

## Great Ming 1041

### Chapter 1041: I Have the Power to Turn the Tide

Gao Yingxiang said, "Stop arguing. I already understand what I need to do."

Everyone was baffled. When did it become his turn to make the decision?

In that very instant, Gao Yingxiang suddenly sprang up from his stretcher. Though he was gravely wounded, he still forced out enough strength to move. No one anticipated such a sudden action. His movements were lightning-fast. The moment he stood, he vaulted over the railing, tumbling toward the outside of the watchtower's balcony.

By the time everyone reacted, he was already hanging from the outside of the railing.

He was critically injured and severely weakened. That single vault had drained the last of his strength. He was left gasping for breath, his grip trembling.

Yet his spirit was far more vibrant than before, even carrying a trace of excitement.

"Friends," Gao Yingxiang declared, "my hands are stained with blood. I don't know how many innocent lives I have harmed, how many children like Gao Sanwa have suffered because of me. My crimes deserve a thousand deaths. No one should plead for me. I have never once done a single good deed for the people of Gao Family Village."

Everyone was momentarily speechless.

"Uncle, don't hang outside the railing and talk. Climb back over and speak properly," Gao Yiye cried out.

"Brother Yingxiang, no... please don't," Gao San Niang pleaded, her voice filled with despair.

Gao Yingxiang said, "After I die, take my head to the imperial court and claim credit. You should receive a substantial reward. That will be the last thing I can do for the village."

With that, Gao Yingxiang released his grip.

Headfirst, he plunged downward.

At that very moment, Li Daoxuan had time to reach out and catch him.

But he did not.

Adults, taking responsibility for their actions—that was something Li Daoxuan respected.

Gao Yingxiang's head struck the ground first with a dull, sickening thud. Then his body followed. He was gone.

The original forty-two villagers of Gao Family Village rushed down from the third floor, frantically gathering in a circle around his body. Soon, Gao Yiye's loud sobs echoed through the area. The Old Village Chief let out a long, heavy sigh. Then Gao San Niang also began to weep, even more fiercely than Gao Yiye.

For some reason, a song began to play softly in Li Daoxuan's mind.

There were old mothers.

There were loved ones.

There was love unto death.

There was the bitterness of parting.

Li Daoxuan suddenly noticed a speck of light float up from Gao Yingxiang's body and merge into the box.

Then, the box's Salvation Index actually increased by two points.

"Huh? This can also increase the Salvation Index?" Li Daoxuan murmured.

Although his life was not saved, his soul was.

The weight of a soul was sometimes greater than life itself.

Li Daoxuan patted the box gently, momentarily at a loss for words.

July, Ninth Year of Chongzhen

Imperial Study, Capital City

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, was poring over memorials, his expression grim.

"The Manchu general Ajige has divided his forces into three routes, entering Xifeng Pass and Dushikou. Censor-Inspector Wang Zhaokun resisted in battle but was defeated and killed. Our forces have retreated to defend Changping, and the Manchus are once again invading Juyong and the northern road of Changping."

As he read, Zhu Youjian's mood plummeted as if he were on a free-fall tower ride.

"Where is Lu Xiangheng?" Zhu Youjian demanded, slamming his hand on the table. "Did I not summon Lu Xiangheng to the capital as reinforcement?"

Cao Huachun stepped forward. "Supreme Commander Lu is still en route. From Henan to the capital, it is a journey of a thousand li. Merely traveling on foot would take a long time. Not to mention he still needs to organize his troops and prepare provisions and weapons."

He paused before continuing, "And after Lu Xiangheng left, the bandit groups in Henan have started causing trouble again. They have divided into three forces. Chuǎng Wang is entering Shaanxi. The Dashing General is attacking Kaifeng. The West Camp Eight Great Kings are heading toward Sichuan."

Zhu Youjian was utterly frustrated. "What is to be done? The Manchus beyond the pass frequently cause trouble. The rebels seize the opportunity to stir up unrest. This is truly..."

He wanted to say that he was ignoring the rear while focusing on the front, but felt it was too crude, so he swallowed the words.

Governing the realm was so difficult.

Zhu Youjian had taken the throne unexpectedly and had never received the rigorous training in imperial governance from childhood. Only after personally taking charge of this vast empire did he realize it was already teetering on the brink, and managing it was incredibly, incredibly difficult.

Just then, a young eunuch scurried in from outside, his face beaming with joy.

"Your Majesty, good news! Splendid news!"

Zhu Youjian scoffed. "Given the current situation, what possible good news could there be?"

The young eunuch quickly declared, "Chuǎng Wang, the supreme leader of the world's rebels, was ambushed by Sun Chuanting's militia and the Tongguan garrison forces while leading his army into Shaanxi. Chuǎng Wang was struck in a vital spot by a firearm and executed!"

"What?!"

Zhu Youjian instantly shot to his feet, his mood soaring.

"Is Chuǎng Wang truly dead?"

The young eunuch affirmed, "Truly! The Tongguan garrison, the Governor of Shaanxi, and the Governor of Henan have all simultaneously submitted memorials reporting this. So many people would not dare to lie to Your Majesty."

Zhu Youjian burst into uproarious laughter.

"Hahahahaha! Hahahahaha!"

It was a rare occasion for him to be so overjoyed.

"Heaven aids me!" Zhu Youjian declared. "I can do this! Hahahaha! I truly can turn the tide! Hahahahaha! Who did you say killed Chuǎng Wang just now?"

The eunuch replied, "Sun Chuanting."

Zhu Youjian frowned slightly. "That name... I seem to have heard it somewhere before?"

Cao Huachun explained, "Your Majesty, the 'Memorial on the Enemy's Inherent Weaknesses' and the 'Memorial on the Standardization of Logistics and Transport' that you read last time were both written by Sun Chuanting. You had even intended to promote him and sent people to find him, but unfortunately, he disappeared."

Zhu Youjian's memory stirred. "Yes, that seems to be the case."

"This man truly possesses great talent," Zhu Youjian said. "My original intention to promote him was indeed correct. Even without an official post, he managed to slay Chuǎng Wang. He is truly a talent among talents!"

Cao Huachun responded, "It is not too late." He turned to the young eunuch. "Where is Sun Chuanting now?"

The eunuch reported, "Sun Chuanting is currently in Puzhou. It is said that he has established a military academy there, named the Yellow Pole Military Academy, where he teaches military strategy to young people and trains militias to defend against bandits."

Cao Huachun murmured, "As long as he can be found. Let us not have him vanish again like last time, when we sent people to search for him only for him to disappear."

Zhu Youjian nodded. He pondered for a few seconds before looking up again.

"The Governor of Shaanxi, Lian Guoshi, has been in office for nearly three years now, hasn't he?"

Cao Huachun confirmed, "Indeed. Lian Guoshi took office as Governor of Shaanxi in the sixth year of Chongzhen and has served for almost three years. During his tenure, his performance has been rather poor. Taxes have not been collected effectively, and his evaluations are bad."

Zhu Youjian made his decision. "Then reassign Lian Guoshi to another post and promote Sun Chuanting to Governor of Shaanxi."

"As Your Majesty commands!"

Cao Huachun immediately began grinding the ink.

Zhu Youjian took up his brush and wrote the imperial edict with bold strokes.

After finishing, he glanced left and right, admiring his calligraphy. No, it was not just that his writing was good. His improved mood simply made the characters look better.

Since Chuǎng Wang had been executed, the realm should soon be put in order, shouldn't it?

After all, I am a sagacious ruler capable of turning the tide and saving the Great Ming Dynasty from peril.

Hehehehe.

#### Chapter 1042: The Shanxi Army Arrives to Aid the Emperor

Just as the people of Gao Family Village were still handling the aftermath of Gao Yingxiang's death, Chen Yuanbo, the Magistrate of Daizhou and one of Gao Family Village's most outstanding first generation middle school graduates, was facing an extremely serious situation.

"Report!"

A militia scout rushed in, clasping his fists toward Chen Yuanbo.

"The vanguard of the Manchu invaders has already drawn close to Xuanfu and Datong."

Chen Yuanbo frowned. "I am not very familiar with military affairs. Didn't the Wushen Tribe lead a large number of Mongol tribes to attack the Eastern Mongol tribes? Under these circumstances, how did the Manchu manage to reach Xuanfu and Datong?"

The scout replied, "The Mongols are no match for the Manchu. As soon as the Manchu general Ajige led his troops out, the Wushen Tribe scattered like frightened birds and beasts. They deliberately kept their distance and avoided the main Manchu army."

Chen Yuanbo was startled. "Where is Zao Ying's Cavalry Battalion? Aren't they assisting the Mongols?"

Hearing this, the scout's expression turned strange. He lowered his voice.

"Instructor Zao is currently unable to go on campaign. She has been staying at home these past few days, resting due to pregnancy."

"What?" Chen Yuanbo was shocked. "Pregnant? What happened? I did not hear that she got married."

The scout coughed lightly and whispered, "It is said that on a dark and stormy night, after getting Zheng Daniu drunk... well... that is the general situation."

Chen Yuanbo fell silent for a moment and finally understood.

"The Mongols are too weak. Without our village's Armored Cavalry Battalion, they cannot face the Manchu head on. To stop the Manchu, we still have to rely on ourselves. What is the current situation of the border army at Xuanfu and Datong?"

The scout answered, "The Xuan Da border army is currently entirely under the command of Regional Commander Wang Pu of Datong. Wang Pu is quite spirited and wants to fight, but he does not have enough troops. It is impossible for him to stop one hundred thousand Manchu soldiers."

When Chen Yuanbo first took office as Magistrate of Daizhou, the Supreme Commander of Xuan Da had been Yang Sichang. Chen Yuanbo had once exchanged letters with Yang Sichang regarding the recruitment of miners.

However, not long after Yang Sichang took office, his father Yang He passed away, and Yang Sichang resigned to observe mourning. A year later, his mother also passed away, extending his mourning period. As a result, the position of Supreme Commander of Xuan Da remained vacant.

Therefore, the Xuan Da border army was currently only overseen by Regional Commander Wang Pu of Datong.

Chen Yuanbo said, "A few days ago, Dao Xuan Tianzun already ordered all Gao Family Village generals to return to their posts and be ready to receive orders at any time. This was precisely to deal with a situation like this. Immediately send this message back."

The scout acknowledged and quickly boarded a car headed for Taiyuan.

Soon after, San Shier, who had been assisting Wu Shen with administrative affairs in Taiyuan, received the news. San Shier did not understand warfare, but he was extremely skilled at deploying supplies. He immediately sent people to notify the various Gao Family Village generals and began preparing all necessary materials for battle.

Xuanfu, also known as Xuanzhen, was one of the Great Nine Border Garrisons of the Great Ming. It was originally under the jurisdiction of Supreme Commander Yang Sichang of Xuan Da. Now, however, it was overseen by Regional Commander Wang Pu of Datong.

Days earlier, Manchu invaders had breached the pass, and their forces had reached the northern district of Changping. The capital was shaken.

Changping was only about one hundred li from Xuanfu. Imperial requests for aid had long since reached Xuanfu.

But Wang Pu did not dare to move.

He had only five thousand troops on the books. Four tenths of them were ghost soldiers who drew pay but did not exist, leaving him with a true strength of only three thousand. Meanwhile, the Manchu this time commanded a massive army of one hundred thousand.

"Damn it, utterly damn it," Wang Pu paced back and forth. "If I go to help, it is a dead end. If I do not go, it is morally indefensible, and His Majesty will punish me. That is also a dead end. What should I do?"

Just as he was pacing anxiously, a soldier rushed in, clasping his fists.

"General, the Governor of Shanxi, Wu Shen, has sent imperial aid forces."

Wang Pu was overjoyed. "The Shanxi army is here? Quickly, I will go out to welcome them."

He ran to the city gate and saw an army standing outside Xuanfu's south gate. Their formations were neat and disciplined. A large banner with the character Wang was clearly displayed.

Wang Pu was somewhat familiar with Shanxi generals surnamed Wang. This should be Wang Xiaohua, the Garrison Commander of Pingyang. Standing beside him was a burly, full bearded general who looked extremely imposing. He was Wang Xiaohua's deputy.

This combination was quite well known, so Wang Pu did not think much of it at first.

However, he soon noticed that behind the troops led by Wang Xiaohua, there was another cavalry battalion.

More than two thousand cavalymen, all heavily armored and mounted on iron steeds, stood in neat ranks. Their military bearing was impeccable. They were clearly an elite force. Yet the general leading them did not fly any banner.

Wang Pu asked curiously, "Who is that?"

Bai Mao smiled and introduced him. "This gentleman's surname is Ma. His name is Ma Shouying. He is a military officer recently promoted by the Governor. His current rank is quite low and not worth mentioning."

Wang Pu lowered his voice. "General Wang, this Ma Shouying clearly looks extraordinary. I think he will rise very quickly. Should I prepare a calling card and try to befriend him?"

Bai Mao replied, "That is up to you."

Wang Pu hurried over to Ma Shouying.

"Greetings, brother. I can tell at a glance that you are a dragon among men. If you do not mind..."

Ma Shouying rolled his eyes. "I do mind."

Wang Pu froze on the spot.

A dignified Regional Commander was publicly snubbed. Wang Pu was furious inside.

However, when he saw the two thousand plus armored cavalry behind Ma Shouying, he swallowed his anger. These men did not look easy to provoke. Every one of them carried a fierce, bandit like aura. If he caused trouble, they would likely draw their blades without giving him any respect. He could even be accused of inciting a mutiny. If it were investigated afterward, he might lose his head.

Better to forget it.

Wang Pu returned to Bai Mao and whispered, "This man does not understand social conduct."

Bai Mao whispered back, "Never mind him. As long as he can fight, that is enough. Since we are here, let us move out and relieve Changping."

Wang Pu calculated the forces.

His own three thousand, nominally five thousand.

Bai Mao's three thousand, nominally five thousand.

Ma Shouying's two thousand plus, nominally four thousand.

Altogether, they nominally formed an army of twenty thousand.

This should be enough to harass and restrain the Manchu from the periphery.

Wang Pu was not someone who feared battle. He waved his hand.

"Move out. Attack."

The so called twenty thousand strong army immediately set off for Changping.

When they arrived, they discovered that Changping city had already fallen.

A Manchu army was roaming the outskirts, chasing and slaughtering villagers everywhere.

Wang Pu hesitated for a full ten seconds, trying to devise a battle plan.

At that moment, he saw Bai Mao issue an order. The Shanxi army under his command surged forward directly toward the enemy.

Wang Pu was shocked. "General Wang, the Manchu are fierce. We should not underestimate them. We should first consider our strategy carefully..."

Before he could finish, the battlefield was already filled with the sound of flintlock volleys and the explosions of hand grenades.

The Manchu soldiers were thrown into complete confusion in a very short time.

Then, Ma Shouying led his iron cavalry in a sudden charge.

The armored cavalry smashed into the Manchu ranks like a steel tide, instantly scattering them in disarray.

Wang Pu's mind went blank.

By the time he came back to his senses, the battlefield results were already clear.

They had cut down 1,104 Manchu soldiers.

They had captured 143 alive.

Chapter 1043: No Direct Assault

Wang Pu suddenly found himself credited with a tremendous military achievement for no clear reason. Looking at the more than one hundred captives and the thousand plus Manchu heads now under his command, he was completely dazed.

He quickly went to find Bai Mao and said, "Generals Wang and Ma, you achieved such a great victory the moment you arrived. I must immediately report this to the imperial court and request commendations for your accomplishments."

Bai Mao shook his head. "This was all thanks to your brilliant leadership, General Wang, which allowed us to decisively defeat the Qing forces. Neither of us dares to claim credit. These achievements should rightfully belong to you."

Wang Pu thought Bai Mao was subtly testing him and quickly waved his hands. "How could that be? No, no, this is clearly your achievement. I cannot take credit for it."

Bai Mao pressed on. "General Wang, you were the lead commander this time. You led us here, did you not?"

Wang Pu hesitated for a moment. "Well... yes, that is true."

Bai Mao continued, "When fighting a battle, the commanding general does not need to personally charge into combat. But the achievements of his subordinates are naturally attributed to him. Take Zhuge Liang setting Xinye ablaze as an example. Did Zhuge Liang personally go onto the battlefield to hack at enemies? Of course not. But the feats accomplished by his soldiers and the enemies they killed were all attributed to Zhuge Liang."

Wang Pu thought carefully. "That... actually makes sense."

Bai Mao said firmly, "This decisive defeat of the Qing forces is proof of your capable command, General Wang."

Wang Pu's face reddened slightly. He felt something was a little off, but with such a major achievement placed in front of him, if others insisted on giving him the credit, it would be foolish to refuse.

Wang Pu was not a foolish man.

He nodded and said, "Very well. Since you two brothers insist on attributing this credit to me, then it would be impolite to refuse. When I receive the rewards, I will certainly share a portion with both of you. My word is my bond."

Bai Mao laughed. "You are too kind."

Ma Shouying merely snorted coldly at the side and said nothing.

Wang Pu then said, "Now that we have defeated the Manchu western flank, we can consider retaking Changping City."

All three of them turned their gazes toward Changping City in the distance.

Changping City was a crucial strategic area protecting the capital. It had been upgraded to a prefectural city during the reign of the Zhengde Emperor. To better defend the capital, Changping City had been built tall and imposing, easy to defend and extremely difficult to attack.

No one knew how the Qing forces had managed to capture it so easily.

The Manchu Eight Banners soldiers, who had been defeated earlier by the Gao Family Village militia, had now retreated into the city and were guarding the walls. Qing-made cannons were mounted along the battlements.

Wang Pu took one look at the city walls and shook his head. "This is truly troublesome. It will be extremely difficult for us to assault these walls."

Ma Shouying also turned to Bai Mao and Wang Er. "Gentlemen, this city is not easy to attack. My cavalry will be useless in a siege."

Bai Mao said in a low voice, "If we bring out our cannons, the city walls will not be a problem."

Wang Er, however, shook his head. "Our Gao Family Village special artillery should not be used here."

Bai Mao was confused. "Why not?"

Wang Er lowered his voice. "The soldiers defending the city are not our Ming troops."

Bai Mao was startled. "Not Ming troops? Why does that mean we cannot use cannons?"

As soon as he finished speaking, he suddenly understood.

"Oh no. I see it now. There are many of our Ming civilians still inside the city. If we bombard the walls, the Qing forces will push the common people onto the battlements, lining them up as shields. They will show no mercy to our Ming people."

Wang Er nodded. "Exactly. It seems you have already figured it out."

This was the greatest difficulty when an enemy occupied a city belonging to one's own people.

The civilians inside were their own people, but the soldiers defending the city were from the enemy nation.

A reckless assault would only lead to the deaths of countless innocent civilians.

Bai Mao's face was filled with frustration. "In that case, even if we use flintlock rifles to suppress the walls, they will simply push civilians out as targets."

"Yes," Wang Er agreed. "We should not attack for now. In fact, we should withdraw further to avoid making the Qing forces feel threatened. We absolutely must not corner the Manchu soldiers in the city. Otherwise, they might burn the city, slaughter the population, and then open another gate to escape. At that point, we would be completely helpless."

Bai Mao was extremely unwilling, but he knew Wang Er was right.

Just then, Ma Shouying leaned closer and said in a low voice, "I have a plan that can save the civilians."

Wang Er's eyes lit up. "Please, speak."

Ma Shouying said, "After capturing a city, the Qing forces do not usually hold it for long. They kill those who resist, then march the remaining people back to Liaodong as slaves."

Wang Er raised his eyebrows. "Strike under cover of night?"

Ma Shouying chuckled softly. "Exactly. We will first retreat some distance and pretend to abandon the siege. When the Qing forces believe we have left, they will tie up the city's civilians, each with one leg bound, and send a small escort team to march them back to Liaodong. We will ambush that escort halfway and rescue the civilians."

Wang Er asked, "What if they use the civilians as hostages?"

Ma Shouying replied, "We will move with extreme speed. We will cut off their front and rear and kill the escort officers before they have time to give any orders. If the officers do not order the use of hostages, the ordinary soldiers will mostly not dare to act on their own. At most, a few clever soldiers may try to use human shields, but our losses can be greatly reduced."

Wang Er and Bai Mao exchanged glances and clenched their teeth.

"There will still be losses," Wang Er said, "but it is better than allowing mass slaughter of civilians. Let us do it."

With their plan decided, the three of them, dragging Wang Pu along, retreated toward the capital.

The Qing forces in the city, having been shaken by the earlier battle, were too frightened to come out and fight. Seeing the Ming army withdraw toward the capital, they mistakenly believed this powerful firearm unit was heading to defend Beijing, and they finally let out a sigh of relief.

While the Qing forces sent men to report to Ajige about the powerful Ming firearm unit, the soldiers inside the city, after confirming the Ming army's retreat, indeed tied up the civilians with ropes, binding one leg each, exactly as Ma Shouying had predicted.

They then dispatched five hundred men, opened the East Gate, and led the civilians northeast.

Their main force abandoned the city and continued searching for their next target to plunder.

Their movements were extremely cautious. To prevent the powerful firearm unit from faking a retreat and launching an ambush, the Qing forces spread their scouts far and wide, with many cavalry ranging dozens of li away.

This ensured that no enemy scout could monitor the movements of their main force.

However, what they did not know was that Gao Family Village's hot air balloon was drifting several li above the ground, observing everything through telescopes. No matter how widely the Qing scouts spread, they could not block the eyes watching from the sky.

A bamboo tube slid down from the hot air balloon.

The paper scroll inside quickly landed in Ma Shouying's hand.

Ma Shouying said firmly, "I will go rescue those civilians."

Wang Er grasped his hand. "I will go engage the main Manchu force."

Chapter 1044: Come On, Let's Go Home

Northeast of Changping City.

Ma Shouying spread out a perimeter map that had been hastily sketched by a scout from a hot air balloon not long ago.

The drawing was rough, more like a child's scribble.

Yet all the important locations were clearly marked.

He laid the map out so his key generals could see it.

"Look carefully. Our current position is here. The Qing forces escorting the people of Changping are here. They are bringing many civilians with them. Their feet are bound with ropes, so they are moving very slowly."

Ma Shouying continued,

"Therefore, by the time we move from here to here, they should have reached this spot."

He pressed his finger firmly on a point on the map.

His generals responded in unison,

"Understood."

Ma Shouying said,

"We are cavalry. Unlike infantry, we cannot quietly crawl through the grass to approach the enemy. When we charge, we will definitely be noticed by their scouts. So I need you to ride faster than their scouts."

"The moment their scouts spot us, everyone must ride at full speed," Ma Shouying said loudly. "We must arrive before their commanding officer, and arrive at the same time as their own scouts."

The generals replied,

"Yes, sir."

Ma Shouying asked,

"As for what to do after we charge in, I do not need to explain it, do I."

The generals shouted,

"Kill, kill, kill. Take out their leader as fast as possible. Do not give him a chance to use the civilians as human shields."

"Good," Ma Shouying said, waving his hand. "Attack."

Five hundred Qing soldiers, herding tens of thousands of Changping civilians, were moving northeast at a snail's pace.

The Qing commander was extremely cautious, since they were deep inside Ming territory.

Ming forces could ambush them at any moment, so he had spread his scouts wide and gave strict orders to report any disturbance immediately.

So far, the journey seemed safe.

Yanshou Town was just ahead. Once they passed Yanshou Town and crossed Mount Dahei, they would enter a relatively secure area, and these tens of thousands of Changping civilians would safely become Qing slaves.

Bringing back so many slaves at once would greatly increase Qing productivity.

He was indulging in this pleasant fantasy when suddenly a thunderous rumble of hooves erupted.

The Qing commander jumped in shock. He whipped his head around toward the sound and saw his own scouts galloping madly toward him, shouting as they rode,

"Enemy attack, enemy attack. Ming cavalry. They are too fast, too fast. I cannot shake them."

Seeing this, the Qing commander was completely stunned.

What was going on. The scouts arrived, and the enemy arrived at the same time.

Since when were Ming forces so fierce. How could their marching speed be so terrifying.

No, that was not the real problem. How did the enemy intercept them so accurately without being detected by their own scouts.

In that brief instant, the Qing commander's mind almost stopped working.

The leading Ming general nocked an arrow, drew his bow, and fired. The shot was extremely precise, striking the scout directly in the back. The scout fell from his horse.

In the next instant, the Ming cavalry were already upon them.

The Qing commander finally snapped back to his senses. He opened his mouth, wanting to loudly order his men to use the civilians as human shields, but it was already too late.

The Ming general who had fired the arrow was already right in front of him, his long spear raised.

The Qing commander's heart pounded wildly. He swallowed the order that was on the tip of his tongue and raised his own spear to block.

Clang.

Their spears collided. The clash was evenly matched as they rode past each other and turned their horses.

The Ming general suddenly withdrew his spear and drew a curved saber from his waist. This kind of curved blade was not standard for Han cavalry. It was a saber favored by Hui cavalry.

The blade shone like a crescent moon.

As they turned their horses, the curved saber swept backward in a powerful arc.

The Qing commander felt a sharp pain in his back. The tip of the blade had pierced him.

The Qing commander's final thoughts before falling from his horse were filled with shock. Where did such a terrifying Ming general come from. This was not an ordinary officer. He must be a top level border general. The Ming still had such capable border generals. Why had he never heard of him before.

The Ming general who cut him down was indeed Ma Shouying.

After killing the enemy commander, Ma Shouying did not hesitate at all. He continued charging wildly, like a blade cutting through the Qing ranks. With a long spear in his right hand and a curved saber in his left, he cut down everyone in his path.

He slaughtered them without mercy.

Behind him, the Hui cavalry surged forward, instantly separating the Qing soldiers from the civilians.

The fight quickly turned into two thousand five hundred cavalry against five hundred infantry. It was a completely one sided battle.

Hundreds of civilians watched in terror, trembling as they feared being caught in the chaos. They huddled together on the ground, doing their best not to attract the attention of either side.

After an unknown amount of time, the sounds of battle gradually faded.

Slowly and cautiously, the civilians raised their heads.

All they could see were Qing soldiers lying dead all over the ground, and a large group of strange cavalry holding curved sabers standing before them.

The civilians were filled with fear. These did not look like Ming soldiers. Where did these people come from. What did they want with us.

Ma Shouying let out a long breath and raised his curved saber.

With one slash, he cut the rope tied to one civilian's foot in two.

Ma Shouying wanted to say something comforting, but no words came out. He had only been with Gao Family Village for a short time and was not as skilled at dealing with civilians as the other generals. In this situation, he truly did not know what to say.

After a long pause, he snorted lightly and said in a blunt tone,

"Come on. Let's go home."

His subordinates quickly followed his example. They swung their sabers to cut the ropes on the civilians and then, copying their leader, said,

"Go home."

The civilians were confused at first, but then they finally understood. This group of people meant them no harm. They were just not very good with words.

Cheers finally erupted.

These tens of thousands of people had just experienced their city being breached, being captured, and being driven like livestock. Everyone had believed they were doomed, certain they would die far from home and never return, only to end as slaves in the north.

Yet they had been rescued so quickly.

Having survived such a disaster, some cried, and some laughed.

"We are going back to Changping."

"Can we really go back to Changping now. When we left, the Qing were still guarding it."

Ma Shouying replied,

"You can go back now. The Qing forces have withdrawn. Hurry home."

Chapter 1045: Zheng Zhihu Arrives

While the capital region was engulfed in war and chaos, Li Daoxuan himself was currently aboard the Wanli Sunshine.

At this moment, the sea was calm and peaceful. The Wanli Sunshine drifted gently across the waves, moving at its slowest speed.

The Water Specialized Dao Xuan Tianzun stood at the bow, breathing in the faintly salty sea air. A feeling of refreshment and joy filled his heart.

His true body was confined at home every day, trapped in the concrete jungle of the modern world. The oppressive atmosphere of the city was stifling. Being able to take a short journey at sea through his co-sensing avatar was a rare and pleasant release.

Li Daoxuan turned his head and glanced toward Wang Zheng, who stood nearby.

Wang Zheng was busy operating a large device. A chronometer.

Among Gao Family Village's three great scientific figures, Song Yingxing focused mainly on civilian technologies. His inventions were aimed at common people, and he dabbled in many different fields.

Bai Gongzi, on the other hand, specialized in steam engines. In recent years, nearly everything he developed revolved around steam-powered machinery.

Wang Zheng, however, excelled in all kinds of mechanical devices.

His works such as *Illustrated Explanations of New Mechanisms* and *Illustrated Explanations of Remarkable Western Machines* were centered on mechanical structures and engineering principles.

For this reason, Li Daoxuan had directly entrusted him with the blueprints for the most important navigation device, the chronometer, so that he could research and replicate it.

Wang Zheng did not disappoint.

He had successfully produced a functioning chronometer.

This voyage of the *Wanli Sunshine* was specifically meant to test the accuracy of his chronometer.

After adjusting the device for quite some time, Wang Zheng turned toward Li Daoxuan and said,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, according to my calculations, our current position is 122.44 degrees east longitude and 30.01 degrees north latitude. I wonder whether this is accurate."

Li Daoxuan glanced toward the west, where Mount Putuo was faintly visible on the distant horizon.

He immediately shifted his perspective outside the box, opened Baidu Maps, and used the coordinate tool to check the longitude and latitude of the sea east of Mount Putuo.

Perfect match.

Returning his awareness to the box, he smiled and nodded at Wang Zheng.

"The coordinates you reported are correct. The error is no more than five li."

On the vast ocean, an error within five li was extremely precise.

It was incomparably more accurate than the crude methods used by labor reform pirate navigators, who relied solely on observing the sun to determine their position.

Wang Zheng was overjoyed.

Since joining Gao Family Village, he had worked diligently for many years, yet he had never truly produced a groundbreaking invention. Watching Song Yingxing and Bai Gongzi repeatedly achieve great accomplishments and receive praise from Dao Xuan Tianzun had filled him with deep envy.

Now, at last, he had created something truly meaningful and made a real contribution.

Wang Zheng burst into loud laughter.

"It finally worked. Hahahahaha. May Dao Xuan Tianzun bless us. May all gods and buddhas bless us. Amitabha. Infinite blessings. Hallelujah. I finally succeeded. Now our ships can finally venture deep into the great ocean."

Li Daoxuan was also in an excellent mood.

Although Gao Family Village had already taken control of Zhoushan Island, they had never actively launched large scale attacks against Liu Xiang's pirates or Western pirates.

There were two main reasons.

First was manpower. Gao Family Village only had river sailors, not true sea sailors. Sending men who had only navigated the Yellow River and Yangtze River into the vast open ocean would be sending them to their deaths. That was an unacceptable risk.

Second was navigation. There was no reliable method for long distance sea navigation. Relying on former pirate navigators to observe the sun was a primitive and dangerous approach. Countless Western sailors had died at sea for this very reason.

To solve these problems, Gao Family Village had been working tirelessly.

They had been actively recruiting and training true sea sailors. Every day, training ships departed from Zhoushan Dinghai Port and sailed the surrounding waters to help the sailors adapt to the open sea.

As for navigation, all hopes rested on Wang Zheng's chronometer.

Now that the chronometer had been successfully developed, Gao Family Village's navy could finally attempt to sail farther from Zhoushan Island and advance toward the great ocean routes.

Just as Li Daoxuan was thinking about this, a junk ship appeared in the distance.

The ship used signal flags to communicate with the Wanli Sunshine.

Shi Lang slid down from the lookout position and shouted to Li Daoxuan,

"Dao Xuan Tianzun. A Ming navy ship is approaching. They request to speak with us."

Li Daoxuan said calmly,

"Oh. A navy ship. Let them come closer. We can talk."

Soon, the opposing junk ship drew near.

As it came alongside the Wanli Sunshine, it immediately looked small and unimpressive by comparison.

On the deck of the other ship, a sturdy and agile man looked up at the massive hull of the Wanli Sunshine. Envy was clearly visible in his eyes.

Shi Lang tossed down a rope ladder.

"Come aboard."

The agile man grabbed the ladder with both hands and climbed up. His movements were swift and practiced. In just a short moment, he was already on the deck of the Wanli Sunshine.

He deliberately tapped his heel against the deck, clearly trying to determine what material the ship was made of.

Shi Lang saw through his small action and gave a wry smile.

"Do not bother. It is not wood. The materials of this ship are beyond ordinary understanding."

The agile man paused, looking a little embarrassed. He clasped his hands in greeting.

"Young man, you are quite young to be making a living at sea."

Shi Lang replied seriously,

"I am already fifteen this year. That is not young."

The agile man chuckled.

"Who is the captain of this ship. Who should I speak with."

Shi Lang said proudly,

"I am the captain."

It turned out that Jiang Cheng was now stationed at Zhoushan Dinghai Port and rarely went out to sea anymore. As a result, Shi Lang had been appointed captain of the Wanli Sunshine.

The agile man was greatly surprised.

A boy as captain.

For a moment, he felt reluctant to discuss serious matters with someone so young.

Fortunately, Shi Lang immediately added,

"Although I am the captain, you are fortunate today. Dao Xuan Tianzun is currently aboard. If you have important matters, you may speak directly with Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The agile man followed Shi Lang's gaze and saw the Water Specialized Dao Xuan Tianzun smiling at him.

He immediately stepped forward, clasped his hands respectfully, and introduced himself.

"My name is Zheng Zhihu. I am the second brother of Zheng Zhilong, the Coastal Defense Guerrilla General. The brothers at sea call me Python Two."

Li Daoxuan gave a soft sound of surprise, clearly interested.

"Zheng Zhilong's brother, Zheng Zhihu. Excellent, excellent. Truly a pair of Dragon and Tiger brothers."

Zheng Zhihu laughed lightly.

"More than just Dragon and Tiger. We also have a younger brother named Zheng Zhifeng."

"A younger brother." Li Daoxuan found the name slightly strange. "Should that not be a girl's name."

Zheng Zhihu chuckled and smoothly avoided the topic.

"May I ask your esteemed name. And what official position do you hold at court."

His question clearly showed that he believed Li Daoxuan to be an official of the imperial court. It seemed Zheng Zhilong had already received intelligence that the people of Zhoushan were considered part of the Emperor's side.

Li Daoxuan secretly laughed to himself.

"Since you believe that, I may as well play along."

He deliberately stroked the smooth chin of his silicone avatar and smiled playfully.

"Look at this face of mine. What kind of person do you think I am."

Chapter 1046: Divine Clock

Zheng Zhihu narrowed his eyes and studied the pale, beardless face before him.

Ah.

So that was it.

A court official.

The Great Ming had always trusted eunuchs with its grandest fleets. Wasn't Zheng He the most famous example? Ships of this scale, bristling with firepower and secrets, would never be left unsupervised. If the Emperor wanted to sleep soundly, he would place a eunuch he trusted at the helm.

Li Daoxuan spoke calmly. "My identity is not to be disclosed. Just call me Mr. Li."

Not a single lie.

Yet in Zheng Zhihu's imagination, Mr. Li instantly transformed into a powerful figure from the Eastern Depot or Western Depot. A trusted blade at the Emperor's side. A younger Zheng He in the making.

Zheng Zhihu bowed deeply. "Your subordinate greets Mr. Li."

"Why have you come?" Li Daoxuan asked. "What urgent matter brings you here?"

Zheng Zhihu straightened.

"Some time ago, my elder brother heard that a secret imperial fleet had arrived and stationed itself at Zhoushan Island. We did not know its purpose. Since the Emperor forbade inquiry, my brother intentionally avoided making contact."

He paused.

"But this time... we had no choice."

Li Daoxuan lifted a brow. "Oh?"

"Liu Xiang has grown increasingly reckless. Many major ports, fishing villages, and merchant fleets along the southeastern coast have been plundered by his pirate band."

"You intend to confront Liu Xiang?"

"Yes." Zheng Zhihu's voice hardened. "We have prepared hundreds of ships. This time we will fight him to the death. However, to prevent him from fleeing north, we had to inform you. If he escapes that direction, our forces will pursue relentlessly... and we may inadvertently enter Zhoushan waters and disturb Mr. Li's peace."

Li Daoxuan understood perfectly.

The words were polite. The meaning was not subtle.

Their northern encirclement was weak. Liu Xiang might escape that way. They wanted help.

He did not hesitate.

"Very well. When the time comes, I will dispatch a fleet to block his northern escape route. We strike from both sides and eliminate Liu Xiang. Let these waters return to peace."

Zheng Zhihu's eyes lit up. "That would be excellent."

He had expected resistance. Perhaps bargaining. Perhaps greed.

Instead, this eunuch agreed without fuss.

How strange.

"Oh! In coming to see Mr. Li, I brought some local specialties," Zheng Zhihu added hurriedly. "I nearly forgot to present them. How discourteous of me. Bring them."

At his command, men emerged from the junk ship carrying bamboo baskets.

They were placed before Li Daoxuan aboard the Wanli Sunshine.

"Local specialties" was a modest description.

These were expensive gifts.

A large basket of premium abalone, each one enormous.

Flower crabs. Beltfish. Eels. Mussels. Plump deep-sea prawns. Tiger prawns.

A direct strike at Li Daoxuan's lifelong weakness.

Fortunately, he was currently a silicone figure. Otherwise, the sight would have reduced him to drooling disgrace, social reputation utterly destroyed, forced to relocate to the moon out of embarrassment.

Zheng Zhihu smiled apologetically. "We are men of the sea. These are the only offerings worthy of presentation. We hope Mr. Li will not find them crude."

"Excellent items," Li Daoxuan replied with sincere approval. "Very much to my liking."

He turned toward the quartermaster.

The man was from Shaanxi. He had barely seen seafood in his entire life. Faced with such rare delicacies, he panicked.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said nervously, "different shrimp and crabs require different cooking temperatures. I only know how to prepare common fish. If I mishandle these ingredients, it would be a terrible waste."

Li Daoxuan felt his mood wobble dangerously.

Zheng Zhihu laughed. "My men know how to prepare them properly. Shall I send a cook over?"

"That would be most welcome," Li Daoxuan said at once.

Thus Zheng Zhihu's chef boarded the Wanli Sunshine.

He cooked while instructing, patiently guiding the bewildered quartermaster through the mysteries of proper seafood preparation.

Meanwhile, sailors set up a large round table on the deck.

Li Daoxuan, Shi Lang, Wang Zheng, and Zheng Zhihu took their seats, waiting for the feast.

Wang Zheng, however, was still fiddling with a peculiar large clock.

The device caught Zheng Zhihu's eye immediately.

"And this gentleman?" he asked.

Li Daoxuan smiled. "This is Lord Wang Zheng. He once served as Judicial Commissioner of Guangping Prefecture in Zhili, Judicial Commissioner of Yangzhou in Southern Zhili, and Assistant Judicial Commissioner in Shandong."

Zheng Zhihu's eyes widened.

A high-ranking official?

He quickly bowed again.

Wang Zheng waved him off with a chuckle. "All that is in the past. I have resigned. I am merely a private citizen now. These days I amuse myself with strange and curious contraptions."

Zheng Zhihu leaned closer. "I have seen some Western devices before. Is this a Western clock?"

Wang Zheng smiled mysteriously. "No. This is not a Western clock. This is a Divine Clock, bestowed by the immortals of heaven."

Zheng Zhihu did not believe a word of that.

But contradicting a former high-ranking official seemed unwise.

So he kept silent.

"Observe," Wang Zheng continued enthusiastically. "Operate it like this. Then adjust here. Look at these markings. From this, we calculate our longitude and latitude. East Longitude 122.44 degrees. North Latitude 30.01 degrees."

As he spoke, he produced a hollow copper globe crafted by artisans from Gao Family Village and placed it on the table with a solid thud.

His finger traced along the engraved lines of longitude and latitude.

He stopped and pointed.

"Here. East 122.44 degrees. North 30.01 degrees. This is our current position."

Zheng Zhihu had been confused by the talk of coordinates.

But when he saw the globe, his expression changed.

And when he compared the indicated location with his own navigational knowledge...

He froze.

"What?! That is truly our position?"

He had personally navigated these waters countless times. As a seasoned pirate leader, he knew exactly where they were.

The point marked on the globe matched perfectly.

His interest in the nautical clock ignited instantly.

A land official might not grasp its value.

A seafarer understood immediately.

His voice trembled.

"This clock... it can truly calculate our position? Then with this... we would never lose our way at sea?"

Wang Zheng stroked his beard. "Never is an exaggeration. Its margin of error is five li. Is that not enough to cause trouble?"

"Five li?" Zheng Zhihu stared.

He had assumed there would be error. But only five li?

He spread his arms wide.

"For my fleet, five li is nothing! With that precision, getting lost would be impossible!"

Wang Zheng laughed. "On land, people get lost after one mistaken li. Yet you seafaring folk do not even flinch at five. Truly formidable."

Zheng Zhihu's eyes shone.

"A divine artifact! A true divine artifact! It truly is a Divine Clock bestowed by the immortals of heaven! This... this is extraordinary!"

And for the first time that evening, even the seafood temporarily lost its dominance in Li Daoxuan's heart.

Chapter 1047: This Tastes Amazing

Zheng Zhihu looked absolutely pitiful.

His eyes were locked onto the marine chronometer as if it were the only treasure left in the world. If Li Daoxuan had nearly embarrassed himself earlier over seafood, now fate had reversed the situation completely. Zheng Zhihu looked ready to drool onto the deck.

Li Daoxuan laughed inwardly.

So this is how balance is restored.

He leaned forward slightly.

"You want it?"

Zheng Zhihu nodded so hard it seemed dangerous.

"Yes. I want it. What would it take for you to part with such a treasure?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head.

"It is not for sale. No price."

Zheng Zhihu's shoulders dropped instantly.

Of course it was not for sale. A device that could calculate one's exact position at sea was worth more than ten thousand taels. It could save fleets. It could decide life and death.

Then Li Daoxuan spoke again.

"Money is crude. Trade it for abalone instead."

"...What?"

"Abalone," Li Daoxuan repeated calmly. "If that is not enough, then large lobsters. If lobsters are insufficient, sea urchins will do. Tuna. A great deal of tuna. Salmon roe as well."

He stopped.

His mouth watered.

He slapped the table.

"Quartermaster. Is the seafood ready yet?"

"Coming. Coming."

The quartermaster rushed out with a platter of freshly steamed swimming crabs and placed it before him.

In that instant, Li Daoxuan forgot about chronometers, pirates, imperial authority, and possibly the future of maritime history.

He cracked two crab legs.

Crunch. Crunch.

Zheng Zhihu stared helplessly.

Seeing Dao Xuan Tianzun fully occupied with divine offerings, Wang Zheng smoothly took over.

"General Zheng," he said warmly, "your defense of the southern coast against pirates, both local and Western, is truly admirable. Your name will be recorded in history. I once even saw a depiction of the Great Battle of Liaoluo Bay."

"A depiction?"

Zheng Zhihu blinked. "What kind of depiction?"

Wang Zheng cleared his throat. "In any case, your Zheng clan has safeguarded these waters. It is only fitting that you possess this Divine Clock."

Zheng Zhihu's face brightened.

"Truly?"

"Of course. I created this one. I can create another. A second. A third. Even thousands."

Only then did Zheng Zhihu fully grasp that the device was the work of the man before him. Respect rose in his chest.

"However," Wang Zheng continued, raising a finger, "two conditions."

"I am listening."

"First, this Divine Clock must never fall into foreign hands. It is for your Zheng family alone."

"Agreed."

"Second, Mr. Li has very specific seafood requirements. You must procure them diligently. If mortals wish to receive blessings from above, they must not be stingy with offerings. May the Tianzun protect you. May blessings be abundant."

Zheng Zhihu felt momentarily dizzy from the sermon, but the calculation was simple.

Trade seafood for a device that guarantees safe navigation?

A fortune.

On the coast, seafood was common produce. Only premium abalone required effort. The rest were easily obtained.

He bowed deeply.

"My sincere thanks, Master Wang."

Wang Zheng waved quickly. "Do not thank me. If you must thank someone, thank the Dao Xuan Tiqzun. Do not thank me."

Zheng Zhihu silently concluded that Wang Zheng was slightly eccentric.

Then he focused on the food.

He cracked open a crab leg and dipped it into soy sauce. Just as he was about to bite, Li Daoxuan sighed.

"The seafood is excellent. Extremely fresh. But this soy sauce is not ideal."

The soy sauce Zheng Zhihu had brought was common dark soy.

Li Daoxuan detected the problem immediately. Too salty. Too heavy. It overwhelmed the natural sweetness of the crab.

"You are fortunate," Li Daoxuan said. "I came prepared."

He stood and entered the captain's cabin. Moments later, he returned dragging a small sturdy chest.

This chest had arrived from Gao Family Village labeled Heavenly Lord Designated Delivery. No one had dared to open it. Everyone assumed it contained some divine artifact.

Li Daoxuan opened it.

Inside were bottles and jars.

He rummaged eagerly.

"Found it. Specialty seafood soy sauce. Dedicated dipping sauce for small seafood. And Sichuan style spicy seafood sauce."

The sailors from Gao Family Village collectively inhaled.

They had transported this chest thousands of miles.

For condiments.

Li Daoxuan returned to the table, poured the sauces into small bowls, and smiled.

"Try these."

He dipped a crab leg into the specialty seafood soy sauce and took a bite.

His eyes closed in satisfaction.

Zheng Zhihu followed.

He dipped. He bit.

He froze.

This was completely different.

Not aggressively salty. Not overwhelming. It enhanced the crab instead of suppressing it. The freshness blossomed on the tongue.

"Delicious."

He tried another sauce. And another.

Each one drew louder praise.

Then he tried the Sichuan style spicy seafood sauce.

There was a pause.

Then he recoiled violently.

His face twisted in agony.

"I would rather eat an entire banquet of Fujianese than endure this sauce again."

Wang Zheng stared. "Do Cantonese truly eat Fujianese?"

Zheng Zhihu choked. "No. I am Fujianese. It is a joke. Do not mistake me for Cantonese. And for the record, Cantonese do not eat Fujianese."

Wang Zheng fell silent.

Zheng Zhihu quickly moved on.

"These miraculous sauces. Where are they produced? Could I purchase some? If I sell them across Guangdong and Fujian, they would certainly become a sensation."

The merchant instinct had awakened.

Wang Zheng smiled faintly.

"They are not easily obtained."

He pointed upward.

"It depends entirely on the mood of the one above. If he chooses to bestow them, we receive them. If not, they are unavailable."

Those words sparked an idea in Li Daoxuan's mind.

He activated his Co-sensing ability.

His perspective shifted outside the diorama world.

Luoyang.

His refrigerator.

He took out a 500 milliliter bottle of specialty seafood soy sauce and another 500 milliliter bottle of seafood dipping sauce.

Carefully, he placed them into the miniature world.

Then he issued an order.

"Bai Yuan. Hire workers immediately. Decant these into smaller containers. Send a ship to the Nanhui Mouth market."

And just like that, the divine seafood sauce trade quietly began.

Chapter 1048: It's Not Too Early to Start Preparations Now

When Li Daoxuan shifted his perspective back to the ship, the second platter had already arrived at the table. This time it was bamboo shrimp, long and pale, their shells glistening with steam, looking so fresh that even the sea breeze seemed to carry their sweetness.

As he peeled one with unhurried focus, he spoke to Zheng Zhihu as if they were merely discussing small business matters rather than the future of maritime trade.

"General Zheng, you mentioned earlier that you were interested in these seasonings. That poses no difficulty at all. We also operate as Imperial Merchants, and trade is trade. If there is profit to be made on both sides, it would be foolish not to proceed. We will send you a shipment of seafood soy sauce and dipping sauces soon, and you may resell them as you see fit."

Zheng Zhihu's face lit up instantly.

Before the words had even settled, Li Daoxuan had already dipped a perfectly peeled shrimp into sauce and placed it into his mouth. His expression softened in pure satisfaction as he chewed, and only then did he continue the conversation.

"General Zheng, your clan trades not only with coastal regions but also with Westerners and the Nanyang states, correct?"

Zheng Zhihu nodded with practiced composure, though a trace of pride slipped into his tone.

"Our trade routes are extensive. Our ships call at Damni, Brunei, Champa, Luzon, Wangkang, Beigang, Tayouan, Hirado, Nagasaki, Mumbai, Banten, Palembang, Batavia, Malacca, Cambodia, Siam. There are few ports in Nanyang that have not seen the Zheng banner."

Li Daoxuan listened without visible reaction, but Shi Lang could not conceal his astonishment.

"How many ships does the Zheng family command?" he asked, disbelief plain on his face.

Zheng Zhihu allowed himself the smallest expansion of his chest.

"More than three thousand vessels."

Shi Lang muttered under his breath that such a number must surely be exaggerated.

Li Daoxuan, however, knew better. History had already recorded the strength of the Zheng fleet. Three thousand ships was no boast. It was a fact.

For Gao Family Village's second maritime strategy, the key lay precisely in Nanyang, and Zheng Zhilong had already laid the groundwork there. Leveraging that foundation would be far easier than starting from nothing.

Li Daoxuan peeled another shrimp thoughtfully.

"General Zheng, how do you assess the Westerners?"

Zheng Zhihu did not answer carelessly.

"They are few in number, yet formidable in combat. Their shipbuilding and navigation techniques are advanced. Fortunately, they come from across vast oceans. This land lies too far from their homeland for them to threaten us directly, at least for now."

Li Daoxuan gave a low sound of acknowledgment. Such clarity of judgment was rare in this era.

Zheng Zhihu then gestured toward the Wanli Sunshine beneath their feet.

"Though Western ships are large, they cannot compare to the grandeur of our Zheng He Treasure Ships."

So he still believed this vessel to be one of Zheng He's legendary ships.

Li Daoxuan saw no reason to correct him.

Instead, he smiled mildly.

"General Zheng, if I were to lend you a Treasure Ship, could you navigate it across the oceans to the Westerners' homeland?"

Zheng Zhihu's expression grew complicated.

"The furthest we regularly travel is Nanyang. Beyond that lie Francia, Europa, and the Red-Haired nations, tens of thousands of miles farther still. We have never gone so far. Exploration would have to proceed step by step. Without establishing supply ports along the way for at least a decade, such a journey would be impossible."

Li Daoxuan dipped a slice of fish into the Sichuan-style spicy sauce and spoke with calm certainty.

"If supply ports are required, then we may simply take them from the Westerners."

The shrimp slipped from Zheng Zhihu's fingers.

He stared at Li Daoxuan, eyes wide.

In that single sentence he sensed something immense. This was no idle speculation. This was ambition directed westward.

Li Daoxuan appeared completely unperturbed by the shock he had caused.

"It will not be easy," he continued evenly, "but neither is it impossible. I have heard that you maintain cordial relations with the Red-Haired traders. Why not arrange for a few trusted men to travel aboard their ships? Let them visit Western nations, observe carefully, and most importantly map the sea routes and supply points. When the day comes for us to sail there ourselves, we should not be blind."

Zheng Zhihu's thoughts churned. If this was indeed imperial intent, then the Emperor's vision stretched far beyond the horizon. It was an audacity difficult to comprehend.

"Mr. Li," he said cautiously, "is it not somewhat early to begin investigating routes to the West?"

"Early?" Li Daoxuan's tone carried faint amusement. "A round trip to the West would take at least half a year, perhaps a full year. One voyage would not suffice to memorize currents, monsoons, and ocean patterns. It would require several journeys. Without years of preparation, one would not even grasp the basics. If we begin now, we are already late."

Zheng Zhihu fell silent.

Li Daoxuan softened his tone.

"If this task does not suit you, or if you lack appropriate candidates, simply introduce my people to the Red-Haired traders. Let my envoys travel with them. That would be enough."

Zheng Zhihu clasped his hands respectfully.

"That is a small matter. I will see it done."

The conversation gradually returned to food.

After the feast concluded and arrangements were made for future meetings and coordinated action against Liu Xiang, Zheng Zhihu took his leave.

When the deck finally quieted, Li Daoxuan exhaled slowly.

"Now we must find someone capable of traveling aboard a Red-Haired vessel to the Western nations and learning their sea routes."

This was no trivial assignment. The person would need intelligence, literacy, resilience, and the endurance to survive years at sea.

As he pondered, Shi Lang suddenly rose and bowed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I have a candidate."

Li Daoxuan turned toward him.

"My younger brother, Shi Xian."

Shi Lang explained carefully.

"He is three years younger than I, twelve this year. He has received schooling and grew up by the sea. He understands maritime matters and is skilled in both letters and martial arts. Most importantly, he is young. Even if the journey takes several years, he will return still in his prime."

Li Daoxuan considered the proposal.

A twelve-year-old boy aboard a Dutch ship would arouse far less suspicion than a grown strategist asking detailed questions. It could easily be explained as youthful curiosity.

"The key," Li Daoxuan said at last, "is not whether he is suitable, but whether he is willing. This is a matter of life and death. His decision must be his own."

Shi Lang answered without hesitation.

"My brother has long wished to join the army, but his age prevents him. If he could serve in this manner, he would welcome it."

Li Daoxuan nodded slowly.

"As long as he chooses this path of his own will, I have no objection. Every person has the right to decide the direction of their life."

That very evening, Shi Lang departed for Fujian and returned with his younger brother.

Shi Xian was only twelve, yet there was no fear in his eyes. Like his elder brother, he carried ambition larger than his years. When told of the plan, he agreed without reluctance, volunteering to cross distant oceans and learn the Western sea routes.

Thus, while others were still debating whether it was too early to prepare, the first piece of the westward game had already begun to move.

Chapter 1049: Dao Xuan Tianzun Acts with Profound Intent

In Luoyang, a most peculiar factory began recruiting workers.

Within the compound stood two colossal glass bottles, each towering more than thirty meters into the sky. They rose above rooftops and city walls alike, so enormous that from nearly any street in Luoyang

one only needed to tilt their head to see the twin silhouettes gleaming in the sunlight like strange monuments left behind by the gods.

Strange characters were inscribed upon their surfaces. The strokes looked Chinese, yet not quite the Chinese people were accustomed to. Some lines were missing, some corners simplified, as though an immortal hand had grown impatient with complexity.

To elders such as Bai Yuan, a single glance was enough. These were objects from the heavens. The writing upon them could only be Celestial Characters.

The greatest difference between these Celestial Characters and mortal script lay in their startling simplicity. Where ordinary writing tangled itself in layers of strokes, these symbols shed weight without losing meaning. For example, what the common script would render as "seafood soy sauce" or "seafood salad dressing," the Celestial Characters expressed with fewer strokes, cleaner shapes, and a clarity that felt almost refreshing.

Writing became easier. Carving became easier. Printing became easier.

Even within Gao Family Village, a few of the more curious had already begun studying this new script, muttering to themselves as they compared stroke counts and marveled at its efficiency.

Standing before the two immense bottles was Saintess Gao Yiye. At her side stood Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan, who had brought with him a retinue of yamen runners and clerks. Together they called out to the growing crowd.

"Workers wanted. Packaging laborers needed. Your task is simple. Transfer the soy sauce from these two Celestial Realm bottles into smaller porcelain bottles. Three catties of flour per day."

There was nothing complicated about the work. No craft, no skill, no literacy required. If a person had hands and the strength to stand, that was enough.

For refugees who had only just staggered into Luoyang after fleeing famine, such an offer might as well have been a lifeline thrown across a raging river.

Henan was still locked in drought. Fields lay cracked and barren. Bands of rebels roamed the countryside like hungry wolves. The people had suffered to the point of exchanging children for grain. Entire villages had emptied.

Yet Luoyang still held on.

Within its walls, survival remained possible.

Before long, long lines of refugees formed in front of the recruitment tables. Many, as they passed Gao Yiye, lowered themselves into deep bows. To secure work was already a blessing beyond expectation. To see the Saintess with their own eyes felt almost unreal.

Yet Gao Yiye's expression carried a trace of sorrow that had not yet faded. Gao Yingxiang's death still pressed against her heart like a stone she could not set down.

From the side, Gao Jie slipped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Saintess," he asked, lowering his voice, "what exactly is Dao Xuan Tianzun's intention in bestowing upon us these two enormous bottles of such peculiar soy sauce?"

Gao Yiye glanced up at the towering glass giants and allowed herself a faint smile.

"From what I understand of Dao Xuan Tianzun," she replied, "there may not be any specific intention at all."

Gao Jie stared at her as though she had just suggested the heavens might occasionally misplace the sun.

"How could that be? Dao Xuan Tianzun is exalted beyond measure. Every action must carry foresight and profound design."

Her smile deepened slightly, the sadness in her eyes easing for a moment.

"You think too much. Dao Xuan Tianzun sometimes acts on a whim. Have you forgotten the Sudden Whim Festival? Or the Hot Pot Festival? If today becomes a Soy Sauce Bottling Festival, would that truly be so strange?"

Gao Jie clutched at his head as if struggling to protect his worldview from collapse.

"No, impossible. Dao Xuan Tianzun must have a grand purpose. Perhaps he intends to use this peculiar soy sauce to conquer the palates of every coastal city, turning all who taste it into devout believers."

Gao Yiye shook her head, amused despite herself.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun often enjoys earthly amusements. You simply have not witnessed enough of them. Stop exhausting yourself with speculation."

Fan Shangzheng approached and tugged Gao Jie gently by the sleeve.

"Come. Let us inspect the workshop instead of arguing about divine motives."

The two men entered the factory.

Inside, rows upon rows of small porcelain bottles had already been arranged neatly. They had been specially fired for this task. Every kiln in the pottery village had taken on the order, and the potters had earned a respectable sum from the sudden surge of demand.

Funnels, ladles, wooden racks, and sealing tools had all been custom made.

Gao Jie looked around and slowly began to nod.

"I understand now. Dao Xuan Tianzun provided this soy sauce to create work for the kiln workers and craftsmen, ensuring they could earn wages."

Fan Shangzheng chuckled softly.

"Not only the potters. The carpenters who made the funnels and ladles profited as well. Even the transporters who carried materials have found employment."

Gao Jie stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I knew those two colossal bottles could not have appeared without reason. But that raises another question. How are we supposed to retrieve soy sauce from containers that tall? We cannot exactly climb thirty meters with a bucket."

Fan Shangzheng gave him a sideways glance.

"You still measure in zhang. Learn to say thirty meters. That is the proper measure now."

Gao Jie laughed awkwardly and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Old habits are stubborn things."

Fan Shangzheng sighed.

"I have pondered the same question. We cannot scale them, and no ladder in Henan reaches such height."

At that very moment, a gigantic golden hand descended from the sky.

It did not rush. It did not tremble. It reached calmly toward one of the massive bottles, grasped it with effortless precision, and tilted it ever so slightly.

To the enormous Celestial bottle, the movement was no more than a minor adjustment. To the people below, it was like watching a mountain shift.

A thin stream of soy sauce poured down into the vast vats prepared beneath. From the perspective of the celestial container, it was merely a trickle. Yet each vat below filled to the brim in seconds, dark liquid shimmering like polished lacquer.

Gao Jie's mouth fell open.

"So Dao Xuan Tianzun is personally pouring the soy sauce."

Across Luoyang, inside and beyond the city walls, countless citizens saw the golden hand in the sky. One by one, then in waves, they dropped to their knees.

Voices murmured prayers. Foreheads pressed against stone.

Gao Jie swallowed.

"Even tens of thousands of vats may not suffice to empty a single bottle. The refugees will have work for a very long time."

Fan Shangzheng nodded, though his expression grew more serious.

"It is best to keep them employed within the city. I once assigned them to road construction outside the walls, but the rebels in Henan grow bolder each day. A single lapse in vigilance and bandits appear from nowhere, slaughter the workers, and seize their rations. At least within Luoyang, the walls offer some protection."

Mention of the rebels darkened both men's faces.

News of Chuǎng Wang's death had long since reached Henan. Yet the rebel forces showed no sign of collapse. In truth, they had never been entirely dependent on him. He had been a banner more than a commander. The true driving force was the Dashing General.

Before his followers, the Dashing General had wept loudly and sworn vengeance to the heavens, promising to avenge his elder brother, overthrow the corrupt court, and continue the unfinished cause. The speech had stretched endlessly, filled with grief and righteousness in equal measure.

When it concluded, he formally assumed the title of Chuǎng Wang.

Thus a new Chuǎng Wang rose, not diminished but invigorated.

Under his command, the rebels seemed even more energetic than before. They scattered and regrouped like locust swarms, descending upon towns and villages, plundering grain, seizing goods, and vanishing before imperial troops could fully respond.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Zhu Youjian still celebrated. In his mind, the removal of Chuǎng Wang meant the Ming foundations were secure once more. Surely now the tide could be reversed. Surely now the empire could be saved.

He did not yet see that the storm had merely changed shape.

With Lu Xiangheng's main army absent and Zuo Liangyu idling away precious time, the burden of pursuit fell upon men like Bai Yuan, Cao Wenzhao, He Renlong, and Gao Jie. They chased the rebels tirelessly across Henan's dust-choked plains, always a step behind, always racing against a fire that refused to be extinguished.

Chapter 1050: The Seafood Arrives

The seafood shipped by the Zheng family finally arrived.

Five enormous ships, heavy with their haul, sailed into port one after another. From a distance alone, the smell of the ocean seemed to roll in ahead of them.

In order to properly honor the value of the Divine Bell, the Zheng clan had mobilized an entire fleet of fishing vessels and thrown themselves into a frenzied campaign at sea. Nets were cast day and night. Hooks were dropped without rest. Before long, prized catches such as abalones thick as palms, giant lobsters with armor-like shells, and massive tuna were piled high in the holds of five twenty-meter junks.

Even after dispatching such a bounty, the Zheng family still felt vaguely uneasy. To coastal fishermen, five ships of seafood were impressive but not unimaginable. The sea, after all, was their granary.

But the Divine Bell that Mr. Li had given them was something else entirely. That was no ordinary object. That was a treasure that touched the realm of the gods.

So the five ships were escorted carefully to Zhoushan Dinghai Port and presented in full before Li Daoxuan.

Now it was his turn to feel troubled.

He stood at the dock, staring at mountains of abalone, lobster, and tuna overflowing from the five vessels, and for once even he did not know whether to laugh or cry.

There was simply too much.

No matter how enthusiastic a foodie might be, there were limits imposed by a single human stomach. Before he could finish even a fraction of this, half of it would begin to spoil. The mere thought of five ships of seafood rotting under the sun made his chest tighten. What kind of culinary sin would that be?

Keeping them alive posed its own problems. This was the Ming Dynasty. There were no modern aquaculture systems, no oxygen pumps, no refrigerated transport. Relying solely on the experience of fishermen would not prevent heavy losses. At least half would still perish along the way.

Li Daoxuan rubbed his forehead and let out a long groan. Having too much at once, he realized, could be just as agonizing as having none at all.

Whenever confronted with absurd dilemmas like this, he preferred to consult what he liked to call the wisdom of strangers.

He opened his favorite history and military forum and posted anonymously.

"Hypothetical scenario. If you time traveled to the Ming Dynasty and ended up with five ships full of fresh seafood on the coast, far more than you could personally consume, what would you do?"

A reply appeared almost instantly.

"Any giant octopi in there? Could get creative with them and impress the ladies."

Another user responded immediately.

"Where are the moderators? Please escort the gentleman on the first floor out of the premises."

A third comment appeared.

"Fill the ship's hold with seawater and keep the seafood alive inside. Transport it inland and sell it. You'll make a fortune."

Someone else countered.

"The mortality rate would be terrible. Even today, with oxygenation equipment, there's still some loss. In the Ming Dynasty they don't have any of that. The losses during transport would be astronomical."

The previous commenter replied without hesitation.

"Then raise the price. If losses are high, just charge ten times more."

The speaker had not meant much by it. The listener, however, took the idea seriously.

Li Daoxuan leaned back in his chair and thought it through. He could not eat it all himself. Through his proxy, he would only taste a fleeting fraction. Letting the rest go to waste would be unforgivable. It would be far better to send these treasures back to Gao Family Village and let everyone share in the feast.

The only obstacle was oxygenation during transport.

True enough, such equipment did not exist in the historical Ming Dynasty. But the Ming inside his box was no longer purely historical. Gao Family Village already possessed steam powered water pumps. If they could draw water with steam, could they not also push air into it?

He immediately summoned Young Master Bai and Wang Zheng.

"Blowing air into water," Young Master Bai repeated thoughtfully, stroking his chin. "Our steam powered pumps draw water upward using pressure. If we reverse the principle, instead of drawing in, we force air downward."

Wang Zheng nodded, smiling as the idea took shape. "The divine ships granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun are powered by celestial electric motors. We can divert a small portion of that rotational force through a shaft, connect it to a pipe system, and install aeration nozzles inside the cargo holds. As long as the ship is moving, the motor turns. As the motor turns, the air flows. Continuous oxygenation."

Neither man was fond of empty talk. Once the concept was clear, they immediately set artisans to work.

Since the power source already existed, they only needed to add shafts, pipes, and sealed compartments. In less than half a day, the system was complete.

The five ships of seafood from the Zheng family were carefully transferred into the sealed holds of Gao Family Village's river sea vessels. The compartments were filled with seawater, pipes inserted, joints secured.

When the ships set into motion, the pipes began to gurgle. Streams of air bubbled steadily through the tanks.

Li Daoxuan watched the bubbles rise and felt his mood brighten considerably.

"Excellent. Set sail immediately. Transport everything back."

Who would dare delay the decree of Dao Xuan Tianzun?

Several river sea vessels departed at once, their holds alive with the restless motion of marine treasure, heading inland toward Shaanxi.

Several days later.

Luoyang. Xiaolangdi Naval Base.

Bai Yuan rose early, as he always did. The morning sun shone warmly, the river surface glittering like scattered gold. Everything looked pleasant. Yet fatigue clung to him from the moment he opened his eyes.

He exhaled slowly.

"I am getting old," he murmured.

When he first arrived at Gao Family Village in the seventh year of Tianqi, he had been just over forty, in his prime, strong enough to fight without fear. Now it was the ninth year of Chongzhen. Ten years had passed in what felt like a single breath. Threads of white had crept into his hair.

"I wonder how many years I still have left to busy myself," he thought quietly, "and whether I will live to see peace beneath heaven."

As he stood there in contemplation, one of the animated statues of Dao Xuan Tianzun approached, accompanied by Gao Yiye. The statue lifted a hand in greeting.

"Bai Yuan, good morning."

Bai Yuan immediately bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun. Greetings, Saintess."

Even at fifty, he never neglected the rites among the Six Arts of a gentleman. Respect came naturally to him.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Saintess," he asked, straightening, "what brings you to the Naval Base so early? Are there important instructions?"

Li Daoxuan's proxy chuckled softly.

"Nothing especially important. Some good things are about to arrive."

Bai Yuan blinked, puzzled.

"Come. Let us wait at the dock."

Holding Gao Yiye's hand, Li Daoxuan led him toward the waterfront.

The dock was already lively despite the early hour. Ships came and went in steady rhythm. Sailors shouted. Porters hauled cargo. It felt less like a military base and more like a bustling marketplace.

Merchant vessels from upstream and downstream increasingly converged here. Some belonged to Gao Family Village's own network. Others were independent traders drawn by profit.

From Gao Family Village, Xi'an, and Puzhou came goods such as the famed Warm and Sleepy wool sweaters, cotton knitwear from the textile mills, pottery from Yaotou Kiln, and delicate glassware from the village's glass workshop.

Independent merchants brought their own wares from along the Yellow River, exchanging curiosities and regional specialties for the unique products of Gao Family Village.

The Warm and Sleepy sweaters in particular had become legendary. Within Dao Xuan Tianzun's territories they were already a staple. Beyond those borders, they were regarded as rare marvels. In Jiangnan, where wool was scarce, people examined them as though touching something almost magical.

As Li Daoxuan reached the edge of the dock, he noticed a large ship being loaded with cargo.

The goods were unusual.

Crates upon crates of bottles and jars were being carried aboard. Each jar bore a red label with bold characters reading: Dao Xuan Seafood Soy Sauce.

Gao Yiye pointed toward the vessel, a hint of pride in her voice.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, this is the celestial soy sauce you bestowed upon us. The factories in Luoyang have already bottled it. It is being shipped to Jiangnan."

Li Daoxuan stepped closer and picked up one bottle from an open crate. He turned it slightly in his hand, admiring the label.

"Make a note," he said lightly. "I am taking one bottle. It will prove useful very soon."

The smile in his eyes suggested that somewhere, someone's taste buds were about to experience a revelation.