seat at the very back and sat down without drawing attention.

From the front of the carriage, casual conversation drifted over.

"Brother Zhang, where are you headed today?"

"I'm going to Shanyang County Town," a man replied cheerfully. "Need to buy a few things for my wife. What about you?"

"I'm heading to Lantian County. Got a relative there I haven't seen in years."

"Hahaha, no wonder."

Listening quietly, Lao Huihui gradually realized that this vehicle would pass through quite a few places along the way, not just a single destination.

Before long, the sun rose above the horizon.

With a faint hum, the long-distance solar car began its journey.

It traveled from Tianzhu Mountain to Shanyang County Town first. Several passengers got off there, but even more boarded, filling some of the empty seats. The vehicle continued onward, steady and unhurried. Along the route, people constantly got on and off, as if this strange machine were an inseparable part of daily life.

By the time it finally reached the outskirts of Xi'an, half a day had already passed.

It was afternoon.

Lao Huihui stepped down from the vehicle and lifted his head. In that instant, all other thoughts were forcibly driven out of his mind.

Inside the city stood a colossal golden statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

It was enormous beyond imagination, at least twice as tall as the highest buildings in the city. Even the towering city walls could not obscure its presence. Bathed in sunlight, the golden colossus gleamed brilliantly, its gaze seemingly cast over the entire city of Xi'an.

"Incredible..." Lao Huihui muttered under his breath. "The local authorities actually allowed something like this to be built inside the city."

As he entered Xi'an, his attention was quickly drawn to the bustling market district outside the South Gate. Vendors lined the streets, selling all kinds of strange and exotic goods he had never seen before. Carriages and pedestrians flowed endlessly through the streets, lively and orderly at the same time.

This was completely different from the decaying ancient capital he remembered.

The people here looked happier, more confident, and more at ease than the labor reform prisoners he had seen on Tianzhu Mountain. Their faces carried an ease that could not be faked.

He had not gone far when a massive golden iron vehicle emerged from a side street ahead of him.

Its front was adorned with a soaring five-clawed golden dragon, crafted with such vivid detail that it seemed ready to take flight. Yet despite its imposing appearance, the vehicle moved slowly and carefully, clearly yielding to pedestrians along the street.

This alone stunned Lao Huihui.

In his memories, the carriages and horses of the wealthy had always rampaged through the streets without restraint, trampling whoever stood in their way.

Nearby, two passersby laughed as they watched.

"Oh, the Prince of Qin's heir's Kulinan has arrived," one of them said. "That vehicle really is magnificent. I wish I could own one in my lifetime."

"Stop dreaming," the other replied. "That thing costs a fortune. Even the Prince's heir had to sell off everything he owned to build it. How could common folk like us ever afford it?"

Unable to contain his curiosity, Lao Huihui stepped forward and asked, "Brothers, is that really the Prince of Qin's vehicle?"

The two men nodded.

"That's Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir," one of them said. "See that profligate middle-aged man grinning foolishly inside? That's him."

Lao Huihui hesitated, then voiced the doubt that had been gnawing at him.

"Aren't imperial relatives and powerful families usually wicked?" he asked. "Rampaging through the streets, killing people without consequence? Why is this golden iron vehicle from the Prince of Qin's estate moving so slowly, even yielding to people? And that profligate middle-aged man doesn't seem that bad. He just looks a bit foolish."

The two pedestrians burst into laughter.

"What kind of place do you think this is?" one of them said. "This is Dao Xuan Tianzun's Liberated Zone. Who would dare rampage recklessly here? Forget the Prince's heir. Even if the old emperor himself came, if he drove recklessly and killed a pedestrian, he'd still be charged with traffic endangerment and sent to labor reform."

Lao Huihui's pupils shrank violently.

"!!!"

This was completely beyond reason.

The two pedestrians continued, unfazed by his reaction.

"Of course, if someone deliberately throws themselves in front of a vehicle to extort money, that's another matter. In any case, Dao Xuan Tianzun is a very reasonable deity. He always sides with whoever is in the right."

Lao Huihui raised his hand and pointed toward the golden colossus towering in the distance.

"That," he asked cautiously, "is Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

"Yes," the two replied without hesitation.

"He's a celestial immortal, right?" Lao Huihui asked carefully. "Would he really concern himself with mortal affairs?"

What he truly wanted to ask was whether this Dao Xuan Tianzun was fake. But he was not foolish enough to say such a thing aloud in a city filled with believers.

The two men laughed again.

"Other deities might not bother with mortal affairs," one of them said. "But Dao Xuan Tianzun is different. He frequently performs divine miracles. Stay here long enough and you'll definitely get a chance to witness his divine manifestations."

Lao Huihui's heart skipped a beat.

At that very moment, the Kulinan rolled to a stop directly behind him.

A head popped out from inside the vehicle. It belonged to none other than the profligate middle-aged man himself, Zhu Cunji. Squinting at Lao Huihui, he frowned and muttered, "Your face looks familiar. Where have I seen you before? Ah, right. Gaojia News... Gaojia News... War correspondent Zhou Daya's report. You're from Henan... Henan Qun..."

Before he could finish the sentence, Lao Huihui's mind went completely blank.

He did not understand what Gaojia News was, but the moment the word "Henan" came out, he could already guess what would follow.

Terror surged through him like ice water.

Without thinking, he sprang forward, leaping onto the hood of the Kulinan and reaching out to grab Zhu Cunji by the throat.

But Zhu Cunji was no ordinary citizen.

Almost at the same instant, the Prince of Qin's personal guards appeared, as if they had materialized from thin air.

Two guards, one from each side, leapt into the air simultaneously. With two sharp thuds, they seized Lao Huihui's shoulders and yanked him backward.

His strike failed. Instead, he was dragged off the hood and flung away from the vehicle.

An ordinary person would have crashed hard onto the ground. Lao Huihui did not.

His body twisted in mid-air, completing a full rotation before his feet slammed onto the ground. He landed solidly, steady and upright.

The Prince's personal guards stared at him in shock.

"Assassin!" they shouted. "A master. He's a master!"

Chapter 1024: The Expert

In an instant, the entire street exploded into chaos.

What had been a lively, orderly avenue only moments ago turned into a scene of sudden panic. Pedestrians cried out in alarm and scattered in all directions, retreating as far as they could, pressing themselves beneath shop eaves and behind wooden stalls, afraid that the violence might spill over onto them at any moment.

Almost simultaneously, dozens of guards from the Prince of Qin's estate surged out from every direction. Their movements were swift, coordinated, and clearly well-practiced. In the blink of an eye, Lao Huihui found himself surrounded, front and back, left and right, with no obvious path of retreat.

He swept his gaze across the encirclement, and a chill crept up his spine.

One guard leapt onto the Kulinan in a single bound, placing himself squarely in front of Zhu Cunji like a human shield. His voice rang out sharply, loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

"Who are you?" the guard demanded. "Why did you assault His Highness, the Prince's Heir?"

Lao Huihui frowned, his lips pressed tightly together, choosing silence instead of a reply.

Zhu Cunji, still half inside the vehicle, waved his hand impatiently. "Subdue him first. We can question him slowly later."

The guards answered in unison, their voices crisp and resolute. "As you command!"

With that single order, several guards lunged forward at the same time.

Lao Huihui reacted instantly. He tilted his head just enough to let a punch whistle past his ear, then swung his arm back in a sharp arc, gripping the attacker's forearm. With a sudden burst of strength, he twisted his waist and flung the man outward. The guard was sent flying, crashing straight into two others who had been rushing in from behind.

With a heavy thud, all three fell into a tangled heap on the ground.

Before Lao Huihui could even catch his breath, two more guards attacked from opposite sides. He answered with a left hook that forced one man back and followed with a powerful right kick that sent the other staggering several steps away.

The guards' shouts grew louder and more urgent.

"An expert!"

"He's a true master!"

"A rare expert indeed!"

"More men, hurry and help!"

At once, the remaining princely guards surged forward together, no longer testing him one by one.

Lao Huihui clenched his teeth, feeling a strange heat rise in his chest. His fighting spirit was fully ignited. He parried incoming blows, blocked strikes with his forearms, ducked beneath swinging fists, and leapt over sweeping legs. His movements were fluid and explosive, almost theatrical, like a martial arts star leaping across the screen of an old film. Facing dozens of guards alone, he fought fiercely, turning the entire street into utter pandemonium.

Such a massive disturbance could not remain contained for long.

Some bystanders ran off to alert the authorities.

Others rushed away to summon the local militia.

The government yamen runners happened to be stationed on a nearby street and arrived quickly, but the moment they recognized the guards of the Prince of Qin's mansion, they exchanged glances and immediately retreated, pretending they had seen nothing. None of them dared interfere.

The militia, stationed farther away, arrived more slowly.

However, when they did arrive, the person leading them was no ordinary figure.

Inspector Fang Wushang.

Although Li Daoxuan had not paid much attention to Fang Wushang in recent times, Fang Wushang himself had been steadily climbing the ranks. As Dao Xuan Tianzun's territory expanded, the Gao Family Village Inspectorate naturally could not remain limited to the small confines of Chengcheng County.

The Inspectorate expanded, and with expansion came promotion.

Old members rose step by step. Small squad leaders became major chiefs, major chiefs advanced to higher authority, and eventually reached the very top.

Fang Wushang had been promoted to General Director, now overseeing all branch inspectorates across the entire Dao Xuan Tianzun Liberated Zone.

By coincidence, he happened to be in Xi'an that day, inspecting the local branch of the Inspectorate, when he received reports of a violent street brawl.

He led the charge personally and was the first to arrive at the scene.

The moment Fang Wushang laid eyes on the situation, he quickly took stock of it. The guards of the Prince of Qin's estate were clearly surrounding a single man. That man wore strange attire and, most importantly, did not have Dao Xuan Tianzun's image embroidered on his chest.

There was no need for further deliberation.

Anyone without the embroidered image was, by definition, an outsider. The Prince of Qin's guards were clearly insiders.

When insiders and outsiders clashed, regardless of who was right or wrong, the first priority was always to subdue the outsider. Only after that could the truth be investigated.

Without hesitation, Fang Wushang surged forward toward Lao Huihui.

Lao Huihui had just kicked one guard to the ground when he suddenly sensed danger. He turned sharply, only to see a fist hurtling toward him at terrifying speed.

His heart jolted.

Another expert had arrived.

He arched his back dramatically, bending backward just enough for the fist to skim past his face. He thought he had narrowly avoided it, but Fang Wushang's movements did not stop there. In one seamless motion, Fang Wushang shifted his stance and brought his elbow crashing downward.

Lao Huihui's pupils contracted violently.

If that elbow strike landed, whether it hit his chest or abdomen, no vital area could withstand such force.

In sheer desperation, Lao Huihui twisted his body and spun mid-air, executing an Iron Bridge maneuver. His body rotated fully before he flipped away, narrowly escaping the blow.

Fang Wushang's elbow missed, and a flicker of surprise flashed across his eyes.

An expert.

The two men sprang backward at the same time, instantly creating distance between them. Then, without a word, they charged again.

Their fists collided with dull, heavy thuds, each punch landing squarely on the other's chest. The impact sent both of them flying backward, knocking over two unlucky guards in the process.

Fang Wushang hit the ground, but in the next instant he sprang back up with a clean carp flip, landing firmly on his feet.

Lao Huihui was not so fortunate.

He fell hard and failed to recover in time. Two princely guards lunged forward, pinning his arms. Before he could shake them off, more guards piled on, one after another, pressing him down with overwhelming force.

Soon, Lao Huihui was completely immobilized beneath their weight.

"We've got the assassin!"

"Haha, we've got him!"

The princely guards cheered loudly, their faces filled with triumph.

Fang Wushang also let out a long breath. "What a formidable opponent," he said honestly. "If we hadn't had the advantage in numbers, I might not have been able to take him down."

Several guards hauled Lao Huihui up, gripping him from all sides.

Unable to move, Lao Huihui let out a rough laugh. "Fine, you've caught me. Do as you wish. Death or torture, take your pick."

"There's no need to talk about death or torture so lightly," Fang Wushang replied calmly. "First, we need to find out exactly what happened here."

Lao Huihui sneered. "Why bother? I'm just a commoner who assaulted the Prince's Heir. Just execute me. Wouldn't that be simpler?"

Fang Wushang's expression hardened. "Silence. If justice were handled that way, where would heavenly principles be? Where would the law be? Before the law, all are equal. Whether you are a commoner or a prince's heir, reason must come first."

Those words struck Lao Huihui like a hammer.

For a moment, he was completely stunned.

Fang Wushang turned toward Zhu Cunji. "Your Highness, what exactly happened?"

Zhu Cunji leaned out from beside the Kulinan and said casually, "I was talking to him quite politely. Then he suddenly reached out and tried to grab my throat. That's when my guards intervened."

Fang Wushang nodded and turned back to Lao Huihui. "Why did you suddenly attack him without provocation?"

Lao Huihui opened his mouth. "He... he..."

His words caught in his throat.

How could he say, "He recognized me," in front of so many people?

Before he could respond, Zhu Cunji chuckled softly. "I was puzzled at first too, but after thinking it over, I understand now. General Director, let's not interrogate him here on the street. Let's move somewhere private and talk."

Fang Wushang raised an eyebrow, clearly puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Zhu Cunji leaned closer and whispered into his ear, lowering his voice. "This man looks very much like the great bandit leader, Lao Huihui."

Fang Wushang's heart skipped a beat.

He straightened at once. "Very well. Take him to the building next door."

Soon, the three of them entered the adjacent building, a shop belonging to Gao Family Village. When the shopkeeper realized who needed the space, he hurriedly invited them inside, closing doors and windows while the princely guards secured the outside.

Inside, Fang Wushang's tense expression finally relaxed. Zhu Cunji, on the other hand, broke into a broad smile.

"So," Zhu Cunji said cheerfully, "it really was Lao Huihui all along."

Lao Huihui stared at him, utterly bewildered. "You recognized me, and instead of turning me over, you bring me into a back room to chat?"

Zhu Cunji scoffed. "Isn't it obvious? Anyone with a bit of standing on our side, anyone who has access to internal information, knows that you're one of us, an ally."

Lao Huihui's eyes widened in shock.

He instinctively glanced at Zhu Cunji's chest.

The image of Dao Xuan Tianzun was embroidered there, stitched in gleaming gold thread.

Zhu Cunji continued, his tone apologetic. "This one's on me. I shouldn't have said those things out on the street. Anyone would have panicked in your position."

Fang Wushang nodded solemnly. "Indeed, Your Highness. You must be more careful in the future. Lao Huihui's identity cannot be exposed in public."

Lao Huihui muttered weakly, "Huh?"

Zhu Cunji turned back to him and gave a conspiratorial wink. "I know why you're in Xi'an. You're here for a little trip, right? Wanting to see the wider world. I get that feeling completely."

Lao Huihui felt even more confused.

What trip? What nonsense was this profligate middle-aged man talking about?

He had come to see the truth behind Dao Xuan Tianzun's Liberated Zone.

But as things stood now, it seemed he was already beginning to glimpse that truth, whether he wanted to or not.

Chapter 1025: Can You Really Get Rich?

Lao Huihui's heart pounded violently in his chest.

These people were truly terrifying.

Even the Prince of Qin's estate, the most prestigious and powerful princely fief in the entire realm, was apparently standing on their side without hesitation. Such a level of influence was something even the White Lotus Sect could never hope to achieve.

Yet that was not what shocked him the most.

What truly shook Lao Huihui to his core was how orderly, rational, and restrained these people were. From beginning to end, no one had tried to suppress him through status alone. Even after he had attacked Zhu Cunji in public, the Prince's heir had not exploded in rage, had not screamed for execution, and had not thrown his weight around as an imperial relative.

Instead, he had spoken calmly, even casually, as though they were equals having a misunderstanding rather than enemies clashing on a street.

That alone placed this group in a completely different category from the imperial court.

Why had Lao Huihui risen in rebellion with his mixed cavalry in the first place?

On the surface, it was because wages had not been paid, because his men had been driven into a corner where survival itself demanded violence. But beneath that was something deeper, something far more bitter.

It was the entrenched discrimination.

He and his people, the Hui and other frontier folk, had always been treated as lesser beings by the Han officials. They were useful when fighting was needed, expendable when peace returned, and despised at all other times. Titles, laws, and morality were weapons used selectively against them, never shields meant to protect them.

That was what Lao Huihui truly hated.

Yet here, the princely heir before him, and even the inspector who clearly held real authority, had shown him no trace of contempt.

It was unexpected to the point of disbelief.

Fang Wushang waved his hand impatiently. "Since this was only a misunderstanding, I will not arrest you for disturbing the peace. I still have several districts to inspect today. Frankly speaking, I'm drowning in work."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and hurried away, already barking instructions to his subordinates as he left.

Zhu Cunji, on the other hand, watched Fang Wushang's retreating back, then turned toward Lao Huihui with a grin that looked far too eager for a man who had nearly been strangled moments earlier.

"You've been to a lot of places, haven't you?" Zhu Cunji said enthusiastically. "The vast grasslands of the northwest frontier, most of Shanxi, Henan, Hubei, Sichuan, even Yunyang. Come, come, tell me, which places are the most beautiful, the most interesting?"

Lao Huihui stared at him blankly.

"Come on, don't hold back." Zhu Cunji grabbed his arm with friendly familiarity and pulled him out of the room, guiding him straight toward the Kulinan. "Sit, sit. Tell me everything."

Before Lao Huihui could protest, he was already ushered into the passenger seat.

The engine started slowly, releasing a deep hiss and a steady, ominous thrum. The vibration traveled up through the seat, into Lao Huihui's bones, making his scalp tingle.

This was the first time in his life he had ever sat inside an automobile.

The sheer sense of power contained within this iron contraption unsettled him deeply. As someone who had spent most of his life on horseback, he instinctively understood danger.

This thing was far more frightening than a warhorse.

If this frivolous princely heir decided to ram someone with it, even the finest cavalry would be helpless. There would be no charge, no evasion, no counterattack. One would simply be crushed.

Zhu Cunji nudged him with his elbow. "Hey, Lao Huihui, don't space out. I asked you, where are the best sights?"

Lao Huihui stiffened slightly. "Please don't call me that in public."

"Oh, right, right." Zhu Cunji scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Then what should I call you?"

After a brief silence, Lao Huihui let out a soft sigh. "My name is Ma Shouying."

Zhu Cunji raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Your real name?"

Ma Shouying nodded faintly. "Yes."

Zhu Cunji looked genuinely surprised. "You're actually telling me that?"

"I don't know why," Ma Shouying replied honestly, "but I feel I can trust you with it."

Zhu Cunji burst out laughing. "Heh!"

As the Kulinan rolled forward at a steady pace, the two men talked. Ma Shouying spoke of mountains layered like waves, of rivers cutting through valleys like silver blades, of border towns where wind howled day and night and grass stretched endlessly to the horizon.

Zhu Cunji listened with bright eyes, occasionally slapping his thigh in excitement.

"I must go see that place someday!"

Ma Shouying glanced at him. "As the Prince of Qin's heir, you can't really leave Xi'an, can you? Those places will always be beyond your reach."

Zhu Cunji only laughed. "With Dao Xuan Tianzun watching over us, this heir actually does have ways. Hehehe."

Ma Shouying did not press him. A man who had survived years of chaos knew one thing well. If someone wanted to speak, they would. If they did not, asking was useless.

He changed the topic, his tone turning serious. "Prince Heir, I am not yet one of your people. I am still considering whether to join you in the future."

Zhu Cunji blinked. "What's there to consider? I joined without even thinking twice."

Ma Shouying remained silent, his thoughts churning.

He had originally suspected that Zhu Cunji was the hidden mastermind, using Dao Xuan Tianzun's banner as cover to rebel and seize the throne. But the more he listened, the more he observed, the more it seemed that this man was not the true core at all.

Rather, he felt like someone who had joined later, swept along by something far larger than himself.

Lowering his voice, Ma Shouying asked, "Prince Heir, then who truly leads this faction? And what is your ultimate aim?"

Zhu Cunji spread his hands. "The leader? Naturally, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Ma Shouying turned his head to look at the towering golden statue in the distance, his expression complicated. "I don't mean that kind of leader. I mean a person. A mortal leader."

In his mind, Dao Xuan Tianzun was no different from the White Lotus Sect's Unborn Venerable Mother, a symbol used to rally followers. Real power, he believed, always rested in human hands.

Zhu Cunji laughed softly. "Oh, in the mortal world? Then it's naturally the Saintess."

Ma Shouying leaned closer. "Could I meet her and speak with her?"

Zhu Cunji looked puzzled. "Speak about what? Are you planning to swear allegiance?"

That was exactly what Ma Shouying had been thinking. He wanted to see the mortal leader of this Dao Xuan Tianzun faction with his own eyes, to judge whether she was worthy of his loyalty.

Zhu Cunji chuckled. "You outsiders really don't understand how things work here. But you're in luck. It's almost evening. I'll take you to the market square, in front of the Immortal Treasure Mirror. You'll see the Saintess there."

Ma Shouying's eyes lit up. "Many thanks."

The Kulinan headed toward the bustling market square.

By the time they arrived, dusk was settling in. The square was already crowded. Workers who had just finished their shifts sat down in neat rows, opening five copper meal boxes, eating while waiting for the evening program.

When Ma Shouying saw the enormous mirror, his breath caught.

Inside it, people were moving.

A beautiful young girl appeared on the screen, no more than ten years old.

Ma Shouying gasped. "What is this? Why is there a giant girl inside?"

Zhu Cunji laughed. "This is an Immortal Treasure Mirror bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. It can show the past and the future."

Ma Shouying's eyes widened in disbelief.

The image shifted again. Two Mongolian children appeared, holding bundles of wool, speaking earnestly about sheep and grasslands.

Zhu Cunji gestured at the screen. "These woolen sweaters are exploding in popularity. My consort bought five, and all my wives are fighting over them. Merchants are rushing to the northwest like mad. The nomads have sold all their wool at sky-high prices."

Ma Shouying sucked in a sharp breath.

He was Hui, and many of his men raised sheep as well.

"Can you really get rich?" he asked instinctively, then quickly corrected himself. "No, not rich. Just enough to live well. To eat until full. Is that really possible?"

For the first time in many years, hope crept quietly into his heart.

Chapter 1026: Military Exercise

Zhu Cunji spoke in a tone so casual that, to someone unfamiliar with him, it might have sounded as though he were merely chatting about some trivial market gossip, yet every word he uttered quietly

overturned Ma Shouying's long held understanding of how power and governance truly worked. He said that not long ago, Dao Xuan Tianzun himself had personally visited Yinchuan in Ningxia and given direct instructions to the local governor, and that shortly after that visit, a new policy had been implemented with remarkable speed and without the usual layers of obstruction.

According to what Zhu Cunji had heard, the governor had established a wool purchasing station specifically tasked with buying wool from the herders before reselling it to their own merchants, and under such an arrangement, it had become nearly impossible for the herders of that region not to make money. They could sell their wool whenever they wished, without waiting for intermediaries or relying on luck. If they wanted to earn a bit more, they could simply wait for merchant caravans to arrive and sell directly to them, while those who preferred convenience could sell straight to the government purchasing station at a slightly lower price, trading a small margin of profit for certainty and ease.

As Ma Shouying listened, he could not stop himself from letting out a long sigh, one that carried with it deep regret and suppressed bitterness. He muttered that such humane and practical policies already existed, and that if only things had been like this back then, his subordinates would never have been driven to the point of rebellion merely to survive.

At that moment, the endlessly looping advertisement on the Immortal Treasure Mirror abruptly stopped.

The reaction from the crowd was immediate, as though a collective burden had been lifted from their chests. Voices rang out with relief and excitement, announcing that Gaojia News was finally about to begin. The image on the screen shifted, revealing a woman of dignified beauty, her presence calm yet commanding, the kind that made people instinctively quiet down and listen.

Someone in the crowd cried out in admiration, calling her the Saintess.

Ma Shouying leaned closer to Zhu Cunji and whispered in disbelief, asking whether the woman on the screen truly was the Saintess.

Zhu Cunji nodded easily and explained that the Saintess herself was in Gao Family Village in Chengcheng County, and that what they were seeing now was a remote appearance through the Divine Mirror. Hearing this, Ma Shouying was once again startled, for the longer he stayed here, the more things that should have been impossible elsewhere appeared perfectly normal.

The Saintess smiled gently at the screen and announced that they would begin with an international news report. She explained that a few days earlier, the Jin state had reorganized its Literary Office into three internal academies, namely the Academy of National History, the Academy of Secretaries, and the Academy of Grand Culture, each assigned its own responsibilities.

A wave of confusion passed through the audience, and Ma Shouying was no exception. He asked quietly what such a change was supposed to mean.

With patient clarity, the Saintess explained that many people in their country still regarded the Jin state as a land of barbarians, imagining them as savages who consumed raw meat and drank blood, yet in reality, the Jin state was actively striving toward good governance, continuously learning from others' strengths, and steadily advancing toward a more developed civilization. She emphasized that arrogance had to be discarded, and that their enemy should be faced squarely and honestly, because blind self importance would only lead to being surpassed.

A young scholar suddenly jumped to his feet and shouted his agreement, only to be hurriedly scolded for blocking the screen, prompting him to sit back down in embarrassment and apologize.

The Saintess then moved on to domestic news, reporting that a severe famine had once again struck Henan. She described how starving people, lacking grain, had first resorted to eating tree bark and wild grass, and when even those were gone, had turned to cannibalism. She cited a report from the Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian, stating that in Nanyang, Henan, the situation was so dire that some mothers had even cooked their own daughters to eat. She added that the emperor had issued an edict allocating 3,500 jin for relief and exempting both old and new taxes in the affected prefectures and counties.

Ma Shouying's face went pale at these words, and he asked in a strained voice whether Gaojia News truly reported such matters every day.

Zhu Cunji answered without hesitation that it did.

Ma Shouying then asked, haltingly, whether this meant that the common people here, without ever leaving their homes, could know the affairs of the entire world, and how such awareness could possibly compare to that of ordinary folk elsewhere.

Zhu Cunji agreed readily, saying that the insight and knowledge of the common people here were genuinely impressive, and that one could grab anyone off the street and have a long conversation about national affairs, each person speaking as though they understood everything.

Even as they spoke, the surrounding crowd had already begun discussing the news among themselves. Some remarked that this time the old emperor finally seemed to know how to provide disaster relief, while others scoffed, pointing out that 3,500 jin meant copper coins, not silver. When someone calculated aloud that this amounted to only three taels and five qian of silver, sarcastic laughter followed, with people mocking the emperor's so called generosity in the face of mothers eating their own children.

Voices grew sharper, criticizing the imperial court for never taking disaster relief seriously, only putting on a performance that forced the people to rebel, while others chimed in, saying that this was exactly how they themselves had once rebelled, only to be captured by Gao Family Village, sent to labor reform, and now finally living a good life.

Some even declared that the militia should move faster to capture all the Henan bandits and send them to labor reform, claiming that only then could there be peace under heaven.

Ma Shouying fell silent.

He turned to look at Zhu Cunji, who met his gaze with a relaxed chuckle and told him not to worry, explaining that they were talking about bandits who had committed genuine atrocities. He added that Ma Shouying's military discipline had always been strict, and that he had not done such things, so there was no reason to fear labor reform. After all, Dao Xuan Tianzun had allowed him to choose his own future path, which was already the greatest affirmation possible.

At that moment, the Saintess Gao Yiye began reporting the next item. She announced an interesting anecdote, saying that a week earlier, the Yellow Pole Military Academy had organized a unique military exercise, dividing students into Red and Blue teams for a mock battle.

The screen switched to footage from the exercise. Flat Rabbit, dressed in red, could be seen brandishing his sword and roaring for his men to charge and take Bai Mao's head, while a group of red uniformed students surged forward behind him, Zheng Gouzi among them. On the other side, Bai Mao, dressed in blue, stood beside an artillery unit and shouted for them to fire and blast Flat Rabbit's rabbit head to pieces.

The cannons did not actually fire, of course, but instead, massive bamboo tubes sprayed streams of blue dye across the field.

The image shifted again, showing Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi sitting dejectedly at the edge of the training ground, both covered head to toe in blue dye, their appearance so pitiful that it was almost comical.

Headmaster Sun Chuanting announced loudly that the Blue Team had won the exercise.

Gao Yiye's narration followed, explaining that Bai Mao had taken advantage of artillery positions to secure a strategic edge, while Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi had attempted to organize a charge to seize those positions, only for it to end in clear failure.

A female reporter appeared on screen and asked Flat Rabbit what he had to say about the defeat.

Flat Rabbit complained loudly that he simply had no cavalry available, that their cavalry had been sent to support the grasslands, and that if he had even a single cavalry unit, he would have broken through Bai Mao's artillery positions and claimed victory without question.

Sun Chuanting immediately struck him on the head and scolded him for knowing he lacked cavalry and still charging artillery positions, asking what difference there was between that and a suicide charge.

Flat Rabbit puffed up his chest and declared that he was utterly fearless.

Sun Chuanting retorted that this was precisely why he had died and gotten Zheng Gouzi killed as well, before ordering him to run ten laps around the drill ground.

The final image showed Flat Rabbit's lone figure running laps under the open sky.

Zhu Cunji burst into laughter, mocking the foolish rabbit and remarking that the militia currently lacked excellent close combat cavalry, and that Flat Rabbit had chosen the tactic least suited to their forces.

The words were casual, almost throwaway.

Yet they struck Ma Shouying like a spark to dry grass.

His eyes lit up.

Lacking excellent close combat cavalry?

Hmm.

Chapter 1027: The New Recruits Arrive

The few days allotted for the tour passed more quickly than Ma Shouying had expected, as though time itself had decided to hurry him along toward a choice that had already been made long before he was consciously aware of it.

Early that morning, he boarded the so called long distance Solar Car in Xi'an, its smooth departure utterly lacking the jolting discomfort he had grown accustomed to in military wagons, and after most of the day had slipped by amid quiet travel and reflection, he finally returned to the Tianzhu Mountain barracks. The moment his boots touched familiar ground, he summoned his subordinates without delay, stood before them with a straight back and steady gaze, and announced in a voice that carried neither hesitation nor drama, yet struck with undeniable weight.

"I have decided to join the Dao Xuan Tianzun Daoist Sect's militia. From today onward, I will no longer use the name Lao Huihui. My name is Ma Shouying."

The men before him stirred slightly, though none dared interrupt.

"Those who are willing to continue following me may come with me," Ma Shouying continued, his tone firm yet unforced. "Those who are weary of war and wish to return to civilian life may leave here and now. I will not compel anyone, nor will I hold it against you."

Once his words settled, the choice was made with surprising clarity. Five hundred men stepped forward, bowed, and laid down their arms, choosing a return to ordinary life. The remaining two thousand five

hundred border army cavalry, however, stood fast, their posture unyielding, choosing to follow Ma Shouying into a new future without the slightest wavering.

After a careful assessment conducted by Chief Instructor Cheng Xu, the Gao Family Village Militia officially gained a new formation, one that had been sorely lacking until now.

The Iron Cavalry Battalion.

Ma Shouying was appointed its battalion commander, entrusted with the responsibility of close quarters combat, breakthrough assaults, and decisive spearhead operations against enemy lines. This unit was specifically intended to compensate for the militia's long standing weakness in close combat capability, as well as its insufficient pursuit and flanking power once an enemy formation began to collapse.

Huangpu Military Academy.

On the parade ground, Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi were running laps.

Early that very morning, Flat Rabbit had once again earned himself punishment, and the reason this time was impressive even by his own questionable standards. In the dead of night, he had led several newly enrolled junior students in what he proudly called a practical exercise, namely a night raid on the enemy camp.

The only problem was that the chosen target of this daring operation turned out to be the small building where Headmaster Sun Chuanting himself resided.

The junior students, fresh to the academy and utterly unfamiliar with its layout, had no idea whose residence it was. Fueled by youthful enthusiasm and Flat Rabbit's unshakable confidence, they charged in without hesitation and surrounded the building as though storming a genuine enemy stronghold.

Fortunately for all involved, Sun Chuanting was equally accomplished in both civil and military pursuits, and even when awakened by chaos in the middle of the night, he remained calm and decisive. Grabbing a wooden stick, he stepped outside and promptly thrashed the so called assassins until their cries of pain echoed across the courtyard.

Only after the lights were lit did both sides finally realize exactly who they had been attacking.

Thus, Flat Rabbit was punished.

Zheng Gouzi, having passionately pleaded on his behalf, was sentenced to run alongside him.

Sun Chuanting's exact words had been delivered with icy clarity. "Gouzi, since you enjoy helping your rabbit brother so much, when he runs laps, you will help him run as well."

And so, the rabbit and the dog were now sweating side by side, their brotherhood reinforced through shared suffering.

As they ran, panting and wiping sweat from their brows, the two of them noticed a group entering the academy gates. These men were tall and broad shouldered, each leading a warhorse, their presence steady and imposing, yet their eyes carried the unmistakable uncertainty of newcomers unsure of where to go.

Flat Rabbit's eyes immediately lit up.

He jogged over, still technically running laps, and cheerfully called out, "Oh? New recruits, are we?"

The man at the front of the group was no longer young, yet his demeanor was courteous and composed. He cupped his fist toward Flat Rabbit and spoke respectfully. "I recognize you. I saw you on Gaojia News a few days ago. Red Team Leader, Flat Rabbit."

Flat Rabbit laughed heartily, clearly pleased. "That's right. That would be your humble rabbit lord. And you are?"

"I am Ma Shouying," the man replied. "I have only recently joined the militia. I am unfamiliar with its new weapons and discipline, so I have come to Huangpu Military Academy for short term training. Everyone behind me is the same."

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter. "So you're new recruits. Excellent, excellent. Your rabbit lord here loves helping newcomers and standing up for justice. If you don't understand anything, just ask me."

Ma Shouying reached back and patted the warhorse beside him. "I saw it on the broadcast. Rabbit lord said that if he had a cavalry unit, he would not fear artillery. I am skilled in horsemanship, and from today onward, I am willing to serve as your vanguard, charging into battle to help you seize enemy artillery positions."

Flat Rabbit laughed so hard he nearly tripped over his own feet. "Excellent. Truly excellent. Next exercise, the cavalry unit will be counting on you. We will go and chop off White Mao's head."

From a corner of the training ground came a cold, mocking voice. "Stop boasting. Next time, I will be the one chopping off your rabbit head."

Laughter immediately rippled across the field.

Such loud and unrestrained exchanges were commonplace within the military academy, and the students had long since grown accustomed to them.

Ma Shouying surveyed his surroundings quietly, a sense of unexpected comfort rising in his chest. This truly was a good place. These were all soldiers, yet none carried the unruly air of bandits or mercenaries. Instead, they radiated a disciplined ease, a confidence that put others at rest. With the exception of the rabbit lord, of course.

Flat Rabbit pointed toward a building behind the academy. "New students go over there to report. I'll finish this good deed properly and take you myself."

He jogged the entire way, leading Ma Shouying straight toward Sun Chuanting's small building.

This was the very building Flat Rabbit had targeted in last night's night raid, and numerous footprints still marred its walls from failed climbing attempts, giving the structure a strangely comical appearance.

Ma Shouying frowned slightly as he studied the marks, wondering how anyone could have even managed to leave footprints so high up the wall.

Before he could ponder it further, the door opened, and Sun Chuanting stepped out.

He had already received notice through the Dao Xuan Tianzun Embroidery Statue, and the moment his eyes fell upon Ma Shouying, they brightened noticeably.

Ma Shouying also examined the man before him with care.

Sun Chuanting spoke without preamble. "As for horsemanship, I have little to teach you. Your training here will focus on firearms and coordinated operations."

Ma Shouying cupped his fist. "I will follow the Headmaster's instruction."

"Hey, hey," Flat Rabbit suddenly interjected, still jogging in place. "Headmaster Sun, he's cavalry. You're not going to teach him mounted tactics, but firearms instead? That's completely wrong. Our militia lacks excellent close combat cavalry, not firearm units."

"You have not finished your punishment," Sun Chuanting replied flatly. "Why do you still have time to interrupt?"

"I'm still running," Flat Rabbit protested.

Sun Chuanting was momentarily speechless.

Flat Rabbit continued eagerly. "Teach them cavalry tactics. Let them become elite cavalry. Don't mislead perfectly good horsemen."

Sun Chuanting snorted. "What do you know? These men do not need me to teach them that."

"Nonsense," Flat Rabbit scoffed. "They're still greenhorns."

Sun Chuanting gave a crooked smile and turned to Ma Shouying. "Greenhorns, give your senior here a small demonstration, so he does not truly believe you are inexperienced. There is no need to be overly modest."

Ma Shouying cupped his fist, then mounted his horse in a single smooth motion, as effortless as flowing water.

Behind him, every single officer, all centurions or above, mounted simultaneously, their movements precise and synchronized.

Flat Rabbit froze.

Ma Shouying raised his hand. "Brothers, let us show the Headmaster what we can do."

A unified roar answered him.

The cavalry surged forward as one, hooves pounding the ground like rolling thunder. At the forefront, Ma Shouying executed a flawless stirrup hide, his body vanishing beneath his horse's belly. The dozen men behind him mirrored the motion perfectly, hanging inverted beneath their mounts as if sharing a single mind.

In the next instant, they flipped upright, Kaiyuan bows already in hand. With a twist of their bodies, arrows were loosed in unison, slicing through the air before striking the ground in front of Flat Rabbit in a perfect circle, each impact precise and evenly spaced.

Flat Rabbit stood there, mouth open, words utterly failing him.

Chapter 1028: Nanhuifangcheng

Flat Rabbit stared at the scene before him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open, before finally blurting out in disbelief, "What the hell!"

Zheng Gouzi was no better off, clutching his own head as if afraid it might fall off. "Oh my goodness..."

All around them, the students on the training ground stood frozen in place, their gazes locked onto the cavalymen before them, admiration flooding their faces so completely that for a moment, not a single person could speak.

Sun Chuanting slowly turned his head toward Flat Rabbit, his expression calm yet unmistakably sharp. "Well," he said, "do you still think they are greenhorns?"

If it had been anyone else, being slapped in the face like this, in front of so many people no less, would have been unbearable. Most would have flushed red with embarrassment, wished desperately for the ground to split open beneath their feet, and sunk into it never to be seen again.

But Flat Rabbit was never most people.

Instead of shame, anger, or jealousy, his face lit up as if he had just been given a priceless gift. He clapped his hands together and laughed loudly, his voice ringing across the training ground. "So they're this good? Hahahaha, excellent, truly excellent. Brother Ma, you must join my Red Team. Next exercise, you fight with me. Hahahaha. This time, Bai Mao's cat head is definitely coming off."

His reaction caught Ma Shouying completely off guard.

Not only did this man show no trace of embarrassment after being proven wrong so publicly, he was not even the slightest bit resentful. Instead, he seemed genuinely delighted by their strength, as if it were his own success.

Ma Shouying felt something shift quietly in his heart.

He had initially regarded Flat Rabbit as little more than a loud mouthed clown, all noise and no substance, but now he suddenly felt that this was a man with an unusually broad spirit, the sort of person who could truly be called a comrade.

A man worth befriending.

Elsewhere.

"Report!"

A messenger rushed before Lu Xiangheng and knelt on one knee. "Governor General, military intelligence."

Lu Xiangheng lifted his gaze. "Speak."

"Lao Huihui's forces disappeared after retreating westward into the forests of Pingding Mountain," the messenger reported. "After entering the mountain ridges, they vanished completely. We have found no trace of them."

Lu Xiangheng frowned slightly. "West of Pingding Mountain lies Yunyang. I was stationed there in the past. What reports have come from the garrisons in that area?"

"None," the messenger replied. "No garrison has reported seeing the bandit army pass through."

This answer left Lu Xiangheng puzzled.

During his earlier involvement in Yunyang's administration, he had become fairly familiar with the local officials and military commanders. After a moment of careful thought, he spoke decisively. "Among the Yunyang garrisons, Shangnan County's defender, Luo Xi, is the most reliable and capable. If the bandit army had passed through Shangnan, there would be no way he would not have detected them. This means they could not have entered Shaanxi through Wuguan Pass."

He paused, then continued, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Given this, the bandit army must have slipped away by another route. There is a high probability that they have entered Sichuan."

His spirits lifted as he reached a conclusion. "Issue orders immediately. Have the Sichuan White Pole Soldiers redeploy to Kuizhou and guard against the bandit army entering Sichuan."

"Yes, sir."

The messenger departed at once.

Lu Xiangheng, however, did not relax. Instead, he continued pondering the situation, fingers tapping lightly against the table. "Since Lao Huihui has vanished, there is no longer any need to maintain our encirclement of Pingding Mountain."

He straightened. "Issue orders to all armies. We will now move to besiege Dabie Mountain. Chuang King and the Dashing General are still hiding there."

Thus, Lu Xiangheng divided his forces into multiple routes, sealing off the mountain passes around Dabie Mountain and tightening the noose around the remaining bandit army.

Meanwhile, far away from marching armies and strategic maps, the so called "three thousand five hundred taels of gold" granted by the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, finally arrived in the disaster stricken lands of Nanyang.

The Prefect of Nanyang held the disaster relief silver in his hand, weighing the three taels and five qian with a thoughtful expression. He shook his head lightly, then slipped it casually into his sleeve before stepping forward to address the gathered people.

"His Majesty, in his boundless mercy," he declared, "has exempted Nanyang Prefecture from this year's taxes. Such benevolence is rare. Should we not all express our gratitude?"

The people stared at him, their faces pale and hollow, yet they still forced smiles onto their lips and bowed in thanks.

Then, without a word, they returned to their homes, set up their cooking pots, and exchanged daughters with their neighbors, each family placing another household's child into the pot with numb, practiced motions, as though emotion itself had long since been burned away.

Just as one little girl was about to be lifted toward the boiling water, frantic shouts suddenly echoed from outside.

"Grain distribution. Grain distribution. The Great Benefactor Bai from Xiaolangdi has sent people to distribute grain. Everyone, come out and receive your share."

The sound hit the village like thunder.

In an instant, despair shattered. People burst into tears, screaming and laughing all at once, rushing from house to house to reclaim their daughters, clinging to them as though afraid they might vanish again if released for even a moment.

Metropolis Shanghai, Nanhuifangcheng.

What had once been a dilapidated and forgotten coastal outpost had undergone a complete transformation. Rebuilt into a gleaming square fortress, it now bore a restored plaque from its most glorious past, officially reclaiming its old name.

Nanhuifangcheng.

Below the fortress walls, an enormous market sprawled outward, crowded and noisy, far more vibrant than any traditional market town.

All of this, naturally, was thanks to Gao Family Village.

Transport ships from Gao Family Village moved ceaselessly along the waterways, often arriving in massive fleets laden to the brim. They carried not only grain, but also high quality goods from Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, and beyond.

Most of these goods were ultimately bound for the islands, yet trading along the route was common, and as a result, the mouth of Nanhui rapidly developed into a massive commercial hub.

Jiangnan merchants, sharp nosed and quick witted, swarmed in like sharks scenting blood. They bought Gao Family Village's goods in bulk, then loaded their own wares onto the ships in return, including Jiangnan's famed silks and porcelain.

With each passing day, Nanhuifangcheng grew more prosperous.

Even Cui Weihua, the Military Preparations Commissioner of Suzhou and Songjiang, was drawn here by the activity. Given such a bustling hub, coastal defense was naturally critical, and so he simply took up residence within Nanhuifangcheng to oversee security and maintain order.

That afternoon, Gao Family Village's transport fleet was scheduled to arrive in half an hour.

Large groups of people had already gathered along the shore, sitting quietly and staring out to sea like Waiting for Husband Stones, patiently awaiting the ships that would carry them onward.

Cui Weihua strolled along the beach with several subordinates in tow when he noticed two men among the crowd. Their clothes were ragged, their faces thin and tinged with hunger, clearly people who had traveled a long way to reach this place.

He stopped and addressed them. "You two look as though you have come from far away."

Startled at being spoken to by an official, the two men hurriedly stood and bowed. "Reporting to my lord, we are from Suzhou. We walked here on foot. It took several days, and we are nearly exhausted."

"And yet you still came," Cui Weihua said. "You received news from that far away?"

The two exchanged awkward smiles. "Our family is poor, my lord. We are always searching for ways to survive. We heard from distant relatives that someone here is hiring laborers to work on an island, so we came to try our luck."

Cui Weihua hesitated, then could not help probing a little further. "What exactly is being built on that island?"

The two men shook their heads at once. "Our relative would not say. Whenever we ask, he only shakes his head and says the master pays him five qian of silver each month just to keep quiet. If he speaks even a word, he would lose his job and his livelihood. So nothing can be said about what happens on the island. Only that there is work."

Cui Weihua sighed inwardly. "Remarkable."

The secrecy was far tighter than he had imagined.

Just then, a shout rang out from Nanhuifangcheng's walls.

"Pirates. Pirates. It's Liu Xiang's flag. Liu Xiang is here."

Panic exploded across the beach.

The people who had been sitting calmly moments ago scrambled inland, while merchants hastily gathered their goods, the bustling market collapsing into chaos in the blink of an eye.

As Military Preparations Commissioner, Cui Weihua leapt to his feet and shouted, "Prepare for battle. Prepare for battle."

The alarm drums of Nanhuifangcheng thundered out, kong kong kong, their sound rolling across the coast.

Cui Weihua turned and hurried toward his ship.

However, the coastline here was shallow, unsuitable for large vessels to dock, and ordinary seagoing ships could not approach the shore without running aground. Only Gao Family Village's river sea vessels could manage it.

Thus, Cui Weihua's Cangshan ship lay anchored far out at sea.

To reach it, he would first have to take a smaller boat.

Chapter 1029: A World Where Only Pirates Get Hurt

By the time Cui Weihua finished boarding his flagship, the Cangshan, the pirate fleet was already pressing in from the horizon, their dark silhouettes spreading across the sea like a creeping stain that made the water itself seem uneasy.

There were dozens of ships, large and small, their numbers so overwhelming that it was difficult to count them at a glance. The largest among them were full sized junks, comparable in scale to Cui Weihua's own flagship, while the smallest were little more than reinforced fishing boats, barely larger than rowboats, yet no less dangerous when packed with desperate men and sharp steel.

Cui Weihua commanded four hundred Zhejiang soldiers and one thousand three hundred sailors, with a formal fleet consisting of seven Cangshan class ships, thirty sand ships, five paddle boats, and sixteen tiger boats. Under normal circumstances, this would have been a respectable force.

Unfortunately, his true main strength was stationed far away on Chongming Island.

What he had at hand now, counting every usable vessel, barely amounted to a dozen ships, not even half the number of Liu Xiang's pirate fleet.

As Cui Weihua took in the scene before him, his heart sank heavily.

Yet even as the pressure threatened to crush his chest, he knew he had no choice but to fight.

If he, the Military Preparations Commissioner of Suzhou and Songjiang, were to flee before pirates, then what dignity would remain to him, and what example would that set for the soldiers under his command? How could he ever face anyone again while bearing the name Weihua, a name that meant protecting China?

Clenching his teeth, he drew in a deep breath and roared, "Engage. All forces, engage Liu Xiang's pirates."

The shout had barely left his mouth when, to his utter disbelief, two of his own ships immediately turned their bows away and fled in the opposite direction, sails snapping as they ran for their lives.

"Damn it," Cui Weihua cursed under his breath.

There was nothing to be done. Such was the quality of Ming naval troops in these troubled times, a reality so bitter that one could only laugh at it in despair.

The remaining ships, left with no other option, pressed forward and entered the fray.

Both sides possessed cannons, though not many, usually only two or three per flagship, and their first exchanges were little more than symbolic gestures. A few thunderous booms echoed across the water, smoke drifting lazily, the shots doing little more than announce that a battle had begun.

Soon after, the ships closed in, hulls grinding and ropes flying, and the muskets began firing in earnest.

Both sides used old smoothbore firearms, weapons that were notoriously inaccurate unless fired in tight formation. Once the bullets left the barrel, they flew wildly, making them almost useless beyond close range. At a distance, they served more to frighten than to kill.

And close range inevitably meant boarding actions.

As soon as blades were drawn and grappling hooks flew, the imperial navy quickly fell into a disadvantage.

Liu Xiang's pirates howled like beasts as they swarmed onto the government ships, leaping across planks and ropes with savage glee. Steel flashed in chaotic arcs, and Ming soldiers were cut down one after another, their bodies collapsing onto blood slick decks.

With a deafening crash, a pirate junk slammed against Cui Weihua's Cangshan, the two ships locking together. A mass of pirates surged across, blades swinging, their eyes red with excitement as they plunged into brutal hand to hand combat.

Cui Weihua felt his heart sink completely.

He knew, with painful clarity, that they were finished.

On the shore, the common folk watched in terror, their voices trembling as they whispered among themselves, "The imperial soldiers cannot hold them. Is our Nanhui Market about to be looted?"

Just as despair threatened to swallow everything, an unexpected force burst onto the scene.

The harbor pilots stationed by Gao Family Village in Nanhui Market rushed out from their houses, led by Dao Ke, a former pirate now undergoing labor reform. These men were all ex pirates, hardened by years at sea, and though they wore the marks of reform, their fighting spirit remained intact.

They launched several small boats and paddled furiously toward the center of the battle, their shouts carrying across the water.

"Let's earn some merit," one of them yelled. "If we do well, our labor reform term might get shortened."

"Just don't get yourself killed," another shouted back.

"If you're afraid of death, why were you a pirate in the first place?"

"We aren't pirates anymore."

"Nonsense," someone laughed. "We still are. We're labor reform pirates now, but pirates all the same."

To everyone's astonishment, their combat strength far exceeded that of the imperial soldiers.

They swarmed toward the Cangshan, flung grappling hooks with practiced ease, and climbed aboard in moments. The instant their feet touched the deck, they threw themselves into the fight, joining Cui Weihua's men against Liu Xiang's pirates as though they had been comrades for years.

On the deck, steel clashed against steel, sparks flying amid a storm of shouts and curses.

With this unexpected reinforcement, Cui Weihua's flagship somehow held its ground.

He had, quite literally, clawed his way back from the brink of death.

At that very moment, a roar of cheers erupted from the shore.

From the northern horizon, Gao Family Village's river sea vessels appeared, their silhouettes unmistakable. These strange ships, moving without sails or oars yet cutting through the water at incredible speed, were recognized instantly by everyone present.

The moment they arrived, morale surged across the battlefield.

The imperial soldiers straightened their backs, the labor reform pirates howled with renewed vigor, and even the common folk on shore felt hope ignite in their chests.

Even Liu Xiang's pirates, upon seeing these vessels, grew excited rather than fearful.

"Hahaha," they shouted. "The real targets are here. Perfect. These are the ones we want to fight."

Dozens of pirate ships immediately abandoned the imperial navy, which they now deemed worthless, and turned their bows toward Gao Family Village's vessels.

It was only then that they realized their mistake.

Circular gun ports snapped open along the hulls of the river sea vessels, and thick barrels of large stainless steel cannons extended outward, cold and merciless.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

A single volley sent shockwaves across the sea, leaving the pirates reeling, their formation shattered in an instant.

What followed was Gao Family Village's signature tactic.

Muskets roared in disciplined succession, and hand grenades arced through the air, exploding amid the pirate decks in clouds of fire and smoke. Within moments, the pirates broke completely, abandoning several ships and crews behind as prisoners, all destined to join the ranks of the labor reform army. The rest fled in panic toward the open sea, never daring to look back.

When the battle finally ended, Gao Family Village's ships glided calmly toward the shore of Nanhui Market.

Cui Weihua's battered Cangshan also pulled alongside, and he shouted across the water, "What exactly is going on with these Liu Xiang pirates?"

From one of Gao Family Village's ships, a young man emerged, a short term trainee from the Yellow Pole Military Academy. From a distance, he cupped his fist respectfully. "The Liu Xiang pirate syndicate had a minor disagreement with us," he said. "This was likely their attempt at retaliation."

Cui Weihua felt a headache coming on.

The last time Gao Family Village's grand fleet passed Chongming Island, he had already suspected they were heading out to rough someone up in the Southeast Seas. He never imagined they would provoke Liu Xiang himself. If Liu Xiang kept attacking this area when Gao Family Village's ships were absent, how was he supposed to defend it with the pitiful forces at his disposal?

As if sensing his thoughts, the trainee continued, "Master Cui, there is no need to worry. Since Liu Xiang has caused trouble here, we will devise appropriate defensive measures. Dedicated warships will soon be dispatched to patrol these waters."

Only then did Cui Weihua finally breathe a little easier.

With the immediate danger gone, he had the clarity to reflect on his own situation.

Weak. Far too weak.

As the Military Preparations Commissioner, it was his responsibility to ensure his troops were capable, yet his naval forces were so feeble that he had survived only by relying on others.

"Master Cui," the trainee added, "during the battle, we captured eight of Liu Xiang's ships, one large junk and seven smaller vessels. We would like to present all of them to you, so your strength here can be enhanced."

Cui Weihua's eyes widened in delight.

More ships.

Gao Family Village had gifted him six pirate vessels last time, and now another eight had fallen into his hands just like that.

Yet even as joy surged, a strange bitterness followed close behind.

I am the Military Preparations Commissioner of Suzhou and Songjiang, he thought, and yet my entire improvement depends on others handing it to me on a platter. Something about this feels deeply wrong.

Unable to restrain himself, he asked again, "Tell me honestly, what exactly are you doing on that island? You provoke pirates, hire workers, stir up half the coast, yet not a single laborer will speak."

The trainee laughed softly. "Master Cui, nothing much is happening there. The Emperor has forbidden us from discussing it, so it may be best that you do not ask further. In short, as you can see, we fight

pirates and even give you ships. We are helping you. If everything were laid bare, it might become inconvenient for us to continue doing so."

Cui Weihua immediately closed his mouth.

Right, he admitted to himself. When you take favors from others, it is best to keep quiet.

As Gao Family Village's ships docked, unloading and loading began once more. Merchants flooded back like water after a tide, carrying goods in and out, smiles blooming on every face.

Among the crowd, the two impoverished men from Suzhou finally saw their chance. They merged into the flow of people, climbed onto a cargo ship, and sat down obediently, ready to travel to the island and begin work.

Everything seemed orderly, peaceful, and almost idyllic.

It was, truly, a world where only pirates got hurt.

Chapter 1030: It's Too Heavy

A river-sea vessel from Gao Family Village arrived steadily at Zhoushan, its hull riding low with the weight of human cargo rather than grain or steel.

In the past, these ships mostly carried workers back and forth between the island and the mainland, a constant tide of labor arriving at dawn and departing at dusk. But times had changed. Many workers no longer bothered returning at all. They had put down roots on the island, settling permanently, as if afraid that once they left, this place might vanish like a good dream at daybreak.

They had already moved their parents, wives, children, and even distant relatives over from the mainland, arranging them into the employee dormitories. Compared to the collapsing mud houses and famine-stricken villages they came from, the dormitories were nothing short of paradise. There was food, steady work, order, and most importantly, dignity.

Relatives brought in friends. Friends brought in cousins. Word spread quietly, stubbornly, like grass pushing through cracks in stone.

Before long, there was no reason to return to the mainland at all. Supplies were abundant, daily life was stable, and there were no corrupt officials leaning over your shoulder, no sudden levies, no arbitrary beatings. For common folk who had known only hunger and fear, the island felt unreal.

This particular voyage, however, carried mostly newcomers.

Among them were two impoverished brothers from Suzhou.

They stood shoulder to shoulder on the deck, hands clenched tight in their sleeves, eyes fixed on the horizon. Though they had heard glowing stories from distant relatives who had already come here, stories of full bellies and honest pay, stepping into the unknown still stirred unease in their chests.

It felt like stepping into a strange restaurant for the first time, pretending confidence while secretly wondering whether you were about to make a terrible mistake.

Before the ship reached its destination, the pilot strode to the bow and raised his voice, sharp enough to cut through the sea wind.

"We're almost there. Listen carefully," he said, sweeping his gaze across the gathered workers. "What's being built on this island is top secret. Truly top secret."

He paused, letting the words sink in.

"Do you know what that means?" he continued. "It means that if you let even a single word slip, stones will be tied to your feet, and you'll be thrown into the sea."

A ripple of fear ran through the crowd. Several people instinctively swallowed.

"If you know yourself," the pilot said coldly, "if you like gossiping, bragging, running your mouth about everything you see, then this place is not for you. There's a small island ahead. You can get off there and wait for the next ship back to the mainland."

Silence followed.

No one moved.

After coming this far, after clinging to hope through hunger and exhaustion, who would willingly turn back?

The workers could only nod, each silently swearing to weld their mouths shut.

The ship continued forward.

When it finally entered Zhoushan's Dinghai Port, the deck erupted into stunned murmurs.

Before they had even docked, the workers were struck dumb by the sight ahead.

A colossal port stretched along the coastline, so vast that it swallowed the horizon. Wooden scaffolding covered nearly the entire shore, layer upon layer, rising like a forest of timber. The scale alone made one's scalp tingle.

Dozens upon dozens of massive ships lay anchored there, each one stretching dozens of meters in length. Even from afar, their silhouettes radiated menace.

These were warships.

On their decks, marines trained relentlessly, blades flashing, bodies colliding, shouts echoing across the water. Even at this distance, the intensity of their drills made the air feel tight.

Suddenly, a gigantic vessel thundered past the workers' ship.

A commanding voice rang out from its deck.

"Port thirty degrees!"

"All hands, prepare for battle!"

"Gunports, fully open!"

At the barked orders, the marines moved like a single organism, leaping into position with terrifying efficiency.

The realization struck the workers all at once.

This was a military port.

No wonder secrecy was enforced so brutally.

Had the imperial court not long ago abandoned its overseas islands? Why, then, was it openly building such a massive naval base here, training troops so aggressively, constructing ships that looked nothing like the old wooden junks of legend?

Something fundamental had changed.

No one dared ask questions.

They docked in silence and disembarked carefully, as if afraid to breathe too loudly.

They were led into a newly constructed building that still smelled of fresh paint and raw timber. Inside, they were subjected to a long, exhaustive lecture of rules, warnings, and prohibitions. By the time it ended, most heads were spinning.

Finally, the foreman slammed his palm against a table and raised his voice.

"As long as you follow regulations and work honestly, you will earn four taels of silver per month," he declared. "Skilled workers earn more."

For a heartbeat, the room froze.

Then cheers exploded.

Four taels. Real silver. Steady pay.

For people who had lived hand to mouth, it sounded almost obscene.

Assignments were handed out soon after.

The two brothers from Suzhou were sent to the shipyard.

They followed their foreman east along the beach, walking until their legs grew sore. Ahead, a sentry post came into view, manned by heavily armed soldiers whose expressions were as hard as stone.

After a strict inspection, they were allowed through.

Only then did they enter the shipyard.

The moment they stepped inside the production workshop, both brothers stopped dead in their tracks.

Before them rose the skeletal frame of a ship, but not one made of wood.

Steel.

An immense framework of iron loomed overhead, cold and merciless. The keel itself was solid iron, a monstrous spine that looked more suited for a fortress than a vessel.

This was no metaphorical "steel muscles and iron bones."

It was literal.

Workers wearing Yellow Hats swarmed across the structure, installing massive iron plates under the precise commands of Blue Hat foremen. The clang of metal rang endlessly, hammer strikes echoing like thunder trapped indoors.

One brother whispered, barely daring to speak. "A ship... made of iron? Can that really float?"

A Blue Hat barked at them. "Newcomers, over here. Put on your hats."

They were handed Yellow Hats and pulled into the workflow.

"You're new," the Blue Hat said. "So you'll be lifting steel plates. Those plates come from the armored workshop. You move them to the hull and hand them to the assembly crew. Understood?"

"Understood," the brothers answered quickly.

They joined several other laborers, hoisting an enormous steel plate onto a cart. It took all their strength just to move it beneath the hull. Steel cables were secured, pulleys creaked, and at shouted commands from above, the plate rose slowly into the air.

The assembly workers guided it carefully, aligning it against the ship's frame.

Then came the rivets.

Heavy, brutal rivets were hammered in with bone-shaking force, each impact ringing through the brothers' chests.

They stared in disbelief.

"It's iron, piece by piece," one muttered. "Won't water seep through the seams?"

The Blue Hat snorted. "That's not for you to worry about. Learn slowly. Or don't. If you never understand, you'll just stay porters forever."

Chastened, the brothers returned to work.

While they labored, a procession entered the workshop.

At its head walked a young master wearing a White Hat, refined and scholarly. Behind him trailed several Blue Hat foremen, their usual authority softened into visible respect.

The brothers finally understood.

This was the real master of this place.

The man was Bai Gongzi.

He frowned deeply, eyes locked on the schematics in his hands.

"No matter how many times I recalculate," he said slowly, "the result never changes. This ship is simply too heavy."

His fingers tightened on the papers.

"The steam engine, the cannons, the coal, the steel hull. Every component piles weight upon weight. The displacement is already enormous."

He exhaled, frustration seeping into his voice.

"With this much mass, the payload capacity will be severely limited."

Bai Gongzi sighed.

"Wooden warships carrying five hundred soldiers made sense in the age of sails," he said. "But for steam-powered ironclads, that logic no longer applies."

He looked up at the towering hull.

"From now on, these ships can only carry a minimal number of soldiers."

The steel frame loomed silently above him, heavy beyond imagination.