

## Great Ming 1061

### Chapter 1061 Who Is This Divine Being?

While Li Daoxuan was relaxing in the water as if the battlefield above had nothing to do with him, the real chaos was erupting on the surface.

Zheng Zhilong's second brother, Zheng Zhihu, was already preparing to board.

On his flagship stood a boy of twelve. He was now called Zheng Sen. The name carried weight, expectation, and a future that had not yet unfolded. For now, though, he was simply a boy watching war up close, standing beside his second uncle and trying to learn how men carved their names into the sea.

Zheng Zhihu lowered his voice.

"Your second uncle is about to board their ship. After I jump across, you stay here and command. Do not follow me into the fight. Do you understand?"

Zheng Sen shook his head stubbornly. "I want to jump too."

Zheng Zhihu clicked his tongue in irritation. "You are twelve. Your bones have barely grown. Do you think the sea cares about your courage? Once I cross over, someone must command this ship. You will take my place here. That is your battlefield."

The boy hesitated, then nodded. "Understood. Second Uncle... be careful. Do not die."

Zheng Zhihu burst into loud laughter, the kind that drowned out fear. "If you are afraid of death, what kind of battle is this? Watch closely."

At that very moment, the flagship smashed into Liu Xiang's vessel with a thunderous crash. Wood shrieked against wood. The entire deck tilted violently. Zheng Sen lost his footing and rolled across the planks.

Zheng Zhihu did not move.

He bit his steel saber between his teeth, gripped a rattan shield in his left hand, caught a sail rope with his right, and launched himself across the gap.

For an instant he seemed suspended between two ships, as though even the wind paused to watch.

Arrows came first. The enemy reacted quickly. Several shafts streaked toward him, but each one struck the rattan shield and bounced off with dull impacts. By the time his boots hit Liu Xiang's deck, he was already moving.

His first kick sent a pirate flying backward before the man's saber had fully descended.

Zheng Zhihu tore the blade from his mouth and roared, "Python Two has arrived. Who dares stand before me?"

Five pirates rushed him at once.

The exchange lasted only moments. Steel flashed in tight arcs. Zheng Zhihu did not retreat, did not hesitate. One fell. Then another. The remaining three followed, their bodies tumbling into the sea as though the ocean itself had claimed them.

"Liu Xiang!" he shouted, charging forward with shield and saber. "Where are you hiding?"

He cut his way from bow to stern, then wheeled back again, a one-man storm tearing across the enemy deck. Pirates swarmed him, but none could withstand a single decisive strike. Blood streaked across wet planks. Men stumbled and fell.

Liu Xiang saw it all and felt his spine go cold.

He did not dare face this monster directly. Instead, he retreated step by step, shouting for his men to block the advance.

It made no difference.

From the ship behind, Zheng Sen watched in breathless awe. His second uncle moved like something out of legend, carving a path through enemies without even seeming to blink.

Then the boy noticed something wrong.

On the enemy stern, Liu Xiang was no longer retreating blindly. He had seized a large fishing net that hung near the rail. Quietly, carefully, he climbed onto the sterncastle.

Zheng Sen's heart clenched.

"Second Uncle, look out!"

His voice tore from his throat, but it was swallowed by the chaos of battle. Clashing steel, shouting men, crashing waves. No one heard him.

Zheng Zhihu had just cut down another opponent when the net dropped.

It fell from above, wide and heavy, wrapping around him before he could react. The coarse ropes tangled his arms and legs in an instant.

A chill ran through him. He cursed inwardly.

From behind, Zheng Sen screamed, his voice cracking with desperation. "Save my second uncle!"

The Zheng marines surged forward, but they were a step too slow.

Liu Xiang leapt down from the sterncastle and delivered a savage kick. Under normal circumstances, Zheng Zhihu would have dodged such a strike easily. Entangled in the net, he had no room to move.

The impact sent him straight overboard.

He hit the sea still wrapped in rope.

Zheng Sen's vision blurred. "Jump in! Pull him out!"

The Zheng marines rushed to the railing, but Liu Xiang was already there, saber flashing. He drove them back before they could dive.

Everything unraveled at once.

Without thinking further, Zheng Sen vaulted over his own ship's rail and plunged into the water.

The sea swallowed him in cold silence.

He kicked hard, swimming toward where his uncle had fallen, searching frantically beneath the surface. But a massive hull stood between them. The deep draft of the warships formed a dark wooden wall beneath the waterline, making a direct path nearly impossible.

He knew the cruel truth. A man who fell into the sea had only minutes. After that, only a corpse rose.

Tears mixed with saltwater as he swam.

Then something streaked past him.

It cut through the water with terrifying speed, so fast that Zheng Sen barely registered the shape. More unsettling than the speed was the movement itself. No human he had ever seen swam like that.

He froze mid-stroke.

"Was that... a person?"

It was.

Li Daoxuan shot forward like a living torpedo, water parting around him as though the sea recognized him as one of its own. In the blink of an eye, he reached Zheng Zhihu.

Below them, Zheng Zhihu was sinking.

He was an excellent swimmer, but the net bound his limbs completely. No technique could compensate for that. His lungs burned. His eyes remained open in stubborn fury.

Then he saw him.

The imperial envoy. The trusted man. Mr. Li.

Approaching like a fish.

Zheng Zhihu's mind faltered. Humans did not move like this.

Li Daoxuan reached him and spoke calmly, though they were deep underwater.

"Do not struggle. I will get you out."

Zheng Zhihu's thoughts shattered. He can speak underwater?

Li Daoxuan grabbed the net and pulled hard.

It did not tear.

Even with extraordinary strength, rope woven for the sea resisted brute force. He realized immediately that tearing it apart would waste precious seconds.

With a thought, the bone blade concealed along his skeleton extended outward with a subtle metallic snap.

Zheng Zhihu stared in horror as a sharp blade slid from Li Daoxuan's elbow.

The blade cut through the net.

Then another emerged.

Then several more, unfolding in a circular arc from his arm like something not born under heaven.

If Zheng Zhihu had air in his lungs, he would have screamed.

The blades flashed rapidly. Rope split apart in all directions. Within moments, the heavy net disintegrated into loose strands drifting in the current.

Freedom.

Zheng Zhihu forced his limbs to move and kicked upward with the last of his strength. The surface seemed impossibly far, yet suddenly it broke open above him.

He burst through and dragged in a massive breath of air.

Alive.

His first thought was not relief.

It was confusion.

"Where is Mr. Li?"

He looked around wildly. The man who had saved him had not surfaced.

Alarmed, Zheng Zhihu plunged his head back into the water.

There, in the shifting blue below, he saw Li Daoxuan already far away, gliding effortlessly. A pirate who had fallen overboard struggled nearby, but before the man could scream, a blade extended from Li Daoxuan's arm and pierced straight through his chest.

The sea swallowed the body without ceremony.

Zheng Zhihu's scalp went numb.

Who in the world was this Mr. Li?

Not a mere imperial envoy.

Not a simple eunuch.

If this was a man, then the word "man" had suddenly become far too small.

Chapter 1062 Palace Secret Arts

Zheng Zhihu was still trying to steady his breathing when another head burst up through the water beside him.

It was Zheng Sen.

"Second Uncle! Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Zheng Zhihu replied, still catching his breath. "Mr. Li pulled me out."

Zheng Sen's face was pale, eyes wide with something between awe and fear. "I saw it. The way he saved you... that wasn't normal. Is he truly human?"

Zheng Zhihu shook his head slowly. "I have no idea. And this is not the time to think about it. Get back to the ship and take command. I still have to go carve Liu Xiang into pieces."

Zheng Sen called after him anxiously, "Be careful! Don't get trapped in a fishing net again!"

Zheng Zhihu snorted. "A trick that works once on Zheng Zhihu will never work twice."

He struck out toward Liu Xiang's flagship again. The hull was slick and nearly impossible to climb, but ropes now dangled from the rail above. He seized one and hauled himself upward with explosive speed.

By the time he vaulted back onto the deck, the battle was already collapsing.

Earlier, Zheng Zhihu had nearly wiped out the entire crew by himself. Liu Xiang was left with barely anyone capable of resisting, and more Zheng family marines were boarding every moment. The tide had fully turned.

"Liu Xiang, prepare to die!"

The sailors roared as they closed in.

Liu Xiang threw his head back and laughed wildly. "If I die, I'll drag a Zheng Zhihu down with me. That's worth it. Hahaha!"

The laughter died in his throat.

The crowd in front of him suddenly parted.

Zheng Zhihu strode forward, pushing aside his own men. "Who exactly are you dragging down?"

Liu Xiang's face drained of color. "Impossible. You didn't drown?"

Zheng Zhihu gave a low chuckle. "I had someone backing me."

Silence fell for a breath.

"All right," Zheng Zhihu continued, lifting his saber. "Old debts and new grudges. Let's finish them here."

He advanced steadily.

Liu Xiang retreated two steps, then abruptly spun and rushed toward the rail, intending to throw himself back into the sea.

He never made it.

With a splash, a figure shot straight out of the water like a flying fish and slammed upward from below. A solid head struck under Liu Xiang's chin with a heavy thud.

The pirate leader staggered backward, his escape shattered.

When he regained focus, he saw a man in swordsman's attire standing lightly by the rail. The fabric clung for only a moment before drying as though the sea itself refused to stain it.

Li Daoxuan sat on the rail with his legs hanging loosely, expression relaxed. "I've finished relaxing. I'm in a good mood now. I'm only watching. Please continue."

Liu Xiang stared at him, unable to form a single word.

Zheng Zhihu did not waste the opportunity. He lunged forward.

Steel rang sharply as their sabers collided.

The duel that followed was fierce but brief. Liu Xiang fought desperately, but the difference in strength was obvious. Li Daoxuan only needed a few breaths to judge the outcome.

Within ten exchanges, Zheng Zhihu's blade cut cleanly across Liu Xiang's neck. Blood sprayed across the deck.

"Liu Xiang is dead!"

"Liu Xiang is dead!"

"The last great pirate of the Southeast is gone!"

Cheers erupted across the ships.

With their leader fallen, the remaining pirates faltered. Some threw down their weapons and surrendered. Others attempted to steer away from the battlefield, hoping to slip through the chaos.

There was nowhere to go.

Zheng Zhilong's fleet and the Gao Family Village navy had sealed the sea from north and south. The pincer had been deliberate from the beginning. Any pirate vessel that tried to flee was quickly surrounded and forced back.

By dusk, the Liu Xiang pirate band was finished.

He had been the last major chieftain among the so-called Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars of piracy. With his death, the large pirate syndicates along the Southeast coast were finally crushed. What remained would be small bands at most, hardly worthy of concern.

That evening, the battlefield was methodically cleaned.

Captured ships were gathered together. Surrendered pirates were disarmed and ordered to operate their own vessels under supervision. Small boats drifted across the sea collecting floating planks and salvaging the bodies of fallen comrades. Those recovered would be brought home for burial. As for pirate corpses, the sea claimed them without ceremony.

On Zheng Zhilong's flagship, a banquet was arranged.

Zheng Zhilong, Zheng Zhihu, Zheng Sen, Mr. Li, Jiang Cheng, Shi Lang, and several others sat around a large table piled high with seafood.

Zheng Zhilong himself was a broad, straightforward man. Not the refined scholar-general type, though he carried himself with slightly more polish than his second brother.

He raised his cup. "Today we were fortunate that Mr. Li intervened and saved my second brother. Zheng can only offer this toast in gratitude."

Li Daoxuan cracked open a crab leg with precise efficiency and sucked out the meat, fully absorbed in the flavor. The wine cup remained untouched.

Zheng Zhilong's eyes twitched slightly.

Jiang Cheng quickly smiled and explained, "General Zheng is too courteous. Mr. Li is not fond of drinking, but he has an exceptional appreciation for seafood."

Zheng Zhilong thought to himself that palace officials were indeed peculiar creatures.

Zheng Zhihu laughed heartily. "Brother, we came from pirate stock. We hate empty formalities. Mr. Li skipping the ceremony suits us perfectly."

Zheng Zhilong laughed as well. "You're right. No need for nonsense. Eat!"

A lobster shell cracked loudly between Li Daoxuan's fingers.

Zheng Zhilong leaned toward Zheng Zhihu and whispered, "Second Brother, this palace official eats quite a lot."

Zheng Zhihu whispered back, "His love of seafood benefits us. The nautical clock I brought you before was traded for seafood."

Zheng Zhilong's eyes brightened. "That divine clock is extraordinary. To exchange a few shiploads of seafood for it was a tremendous bargain."

At that moment, Zheng Sen leaned in as well. "Second Uncle, don't you think Mr. Li doesn't seem entirely human?"

Zheng Zhihu nodded without hesitation. "He truly doesn't."

Zheng Zhilong raised a brow. "Oh?"

The three huddled closer. Zheng Zhihu and Zheng Sen recounted everything they had seen beneath the water.

When they finished, Zheng Zhilong drew in a sharp breath. "You are certain?"

"I may not be educated," Zheng Zhihu replied, "but I can still see clearly."

Zheng Sen added solemnly, "And I am educated. My eyes are clear too."

Zheng Zhilong fell into deep thought. After a long pause, he lowered his voice. "Perhaps it is one of the palace's secret arts. For generations, the court has hidden extraordinary masters. They all possess miraculous martial techniques. I once heard that the Grand Eunuch Zheng He was peerless in skill, wielding hammers like Li Yuanba. He sailed the Western Oceans, suppressed pirates, crushed rebellions, even toppled kingdoms, yet was never injured."

The three men exchanged uneasy looks.

Then they turned their heads toward Li Daoxuan again.

Under the lantern light, with crab shells piled beside him and a calm expression on his face, his figure seemed taller, brighter, and far more unfathomable than before.

Chapter 1063 Let's Get Along Well, Now

Tall, radiant, and completely unbothered by the weight of mortal concerns, Li Daoxuan snapped open yet another crab claw with delicate precision.

The sound was crisp and oddly dignified.

Zheng Zhilong watched for a moment longer, then quietly gave up on attempting any serious exchange with this particular palace official. When a man could peel shellfish with such concentration in the middle of a victory banquet, philosophical discussion might have to wait.

He turned instead to Jiang Cheng and Shi Lang.

"Gentlemen," he began in a steady tone, "what you are building on Zhoushan Island is not something I dare question too deeply. Nor do I presume to understand the full picture. But may I ask, what exactly is the Emperor's ultimate aim in all this?"

Jiang Cheng glanced at Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan was cracking a prawn shell and did not look up, but somehow gave the impression that speaking freely would not be punished.

Jiang Cheng cleared his throat.

"There are four primary objectives, passed down from above."

Zheng Zhilong leaned forward. "Please."

"First, to establish a secure maritime base. Second, to gain firm control of the entire southeastern coast. Third, to extend our influence into the nations of Nanyang. Fourth, to embark on a long voyage across ten thousand li and visit the various Western countries."

Zheng Zhilong's eyes lit up.

His ambitions had always covered the first three steps. Control the coast. Dominate the seas of the southeast. Expand trade and influence southward.

But the fourth step.

To deliberately seek out the distant Western nations and sail across vast oceans not merely to trade, but to project power and presence.

The Emperor's vision reached farther than he had imagined.

"For each of these objectives," Jiang Cheng continued, "General Zheng's support will be indispensable."

Zheng Zhilong clasped his fists. "This humble general will do everything within his ability."

His thoughts drifted to the strange vessels from Gao Family Village. Ships without sails. Ships without oars. Colossal hulls that moved with unnatural speed. With such power, the first three objectives seemed well within reach.

The fourth would take time. Years, perhaps more.

Crack.

Another shrimp shell split neatly between Li Daoxuan's fingers.

Zheng Zhilong stared at him.

Does he truly only know how to eat?

Just as that thought formed, Li Daoxuan spoke.

"General Zheng."

The sudden shift startled him.

Li Daoxuan set down the shell and looked toward Zheng Sen. "I hold your son in very high regard. His mind is sharp. It shines quite brightly. At his age, he already shows promise in both scholarly and martial pursuits. With the right teacher, proper guidance, and a broader world before him, he could rise like a dragon."

Zheng Zhilong blinked.

The man had been silent and devouring seafood for half the banquet. Now he opened his mouth and delivered praise like a flowing river.

Zheng Zhilong felt a faint flush creep up his neck. "Mr. Li flatters him. The boy is ordinary."

Li Daoxuan shook his head with exaggerated seriousness. "Not ordinary at all."

Zheng Sen stiffened as the attention turned toward him.

Li Daoxuan leaned slightly closer. "Do you like my ships?"

The question struck directly at the boy's heart.

"Yes," Zheng Sen answered without hesitation. "I love them."

"We are building even more extraordinary vessels," Li Daoxuan continued casually. "Would you like to see them?"

Zheng Sen's eyes sparkled. "Very much."

"On Zhoushan Island," Li Daoxuan went on, "there is a naval industrial school and a naval academy. Shipbuilding, navigation, artillery, logistics, engineering. Would that interest you?"

Zheng Sen inhaled sharply.

Though only twelve, he was no fool. He immediately sensed the meaning behind the invitation.

He turned instinctively to his father.

Zheng Zhilong was thinking rapidly.

If his son entered the circle of such people, if he gained their trust, if he stood near the Emperor's grand maritime vision, then the Zheng family would not merely rule the sea. They would anchor themselves in the future of the empire.

He gave the smallest nod.

Zheng Sen turned back, voice firm. "Yes. I am very interested."

Li Daoxuan smiled with quiet satisfaction.

"Then come to Zhoushan."

Zheng Zhilong urged gently, "Sen'er, Mr. Li's invitation is a great opportunity. Offer your thanks."

Zheng Sen bowed deeply.

Inwardly, Li Daoxuan felt pleased.

A rare character card secured.

He shifted his gaze to Shi Lang. "Shi Lang, you and Zheng Sen are close in age. You will show him around Zhoushan."

Shi Lang straightened immediately. "Understood."

Li Daoxuan's expression grew unexpectedly solemn.

"You two must get along very well. No fighting. No arguing. You will be good friends."

The boys exchanged confused looks.

Shi Lang, however, had already been thoroughly trained in discipline. Orders were orders. He saluted crisply. "Understood, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan returned to his crab with renewed focus.

Zheng Zhihu picked up a crab leg and grinned at his brother. "Brother, you must try the soy sauce Mr. Li brought."

Zheng Zhilong raised an eyebrow. "What makes it special?"

"It's formulated for seafood. Dip the crab in this and see."

Zheng Zhilong tried it.

His expression changed almost immediately.

"This could sell," he said slowly. "In every coastal city."

Zheng Zhihu nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly. Mr. Li has already arranged shipments to the Nanhui Mouth market. Now that Liu Xiang is gone, maritime trade will flow much more smoothly. We can purchase several shiploads and distribute them along the coast."

"Agreed," Zheng Zhilong replied. "We begin at once."

Li Daoxuan listened with amusement.

In Shaanxi, introducing new products required explanation after explanation. Teaching people how to use them took patience.

Here on the southeastern coast, it was different.

The region breathed commerce. Zheng Zhilong's forces themselves were a strange blend. One third imperial troops. One third pirates. One third merchants with razor sharp instincts. Present them with something new, and their minds instantly calculated routes, margins, markets, expansion.

Working with them was effortless.

"I have many such goods," Li Daoxuan said lightly. "General Zheng, make frequent visits to Nanhui Mouth. We will supply all kinds of items to the nations of Nanyang and beyond. Let their silver flow into our hands."

Zheng Zhilong's smile widened. "That aligns perfectly with my plans. And we must not forget Japan. I know those trade routes well. There is plenty of silver there, and I know precisely what they are willing to buy."

Li Daoxuan raised his thumb in approval.

The adults leaned closer, discussing trade winds, shipping routes, tariffs, and profits, calmly planning how to draw wealth from distant lands.

Meanwhile, the two boys spoke quietly on the side.

"I am Shi Lang," the older one said. "Fifteen."

"I am Zheng Sen," the younger replied. "Twelve."

Shi Lang pointed toward a massive vessel anchored nearby. "See that ship? That is the Wanli Sunshine. I am its captain."

Zheng Sen's eyes widened with pure admiration. "You are only three years older than me, and already captain of that ship?"

Shi Lang grinned. "Wait until you see Zhoushan. There are things there that will change how you think about the sea entirely."

The lantern light flickered over the deck, over shells and wine cups, over maps and ambitions.

Somewhere beyond the glow of the banquet, the sea stretched dark and endless.

And the future, for once, seemed just as vast.

Chapter 1064 Little White No. 2

A few days later, aboard the deck of the Wanli Sunshine.

Zheng Sen stood at the bow, watching Zhoushan Dinghai Port draw closer. His eyes shone with excitement.

Though only twelve years old, he already had several years of seafaring experience. Since childhood, he had traveled aboard large ships, sailing between Japan and Fujian and crossing vast stretches of ocean. Because of that, he understood ships far better than most children his age.

The astonishing speed of the Wanli Sunshine filled him with admiration. Standing at the bow, feeling the sea wind rush past his face, was something those slow, old sailing boats could never compare to.

"Brother Lang," Zheng Sen asked, turning his head, "this ship has no sails and no oars. How can it run so fast?"

Shi Lang chuckled. "Divine power from the immortals."

Zheng Sen fell silent.

Jiang Cheng leaned out from nearby and laughed. "Do not listen to him. The ship runs on electricity. But this electricity is unusual. We mortals cannot produce it. It comes from a celestial treasure called a solar panel."

Zheng Sen felt even more confused.

Shi Lang waved his hand. "Our school teaches these things, but I never pay attention. You are different. You excel in both study and martial arts. If you attend the lessons, you might actually understand it."

Zheng Sen looked curious. "Is that the Naval Industrial Academy you mentioned?"

Shi Lang nodded. "Yes. It was founded by the celestial immortals themselves. All the textbooks are Heavenly Books."

Zheng Sen's eyes widened. "Really?"

As they spoke, the Wanli Sunshine sailed into Zhoushan Dinghai Port.

Suddenly, a strange ship rushed toward them.

Its hull was wooden and shaped much like a traditional sailing vessel. Yet it had no sails and no oars. On each side of the hull was a large circular paddle wheel. Two tall smokestacks rose from the deck, spewing black smoke.

The paddle wheels churned the sea with a loud whirring sound, throwing up white spray as the ship surged forward at great speed.

Zheng Sen gasped. "Another strange ship."

Shi Lang squinted. "Little White No. 2. So it has finally launched. When we left to suppress Liu Xiang, it was not even finished. I did not expect it to complete its maiden voyage so soon."

Zheng Sen blinked. "Little White No. 2? That is the name?"

Shi Lang laughed. "You will get used to it. Bai Gongzi says he is an engineer type. That is how engineer types name things."

Zheng Sen did not understand what that meant.

Soon, he would meet this so called engineer type.

Little White No. 2 slowed and stopped not far from the Wanli Sunshine. At its bow stood a young man dressed in white robes. It was Bai Gongzi.

Shi Lang called out, "Bai Gongzi, your Little White No. 2 has launched at last?"

Bai Gongzi laughed proudly. "Its maiden voyage. Though I am not fully satisfied. I wanted to build an ironclad ship, but it became too heavy to operate. For now, I can only build wooden ships fitted with steam turbines."

After arriving at Zhoushan Shipyard, Bai Gongzi had first designed a mighty iron vessel named Little White No. 1. Unfortunately, the ship proved too heavy and failed to function properly.

Left with no choice, he redesigned it into Little White No. 2.

This version still used steel for the keel, but the hull was entirely wooden, making it light enough to sail successfully.

"It is a pity that it must be wood," Bai Gongzi said with regret.

Zheng Sen suddenly spoke. "What is wrong with wood? I think this ship is already amazing. It moves so fast without sails or oars."

Bai Gongzi looked at him. "You understand ships?"

"A little."

"Wood is light," Bai Gongzi explained, "but it is not sturdy. One cannon shot and there will be a hole."

Zheng Sen spread his hands. "You overestimate cannons. Only your cannons fire far and accurately, and their shells explode. They are terrifying. Everyone else's cannons fire short and crooked, and their shells do not explode at all."

He continued, "Your wooden ships are more than enough to defeat anyone else. If someone wants to resist you, they would be the ones needing ironclads."

Bai Gongzi paused. "Is that so?"

Shi Lang nodded. "For now, that is true."

Bai Gongzi burst into laughter. "Then I can relax. We will mass produce these steam powered wooden ships first. I will continue researching iron ships later."

His mood brightened immediately. He waved his hand and shouted, "Little White No. 2, full speed ahead."

In the engine room, workers shoveled more coal into the furnace. Smoke thickened from the smokestack. A loud whistle shrieked, and the ship shot forward, disappearing like a streak across the sea.

Zheng Sen watched in awe. "Is that a celestial ship too?"

Shi Lang shook his head. "No. That was built entirely by mortal hands. Of course, it cannot compare to a celestial ship."

"It is already powerful," Zheng Sen replied. "You cannot compare everything to celestial artifacts."

His words made sense.

The Heavenly Lord could easily bestow celestial ships, yet he encouraged Bai Gongzi's research and trained countless shipbuilders. The reason was obvious.

Immortals could help for a time, but not forever.

In a mortal's lifetime, receiving help from immortals even once was already great fortune. It was impossible to expect them to solve every problem.

The same applied to shipbuilding.

Celestial ships were powerful, but they belonged to the immortals. Mortals had to learn to build their own ships with their own strength.

Shi Lang pointed toward the shore. "That is the shipyard. I will take you to see it."

"Alright," Zheng Sen replied.

The two disembarked at the dock, where workers bustled everywhere.

Goods from Luoyang were being unloaded in great quantities.

Zhoushan Island had no agriculture and no handicraft production. Everything relied on supplies from the mainland. Every day, ships transported necessities to sustain the workers.

Mountains of goods were stacked along the docks.

Zheng Sen picked up a bundle at random and was startled.

The items were of excellent quality, the kind only wealthy households could normally afford. Yet here they were piled up casually.

Workers carried them away while clerks recorded the distribution. These goods were clearly meant for ordinary laborers.

Zheng Sen fell silent.

This place was unlike anywhere he had ever seen.

Chapter 1065 What Does "Harvesting Leeks" Mean?

Zheng Sen looked over the docks, and awe filled his heart.

It was obvious that any worker on Zhoushan Island lived far better than the laborers under the Zheng family. The difference was impossible to ignore.

Mr. Li truly spared no effort in caring for his people.

Shi Lang pointed ahead. "Sen, see that? That is our newly established Zhoushan Naval Academy. Do you want to take a look?"

"Of course." Zheng Sen remembered Mr. Li mentioning it before. A naval academy that taught sea warfare. For a boy like him, there was nothing more appealing.

At the gate stood heavily armed soldiers. Even Shi Lang had to present something called a student ID before being allowed inside.

Zheng Sen felt a little nervous. He had no such identification.

However, the guards seemed to have received prior orders. They took out a portrait, compared it carefully with Zheng Sen's face, confirmed his name, and then stepped aside.

The two boys entered.

"What exactly do they teach here?" Zheng Sen asked. "Why is security so strict?"

"You will understand once you see," Shi Lang replied. "There is a class in session ahead."

They quietly approached the first classroom window.

Inside, a man stood at the podium. He was a Celestial Vessel pilot from Bai Family Fortress. He had once served Bai Yuan. Born near Horseshoe Lake, he had been an excellent swimmer since childhood. Later, he joined the Gao Family Village navy at Qichuan Ferry and became responsible for piloting celestial vessels. Years at the helm had given him vast experience.

A drawing of a celestial vessel was sketched across the blackboard.

"To become a qualified pilot," the instructor said confidently, "you must first understand how a celestial vessel works."

He pointed at the deck. "Observe this object carefully. It is called a Sun-Capturing Panel. It is a divine artifact lent by Flat Rabbit to Dao Xuan Tianzun, who then granted it to us. When sunlight strikes it, the panel converts solar energy into electricity. The electricity is then transmitted to batteries inside the hull for storage."

The students below responded in unison, "So that is how it works."

Outside the window, Zheng Sen felt his head spin. "What?"

The instructor continued, "When we activate the switch at the bow, the stored electricity flows through these wires to this location."

His pointer moved to the center of the drawing.

"Here is a massive device called the Celestial Engine. Once powered, it rotates at tremendous speed, driving the propeller at the stern."

He tapped the drawn propeller.

"This part is the only component we mortals can truly comprehend. It spins and pushes the water, allowing the vessel to move forward."

The students began taking notes diligently.

Zheng Sen stood frozen.

"No wonder the ship could move so fast without sails or oars. So that is the secret."

Shi Lang chuckled softly. "Now you understand why the knowledge here must remain confidential."

Zheng Sen swallowed. "Is it really acceptable for me to know such secrets?"

"If Dao Xuan Tianzun allows it," Shi Lang replied, "then it is acceptable."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is..."

"Mr. Li."

Shi Lang shrugged. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has shown unusual favor to your Zheng family. The first time he met you, he gifted your second uncle a marine chronometer. Now he permits you to enter the island and learn our inner secrets. Your family must be quite extraordinary."

Zheng Sen felt a strange tension in his chest.

They moved on to the second classroom.

The moment Zheng Sen peeked inside, he nearly jumped.

At the podium stood Li Daoxuan himself.

"Mr. Li is teaching personally?"

Shi Lang nodded. "Geography. Dao Xuan Tianzun sets aside a little time each day to teach it."

He tugged Zheng Sen's sleeve. "No need to hide. Let us go in properly."

They knocked lightly.

"Shi Lang and Zheng Sen request temporary permission to attend," Shi Lang announced.

"Enter," Li Daoxuan replied with a smile.

The two slipped inside and stood at the back of the room.

Li Daoxuan continued as if nothing had happened.

"The place we inhabit is a massive sphere called Earth. Earth contains seven continents and four major oceans. The land beneath our feet is called Asia. The ocean beside us is the Pacific Ocean."

He lifted a large bronze globe from beneath the podium and set it down heavily.

"We are here."

His finger shifted.

"Here lies the Qing Empire. Here is Japan. Here is Annam. Here is the Strait of Malacca. Here is Portugal. And here is the Red-Haired Country."

Zheng Sen's eyes widened. "So that is what the Red-Haired Country looks like."

Li Daoxuan traced a long path from the Red-Haired Country across Europe, down along Africa's coast, around the Cape of Good Hope, through the Indian Ocean, across Southeast Asia, and finally to Formosa.

"Observe how far their ships travel."

The classroom fell into stunned silence.

The length of that maritime route was overwhelming.

"We must acknowledge the vast gap between ourselves and the Western naval powers," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Only by recognizing the disparity can we strive to catch up."

"Acknowledge the gap. Strive to catch up," the students declared together.

Zheng Sen could not hold back. "Strive to catch up. Strive to surpass."

Li Daoxuan smiled at him. "Strive to surpass. Very good."

He continued, "Now let us return to our own region. We will discuss the monsoons and ocean currents along the southeastern coast. In the age of sail, these are essential for long-distance voyages."

He paused briefly.

"In the future, when steamships dominate, wind and currents will matter far less. However, while we may disregard them, the Westerners who still rely on sailing ships cannot. Once you master monsoons and ocean currents, you will know exactly when they arrive and when they must depart."

Shi Lang raised his hand.

"Yes, student?"

"If we know when the enemy comes and goes, we can ambush them."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Correct. But do not think only of war. Think also of trade. If you know when they arrive, you can prepare silk, porcelain, and other goods in advance. The moment they appear, you raise your sickle and harvest the Westerners' leeks."

The students burst into laughter.

Zheng Sen whispered, completely puzzled, "What does harvesting leeks mean?"

Shi Lang leaned closer. "Leeks grow back quickly after being cut. You can harvest them again and again."

Zheng Sen fell silent.

He had the feeling that this island was teaching far more than naval warfare.

It was teaching how to change the world.

Chapter 1066 That's the De Mausoleum

Zheng Sen listened to Li Daoxuan's geography lecture with a focus rare even among the older sailors in the room.

Li Daoxuan had just begun explaining seasonal wind patterns when the dismissal bell rang sharply through the academy compound. Without the slightest hesitation, he stopped mid-sentence.

"Every spring, the warm..."

He glanced at the clock mounted on the wall and smiled.

"Class dismissed."

The room erupted in movement.

Zheng Sen blinked in disbelief. "He actually stopped?"

Li Daoxuan stretched his shoulders lightly. "Dragging a lesson past the bell is a crime. If I dislike being delayed, I should not delay others. Time belongs to everyone."

With that, he walked calmly to the corner of the classroom, lowered himself cross-legged onto a cushion, and closed his eyes.

Within seconds, he was perfectly still.

Too still.

Zheng Sen stared. "What is he doing?"

Shi Lang answered as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. "Dao Xuan Tianzun has shifted his consciousness elsewhere. This body is just an avatar left behind. It will remain here until he returns."

Zheng Sen's mouth opened slightly.

He had sailed across oceans, seen cannon fire tear through hulls, and witnessed pirate battles soaked in blood. Yet this casual explanation unsettled him far more than any naval duel.

"What do you mean... shifted his consciousness?"

Shi Lang shrugged. "It means exactly what it sounds like."

Zheng Sen decided not to pursue the matter. Some things were better accepted than understood.

It was the short break between classes, and the academy corridors quickly filled with uniformed sailors. Many were active duty officers attending advanced instruction. Laughter echoed through the hallways as boots thudded against polished wooden floors.

The two boys walked past clusters of men deep in conversation.

"I sent my mother a bottle of that seafood soy sauce," one sailor said proudly. "Even added a basket of shrimp. Let her taste something different for once."

Another laughed. "My mother hates seafood. I sent rice instead."

"Rice?" the first man asked in confusion. "Who sends rice home?"

"You clearly haven't tried it. Zheng's merchant fleet brought in a shipment from Nanyang. Thai jasmine rice, they call it. Fragrant as incense. I bought ten catties and asked the militia brothers to deliver it back to Bai Family Fortress for me."

Zheng Sen could not help smiling faintly. "That shipment came from our fleet."

Shi Lang glanced at him with new appreciation. "Your family's reach is impressive. Trading across Nanyang at your age."

Zheng Sen looked down the corridor, thoughtful. "I have a feeling this island will go even farther. One day your trade won't stop at Nanyang. It will stretch straight into the Red-Haired nations."

Shi Lang chuckled. "That is part of Dao Xuan Tianzun's fourth objective. It is still far off. For now, we need to stabilize Nanyang first."

Zheng Sen hesitated, then spoke carefully. "Before pushing southward, there is one place we absolutely must secure."

Shi Lang raised a brow. "Let me guess. Yizhou Island."

Zheng Sen turned to him in surprise. "You think so too?"

Shi Lang nodded. "You saw the globe earlier. Yizhou sits right between Guangdong and Fujian, guarding the strait like a gatekeeper. If Westerners establish themselves there, every ship heading south sails under their shadow."

Zheng Sen's eyes sharpened. "If they control the island, can we truly claim the strait as ours?"

The two boys exchanged a look, excitement rising between them.

"Come," Shi Lang said. "Let's think through how we would take it."

They were still whispering strategies when the scene shifted hundreds of li away.

In the Changping region outside the capital, Wang Er, Bai Mao, and Ma Shouying had just regrouped after separate rescue operations.

Bai Mao had escorted civilians from Changzhou to safety and brought grim news with him. The Ming General-in-Chief, Chao Pichang, had surrendered the city without resistance, handing over Changzhou intact to Qing forces.

Had Gao Family Village not intervened, the entire population might have been driven northeast as slaves.

Bai Mao's anger had not cooled since hearing the story from the survivors. When he finished recounting it, Wang Er and Ma Shouying stood silent for a long moment.

Both men had once been rebels themselves. They understood corruption. They understood incompetence. But surrender without drawing a blade stirred something deeper.

"Government troops," Wang Er muttered at last, his voice edged with contempt, "are experts only at failing upward."

Ma Shouying gave a humorless smile. "They surrender cities, yet still collect stipends."

Before further bitterness could ferment, a scout galloped in and dismounted in a single fluid motion.

"Report. A Manchu unit has been sighted moving northeast."

"Northeast?" Wang Er unrolled a map over a crate and traced the direction with his finger. "There are no villages that way."

"There is an imperial mausoleum," the scout replied.

Ma Shouying's expression changed immediately. "The De Mausoleum."

Wang Er frowned. "Explain."

"It is the tomb of the Carpenter Emperor, Zhu Youxiao."

Understanding dawned slowly. "So the Manchus intend to plunder it."

The scout nodded. "They are not advancing quickly. Our cavalry could intercept them."

Wang Er leaned back slightly, thinking.

"They are not heading toward civilians," he said at last. "They seek treasure."

Ma Shouying looked at the scout calmly. "What did you just report?"

The scout blinked, then instantly corrected himself. "Ah. I remember now. There is a small village northwest of that position. The Manchu unit may threaten the common people there."

Ma Shouying nodded approvingly. "Then we advance to protect the villagers."

Wang Er laughed, the sound carrying a rough edge. "Full speed. Let the Manchus dig dirt if they wish. We defend the living."

That same night in the capital, Emperor Zhu Youjian stirred from sleep.

He rose quietly to relieve himself. His chamber was vast, yet empty. He rarely summoned consorts. Endless memorials consumed his days, leaving little strength for indulgence.

When he returned to bed, exhaustion quickly claimed him again.

And then the dream came.

He found himself standing inside the bedchamber of his elder brother, the Carpenter Emperor Zhu Youxiao.

The air felt heavy, thick with incense and finality. Candlelight flickered against carved beams. On the bed lay Zhu Youxiao, pale and thin, life slipping from him.

Zhu Youjian realized with a jolt that he stood exactly where he had once stood years ago.

A frail hand grasped his sleeve.

"I... cannot continue..." Zhu Youxiao whispered, his lips darkened, breath uneven. "The Ming realm... the ancestral altars... I entrust them to you..."

Zhu Youjian felt the old panic surge again.

"Imperial Brother..."

"My brother... you must become a Yao and Shun..."

The sentence never finished. Zhu Youxiao's head tilted to the side, and his arm fell limp.

Grief overwhelmed Zhu Youjian, just as it had that night long ago.

"Imperial Brother, without you I know nothing. How can I govern such a realm?"

Then, impossibly, the dead emperor opened his eyes.

A faint smile curved his lips.

"Do not burden yourself so heavily. I did not understand governance either. I only knew carpentry."

The tone was light, almost teasing.

"Do your best. That is enough."

His head tilted again. This time he did not move.

Zhu Youjian stared at him, confused. That was not how it had happened. His brother had not spoken so gently at the end.

The chamber began to blur.

He woke abruptly in his own bed, heart pounding.

The night was silent.

For a long time, he lay there without moving, staring into darkness, unsure whether what lingered in his chest was comfort or a heavier weight than before.

Far away, under the same sky, the De Mausoleum waited in stillness, unaware that soldiers marched toward it, and that history, once again, was shifting its pieces across the board.

Chapter 1067 Our Spy

The Chongzhen Emperor did not truly wake that night. He surfaced from sleep the way a drowning man breaks water, gasping not for air but for clarity.

The dream clung to him.

His elder brother's face, pale beneath candlelight. That faint, almost teasing smile that did not belong to a dying man. And those words.

Do your best. That is enough.

Zhu Youjian sat upright on the edge of the bed, his long sleeves sliding down his arms. The palace chamber felt colder than usual, though braziers still burned in the corners.

"Have I truly done my best?" he murmured to himself.

The question did not accuse him. That was the cruel part. It simply existed.

He stood and walked slowly across the chamber, hands clasped behind his back, the polished floor reflecting his thin silhouette. For years he had believed that diligence alone could repair a collapsing realm. Rise before dawn. Review memorials. Slash corruption. Punish incompetence. Demand loyalty.

Yet the realm still bled from a thousand unseen cuts.

"From this day forward," he said quietly, as though swearing to the darkness itself, "I will be even more diligent."

The doors burst open before the vow had fully settled in the air.

A eunuch stumbled inside, face streaked with tears, hat askew, breath ragged from running through corridor after corridor.

"Your Majesty!" he cried, dropping to his knees so fast his forehead struck the floor. "Calamity. Calamity beyond words."

Zhu Youjian felt his stomach tighten. When had there not been calamity?

"Speak clearly," he ordered, though his voice had already gone dry.

"The Manchu forces have burned the Dexin Mausoleum. The tomb of the Tianqi Emperor has been opened. The burial treasures are gone."

For a heartbeat, the world made no sound at all.

Zhu Youjian's fingers trembled.

He did not shout. He did not rage. He simply stepped backward as if struck, and slowly lowered himself onto the bed.

"No wonder," he whispered. "No wonder he came to me last night."

The eunuch dared not lift his head.

"His Imperial Majesty Tianqi... his tomb desecrated. The ancestral rites violated."

The emperor pressed a hand to his brow.

"My brother came to settle accounts," he said hoarsely. "He came because I failed to protect even his resting place."

The eunuch's voice cracked again as he forced out the next report. "The enemy vanguard has reached the West Zhimen Gate."

That finally shattered the fragile composure.

"They stand at the gates of the capital," Zhu Youjian roared, rising to his feet, "and where is the Minister of War? Where are the garrison commanders? Where are the relief armies stationed across the provinces? Has the realm grown so empty that no one remains to answer when We call?"

The eunuch trembled. "This servant will go immediately. I will summon them. I will assist in repelling the invaders."

"Then go," the emperor snapped. "Spare me further wailing."

The eunuch fled as if chased by executioners.

Before dawn had fully broken, appointments were made in haste. Eunuch Gao Qiqian was named supervising censor. Minister of War Zhang Fengyi was pushed forward as governor-general. Young nobles who had spent more time practicing calligraphy than archery were dragged from their mansions, handed weapons, and marched toward the walls.

By midmorning, the West Zhimen Gate was crowded with an army that looked more like a ceremonial parade gone wrong.

Some gripped spears backward. Others whispered nervously about whether their silk boots would be ruined by mud. Armor straps hung loose. Helmets sat crooked.

One veteran guard muttered under his breath, "Bandits would laugh at this lot."

Outside the walls, the Qing Grand General Ajige surveyed the scene from horseback.

He had expected resistance. He had expected pride. Instead he saw confusion.

Ajige threw his head back and laughed, the sound carrying easily across the open field.

"So this is the heart of the Central Plains," he said to the generals at his side. "A city full of trembling scholars and pampered sons."

A subordinate cleared his throat carefully. "General, the walls themselves are formidable. However weak the defenders, those fortifications will not fall easily."

Ajige shot him a sharp glance. "Do you think I cannot see stone and mortar with my own eyes?"

The general bowed.

Ajige gestured toward the countryside. "We hold position here. The rest of you disperse. Sweep the surrounding districts. Seize grain, seize livestock, seize people. If they hide behind walls, we will starve the land around them."

The Qing banners spread outward like ink dropped into water.

Dingxing burned. Fangshan fell. Zhuozhou fought and lost. Gu'an was stripped. Wen'an collapsed. Baodi was breached. Magistrate Zhao Guoding died defending his post. Shunyi, Huairou, Hexiwu, Miyun, Pinggu, one by one the names were added to the tally.

Within a single month, twelve cities had been taken. Fifty six engagements fought. Every official report recorded victory.

One hundred seventy nine thousand eight hundred people and animals seized.

In Ajige's tent, scribes recorded these triumphs carefully.

There were, however, inconvenient lines that disrupted the perfection.

On a certain date, Wang Pu, Regional Commander of Datong, led the Shanxi relief army and slew a number of Qing troops outside Changping.

Ajige frowned and struck a bold line through the entry.

Another report followed days later. Wang Pu again engaged Qing forces northeast of Changping and inflicted losses.

Another decisive stroke of the brush erased it.

History, Ajige believed, was a matter of proper editing.

When the official chronicle of the Great Qing was written, it would speak of unbroken victories. It would speak of unstoppable banners. It would not dwell on minor setbacks caused by some obscure regional commander.

He was still contemplating phrasing when a rider galloped into camp, nearly collapsing from exhaustion.

"General. The right flank skirmishers have been scattered by Wang Pu. The right side is exposed. If the enemy presses forward, they may strike toward the main camp."

Ajige's hand tightened around his brush.

In his mind, the terrain unfolded instantly. The capital to the south. His main force centered. The right flank now weakened.

If Ming forces surged from the gate while Wang Pu advanced from the northeast, even a disorganized mob could become dangerous when attacking from two directions.

"Who is this Wang Pu?" Ajige demanded.

The officers exchanged uncertain looks. "An unremarkable man, by reputation. However, he commands a peculiar firearms unit. Their weapons fire rapidly and with alarming precision."

Firearms.

The word irritated him.

He remembered the emperor's earlier covert plan, the one codenamed Jiang Gan Steals the Letter. A spy team had been sent deep into Ming territory to gather intelligence on these new weapons and disrupt their production.

They had vanished.

Most likely captured, tortured, executed.

Ajige allowed himself a brief moment of regret.

If that operation had succeeded, this so called firearms unit would pose no threat.

He sighed inwardly. "What a waste of capable men."

At that exact moment, in a bustling cafeteria inside the Chang'an Automobile Factory, Bin Sheng sneezed so violently that he nearly dropped his bowl.

"Someone must be thinking of me," he muttered, rubbing his nose.

Yanzi, seated beside him, narrowed her eyes. "Oh? Some other girl is thinking of you now?"

Bin Sheng nearly choked. "No, no. I was only joking."

"You were not listening to me," she said, arms folding.

"I was listening," he protested earnestly.

"Then repeat what I just said."

Bin Sheng straightened as though facing inspection. "You said that since I gave up my housing allocation to a fellow worker last time, I still do not have a marital home. But that is acceptable because you have been allocated a small house, and we may use yours first. In the future, I will continue striving for recognition as an advanced worker and labor model, and when the next housing allocation comes, we will apply for a larger home. Then we will have two children, one boy and one girl."

Yanzi's cheeks flushed.

"You did not need to say it so loudly," she whispered, glancing at the surrounding tables.

Too late.

The cafeteria workers were already smiling.

Some giggled. Others nodded approvingly.

"Yanzi is fortunate," one of the older women murmured. "Workshop head, steady income, promising future."

"Hardworking and upright," another added. "Not many like him."

Bin Sheng scratched his head awkwardly, unaware that far away a Qing general was mourning the imagined death of a spy team that had not only survived, but was currently debating housing plans and future children.

Ajige stared at the map in his tent and sighed.

"Our spies must have suffered terribly," he said quietly. "If only they were still alive."

In the factory cafeteria, Bin Sheng took another bite of his meal and sneezed again.

Yanzi pushed a handkerchief into his hand. "Wipe your nose. Workshop heads should maintain dignity."

He grinned.

Somewhere between imperial strategy and factory gossip, history continued moving, indifferent to who believed themselves victorious.

Chapter 1068 The Prince of Tang's Guard

Nanyang, Henan Province.

If one followed the cracked earth northeast of the city walls, past fields that had long forgotten the meaning of green, one would reach the villages most devastated by the drought. Here the wind carried dust instead of scent, and the wells offered more echo than water.

Days earlier, the Prince of Tang had submitted a memorial to the court, reporting horrors that should never have needed ink to describe. Mothers eating their daughters. Families trading flesh for one more day of breathing. The Chongzhen Emperor, moved and shaken, had allocated three taels and five mace of silver for relief, along with tax exemptions.

Three taels and five mace.

Even a moderately corrupt clerk could misplace that amount without noticing.

Tax exemption meant nothing to people who had no harvest to tax.

The common folk of Nanyang were not living. They were waiting to die more slowly.

Fortunately for them, Gao Family Village did not believe in waiting.

Bai Yuan rode at the head of a small militia column, accompanied by carts piled high with grain and steaming food. He did not storm into villages like a conquering general. He entered them as though stepping into a scholar's courtyard, measured and respectful.

Most refugees who still had strength had already fled north to Luoyang, where factories swallowed labor and returned wages in silver and rice. Those who remained were the cautious ones, the wounded in spirit. They had been deceived by officials promising relief that never arrived, extorted by bandits who called themselves saviors, and squeezed by gentry who spoke of virtue while hoarding grain.

Trust, for them, had become more precious than food.

"Instructor Bai," a militia soldier called softly, pointing toward a crumbling hut. "There's a family inside."

Bai Yuan nodded and dismounted. He adjusted his sleeves, ensuring his robe sat properly before approaching the doorway. Soldiers could frighten villagers even when bearing gifts. Steel and hunger did not coexist comfortably.

He stopped at the threshold and spoke with gentle courtesy.

"Forgive the intrusion. We have brought food."

After a long silence, the door creaked open a finger's width. Sunken eyes peered out.

Bai Yuan gestured, and a soldier stepped forward with a wooden tray holding four white steamed buns, still warm.

"Please take these first. If it is not enough, more awaits in the village center."

He did not linger to watch them eat. He turned and walked away, giving them the dignity of privacy.

It was a simple method, but desperation has a smell, and steamed bread carries one too.

Within minutes, doors opened throughout the village. Thin figures emerged cautiously, clutching buns as though they might vanish. Hunger overcame fear. They ate quickly, scarcely tasting the softness against their tongues.

When they approached the village square, what they found seemed almost unreal.

Large cauldrons simmered over controlled fires. Militia members ladled porridge into bowls without impatience or insult. Grain sacks lay openly stacked. No one demanded payment. No one recited edicts.

The villagers stared.

Only when they saw children being fed first did suspicion finally loosen its grip.

The square filled with hesitant murmurs, then with the faint stirrings of hope.

Bai Yuan watched quietly. He did not preach. He did not boast of Dao Xuan Tianzun's benevolence. Kindness that required advertisement was rarely sincere.

A scout came running from the outer perimeter, breathing hard.

"Instructor Bai. An armed force has left Nanyang city and is marching toward this direction."

Bai Yuan's brows lifted slightly. "The Nanyang garrison?"

The scout hesitated. "There is scarcely a garrison left to speak of. The city fell to bandits not long ago. What remains are scattered remnants."

"Then who marches?"

"They carry a 'Tang' banner," the scout replied, still sounding uncertain. "And another large banner reads, 'Coming to the Capital to Serve the King.'"

Bai Yuan paused.

"Tang."

Understanding dawned almost immediately.

"The Prince of Tang. Zhu Yujian."

The realization brought more concern than relief.

"How many?" he asked.

"Approximately one thousand."

Bai Yuan exhaled slowly. "Alas. His Highness has allowed impulse to outrun prudence."

Not far away, the army in question advanced with dust rising around its boots.

At its center rode Zhu Yujian, Prince of Tang, thirty four years of age and very much aware of it.

He was not content to live as a decorative branch of the imperial tree. While other princes cultivated calligraphy or concubines, he cultivated arguments. He had sparred with ministers over succession principles within the clan, offended powerful men without hesitation, and even beaten two of his uncles with a stick during a dispute that had grown beyond words. One had died afterward. The other had survived, though not gracefully.

Such a man could not remain idle while the capital trembled.

He had petitioned the throne for permission to raise troops and defend the dynasty. The emperor had refused.

Most princes would have bowed and retreated.

Zhu Yujian had instead opened his own treasury.

If the dynasty belonged to the Zhu clan, then it belonged to him as well. If the emperor's caution endangered the ancestral temples, then someone had to act.

Behind him rode his personal guard, roughly two hundred men, well equipped and disciplined. The remainder were recruited fighters, martial artists, hardened vagrants, and sturdy peasants drawn by silver and fervor. They were not polished, but neither were they cowards.

The Prefect of Nanyang followed in a carriage, face pale with anxiety.

"Your Highness," he pleaded once more, "please reconsider. Marching toward the capital with private troops invites suspicion. Even if your heart is loyal, the precedent is disastrous."

Zhu Yujian did not slow his horse.

"I march to serve the king, not to rebel. My intentions are transparent."

"The principle is the danger," the Prefect insisted. "If every prince raises troops at will, the realm fractures. The court will interpret this as defiance."

"The Emperor is not blind," Zhu Yujian replied firmly. "He will recognize sincerity."

The Prefect nearly wept. "I beg you. Turn back."

"Enough," Zhu Yujian said, waving him aside. "If fear ruled every decision, our ancestors would never have founded this dynasty."

Before the argument could continue, commotion erupted ahead.

From a patch of woodland burst a ragged mass of men carrying mismatched weapons. Two banners flapped above them, one bearing the characters Meng Hu, the other Du Hu.

The Prefect gasped. "The bandit brothers. They command tens of thousands."

Zhu Yujian's eyes brightened instead of dimming.

"Heaven presents an opportunity."

He raised his hand without hesitation.

"Prince's Guard, forward. Strike them."

The front ranks surged.

Meng Hu stared in disbelief. "Why are the Prince's Guard outside the city?"

Du Hu blinked. "Since when do nobles leave their gates?"

They did not have time to debate further.

The two hundred core guards hit like a hammer. Their armor was sound. Their formations held. Blades flashed in disciplined arcs. The bandits, accustomed to bullying starving peasants and isolated caravans, found themselves facing trained resistance.

The first clash broke their front line.

Behind the guards, the rest of Zhu Yujian's men roared and followed, emboldened by the sight of bandits stumbling backward.

Dust rose thick as fog.

Steel rang. Men shouted. A few moments of genuine resistance flickered, then cracked.

Meng Hu felt his confidence dissolve. "Retreat!"

Du Hu needed no second urging.

What had been a threatening ambush dissolved into chaotic flight.

Zhu Yujian reined in his horse, watching the bandits scatter across fields they had once terrorized.

He felt vindicated.

"Even before reaching the capital," he declared, loud enough for his men to hear, "we have struck down vermin. This proves our march is righteous."

Behind him, the Prefect of Nanyang pressed trembling fingers to his temples.

He was no longer certain whether he feared bandits, Manchus, or the unpredictable courage of princes more.

In the distance, Bai Yuan observed the rising dust and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

The Prince of Tang had chosen action over obedience.

Whether that would save the dynasty or fracture it further remained a question history had not yet answered.

Chapter 1069 This Porridge Was Wasted

The Prince of Tang's guard had scattered Meng Hu and Du Hu so quickly that even the bandits themselves had not fully understood what had happened. Years of surviving as rebels had given them one supreme instinct: when uncertain, run first and think later. By the time Zhu Yujian's men finished their first decisive push, the two bandit leaders were already gone, vanishing into scrubland with enviable efficiency.

Zhu Yujian, flushed with triumph, felt his confidence swell.

"These petty bandits," he declared proudly, "dare show themselves before this prince? From now on, wherever we march, such vermin shall be swept aside."

The Prefect of Nanyang, who had ridden behind in increasing despair, stared at him with complicated eyes. He had expected a reckless noble. What he had just witnessed, however, was not recklessness alone. It was competence. And competence in a prince marching without authorization was far more dangerous than incompetence.

If Zhu Yujian proved useless, the court might forgive him.

If he proved capable, suspicion would bloom like poison ivy.

The Prefect's mind raced. Once this news reached the capital, how would the emperor interpret it? A prince with private troops. A prince capable of defeating bandits. A prince proclaiming loyalty while marching north.

The Prefect swallowed.

There was only one safe course. He would write first.

Without waiting for further developments, he excused himself and hurried back toward Nanyang City, determined to draft a memorial that placed distance between himself and whatever consequences were brewing. In careful language, he would report that Prince Zhu Yujian acted independently, ignoring repeated counsel, and that as a mere prefect he lacked the authority to restrain imperial blood.

He would make it abundantly clear that none of this was his idea.

Meanwhile, in the drought-stricken village, Bai Yuan listened as a scout recounted the clash in precise detail.

When the report ended, Bai Yuan allowed himself a faint smile.

"So His Highness won," he murmured.

Then his expression shifted slightly.

"Bandits are courageous only when they believe they hold the advantage. Once they realize the opponent is organized and disciplined, their courage evaporates. But once they understand that this force is merely a prince's private guard and not an imperial army, they may regain their nerve. When that happens, the Prince of Tang will discover that first victories are sometimes the most misleading."

Another scout approached at a brisk pace.

"Instructor Bai, the Prince of Tang's guard is approaching this village. It appears they intend to enter and rest."

Bai Yuan nodded calmly.

"Then let us receive them properly. Inform His Highness that the Xiaolangdi militia is here conducting disaster relief under the Governor's orders. If he wishes to enter, he is welcome. We will share food."

He paused, then added in a lighter tone.

"And put away the firearms. There is no need for His Highness to develop unnecessary curiosity."

The militia soldiers grinned and quietly removed their muskets from sight, tucking them into carts or covering them with cloth. Discipline was second nature to them, and discretion even more so.

As for the villagers, news of an approaching princely guard produced immediate unease. Many who had only just begun to trust retreated once more into their crumbling homes, clutching their bowls. To starving peasants, nobles were rarely symbols of comfort.

Before long, the Prince of Tang's men entered the village.

Zhu Yujian rode in with an expression of mild curiosity. He had intended only to rest briefly, allowing his troops to recover after their exertion. Instead, he found himself greeted by orderly relief operations and disciplined militia members who neither bowed excessively nor groveled.

He dismounted and surveyed the scene.

Large cauldrons simmered at the center of the village. The porridge within was thick, not the watery mockery so often served in the name of relief. If one inserted a chopstick upright, it would likely stand firm rather than sink.

Zhu Yujian felt a flicker of approval.

"This is genuine relief," he thought. "Not mere display."

Bai Yuan stepped forward, sleeves gathered neatly, posture composed.

"I am Bai Yuan, instructor of the Xiaolangdi militia. I pay my respects to His Highness, the Prince of Tang."

Zhu Yujian studied him briefly and sensed refinement beneath simplicity. He returned the courtesy without hesitation.

"These disaster victims are my people as well," Zhu Yujian said earnestly. "I could not assist them myself. For your efforts, Instructor Bai, you have my thanks."

Bai Yuan inclined his head.

"To do good without calculating the future," he replied softly, "is often the only way good may be done at all."

Zhu Yujian laughed lightly.

"Well spoken. As I march north, I follow the same principle. If one acts rightly, why fear consequences?"

"You are a courageous man, Your Highness."

"Courage is too grand a word," Zhu Yujian replied. "I merely refuse to sit idle."

Their exchange might have continued in mutual respect had events elsewhere in the village not taken a more heated turn.

One of the Prince's officers, a man clad in polished scale armor, strode directly to the porridge cauldrons. Without greeting anyone, without so much as a nod to the militia distributing food, he seized a bowl and dipped a ladle deep into the thick porridge.

Steam curled upward.

The act itself was not the issue. The militia had no intention of denying food to hungry soldiers. But the manner of it, the assumption that he need not ask, that this was his by right, carried the sour taste of entitlement.

A militia member standing nearby narrowed his eyes.

"Hold it," he said evenly. "This porridge is being distributed in order. You could at least ask."

The armored officer snorted, patting his chest where metal scales overlapped with a sharp clatter.

"Do you see this armor? Do you know who I serve?"

The militia soldier's expression did not change.

"I see armor. I do not see manners."

Several nearby militia members chuckled under their breath.

The officer's pride flared.

"What's wrong with taking a bowl? We just suppressed bandits."

"If you had asked," the militia soldier replied calmly, "a bowl would have been yours. But since you assume it is owed to you, we must clarify that it is not."

As he spoke, he extended his left hand and grasped the bowl.

The officer tightened his grip and pulled.

To his surprise, the bowl did not move an inch.

He applied more force. Veins stood out on his wrist. The bowl remained suspended between them, steady as a stone.

The officer's surprise quickly turned to irritation. He had not expected strength from a man holding a ladle.

With his free hand, he swung a punch toward the militia soldier's face.

It was a mistake.

Until that moment, the confrontation had remained a contest of pride. The instant the fist came forward, it became something else.

The militia soldier shifted slightly, the long ladle in his right hand sweeping upward with practiced precision. The reach of a ladle exceeds that of a fist, and in close quarters that difference matters.

The wooden scoop struck the officer squarely on the forehead.

Thwup.

A generous portion of steaming porridge followed, splattering across his face and dripping down the polished scales of his armor.

The officer staggered backward with a yelp.

"Hot! Hot!"

The militia soldier calmly retrieved the bowl in the same motion and stepped back.

"Good thing the bowl didn't spill," he remarked lightly. "No waste."

A nearby militia member shook his head in exaggerated sorrow.

"You smeared half a ladle on his face. That was waste."

The first soldier sighed theatrically.

"You are right. To waste good porridge in such a manner... I must reflect deeply on my mistake."

Laughter rippled through the militia ranks.

Across the square, Zhu Yujian turned at the commotion, his brows knitting slightly.

The drought had wasted enough already.

Now even porridge was being wasted on pride.

Chapter 1070 Here They Come Again

The minor scuffle spread through the village faster than dry grass catching fire.

The Prince of Tang's guards moved almost in unison, hands settling on their saber hilts out of instinct rather than command. Across from them, the Gao Family Village Militia stepped forward as well, not aggressively, but with no intention of yielding ground.

The flintlock rifles had been discreetly put away earlier to preserve courtesy, yet that did not mean the militia stood unarmed. Each man carried a concealed military knife beneath his rough working clothes, and none of them looked nervous. They stood with the quiet steadiness of men who had faced worse than wounded pride.

The air in the center of the village grew heavy.

Bai Yuan and Zhu Yujian had been speaking with measured civility only moments earlier. The sudden clamor cut through their conversation, and both men turned at once. What they saw made them frown in equal measure.

Their subordinates were one breath away from open violence.

They hurried forward.

"What is going on?" Zhu Yujian demanded, his tone firm, more incredulous than furious.

"What happened here?" Bai Yuan asked, his gaze already searching for the soldier involved.

The guard commander, his face still smeared with thick porridge, pointed at himself in indignation. "I only wanted a bowl of congee," he said angrily. "This man refused and threw it in my face."

Zhu Yujian studied him in silence.

He knew his own men. He also knew the world.

In times like these, commoners trembled before uniforms. A commander of a princely guard stood before them, and a village militiaman dared strike him without cause? The story did not sit right.

Bai Yuan turned to his soldier. "Explain clearly."

The militia soldier snapped to attention and saluted. "He approached without greeting anyone and helped himself to a bowl. I stopped him because that was improper. He struck first. I retaliated. That is all."

His voice was steady, neither defensive nor agitated.

Bai Yuan needed only a glance to know the man was telling the truth.

Yet the guard commander's pride had already ignited. "I am a commander of the Prince of Tang's personal guard. Even if I cut down a man like him, it would be justified."

Several militia members narrowed their eyes at that.

Behind his back, Bai Yuan made a subtle gesture. It was small, almost casual. His personal guards understood immediately. One man slipped away quietly, as if merely going to fetch more firewood.

If the situation turned ugly, the hidden flintlock rifles would reappear.

Bai Yuan did not desire bloodshed, but neither would he allow his men to be trampled by empty rank.

Everything now depended on Zhu Yujian.

Unbeknownst to him, his own life hung in the balance. Should he choose to defend his commander purely out of status and arrogance, this modest village would transform into a killing field within moments.

Zhu Yujian looked at the porridge-smearred face of his commander, then at the upright militia soldier who showed no fear.

Memories stirred.

He remembered the years of confinement with his father, imprisoned because of family intrigue, surviving on coarse rice secretly delivered by a minor official named Zhang Shutang. Sixteen years behind stone walls had taught him something many pampered nobles never learned.

Power without justice was merely brutality with a title.

He let out a quiet scoff.

"You say he was disrespectful?" Zhu Yujian said to his commander. "With that uniform on your back, what commoner would dare insult you without provocation? Do not make me a laughingstock."

The square went still.

The militia who had been preparing to retrieve their weapons froze where they stood.

Even the Prince's own guards were stunned.

"No one is injured," Zhu Yujian continued evenly. "The matter ends here. Go wash your face. You look ridiculous."

The commander flushed with humiliation and stepped back stiffly.

He walked to the village well, only to discover that the water had dwindled to a muddy trickle at the bottom. The drought had not spared even this place. He stood there awkwardly, unsure what to do.

A wet cloth was extended toward him.

He turned and saw the militia soldier.

For a moment, neither spoke.

The commander took the cloth and wiped his face clean. Steam still rose faintly from the fabric, and the porridge smell clung stubbornly to his armor. When he finished, he handed the cloth back.

Their eyes met. The earlier hostility had thinned, replaced by something more complicated. Embarrassment perhaps. Recognition perhaps.

Across the square, Bai Yuan relaxed almost imperceptibly. The signal was withdrawn. The flintlock rifles would remain hidden.

He clasped his fists toward Zhu Yujian. "Your Highness handles matters with fairness. That is rare."

Zhu Yujian waved him off lightly. "Fairness is not rare. It is merely inconvenient."

Bai Yuan allowed himself a faint smile, then said more seriously, "Your Highness, about your decision to raise troops in service of the emperor, I still believe it deserves careful thought."

Zhu Yujian arched a brow. "You too? The Prefect of Nanyang chased me for miles to persuade me otherwise. I thought you were not the pedantic sort. I lead this force without selfish intent. My loyalty is genuine. Surely His Majesty will recognize that."

Bai Yuan hesitated. "His Majesty's temperament..."

He did not finish.

Two scouts burst into the village at nearly the same moment, one from the Prince's guards, the other from the militia. Breathless, they spoke over each other.

"Bad news. Meng Hu and Du Hu are attacking again."

Zhu Yujian blinked in disbelief. "Meng Hu and Du Hu? I scattered them myself. They fled like frightened rats. They dare return?"

Bai Yuan's expression, however, grew thoughtful.

Earlier, the bandits had retreated because they had not understood the strength or composition of the force opposing them. Caution had driven them away.

But once they regrouped and conducted proper reconnaissance, they would have realized the truth. What had routed them was not an imperial army, but merely the personal guard of a prince.

And across the land, the word "prince" did not inspire fear.

It inspired contempt.

Meng Hu and Du Hu had recovered their courage.

Now they were coming back.