

Great Ming 931

Chapter 931 A Purchase for Pure Enjoyment

As the train thundered past Heyang County and crossed the Linyi Yellow River Bridge, the masked man's shouting grew increasingly unrestrained.

"Wow, a bridge! What an enormous bridge! What an incredible bridge! The divine bridge bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, I've finally seen it! Hahahahaha! Hahahahaha! This trip was absolutely worth it! I want to get off! I want to get off and play on the bridge!"

The moment Shi Kefa heard that, a deeply embarrassing memory from his own past surfaced.

He covered his face with one hand.

The train swept across the massive bridge and soon slowed to a stop at Sunji Town Station, located right at the bridgehead.

The masked man sprang to his feet, clearly intending to jump off immediately.

One of his guards hastily grabbed him. "My lord, you cannot disembark. This is a very small station, and the stop is only five minutes long. If you go strolling on the bridge, you will not make it back in time."

The masked man gasped. "What? Can I not just take the next train?"

The guard lowered his voice. "There is only one train per day, my lord. The next one will not arrive in Sunji Town until this time tomorrow. If you delay a full day, you will miss the maiden voyage of the new ship and will not make it to Nanjing."

The masked man visibly deflated.

Though his face was hidden behind black cloth, his slumped shoulders conveyed pure disappointment. He collapsed back into his seat with a heavy thud.

"Why is there only one train a day?" he complained bitterly. "That is absurd! Increase the schedule! Make it ten trips a day!"

The guard smiled helplessly and tried to placate him. "My lord, the trains are not fast enough yet. Even managing one round trip per day already stretches the system."

The masked man snorted. "Then throw money at it! Fund research! Just improve the steam engine efficiency. Is that not simple? What is his name, go tell Young Master Bai. Ask him how much research funding he needs. I will pay!"

The guard leaned in even closer. "Hush. Shi Kefa is watching."

The masked man immediately shut his mouth.

Shi Kefa had not heard the last part, only the earlier remarks. He found them strangely amusing. He had initially suspected this man was some sort of criminal, but now it seemed more likely that he was merely a naive scion of wealth, perhaps a rich heir from a family with mines, venturing outside for the first time and utterly overwhelmed by the world.

Still, despite being wealthy, the masked man did not seem particularly young. How could someone his age remain so unworldly? Normally, children of great families traveled extensively with elders from an early age.

Questions swirled in Shi Kefa's mind.

In the end, since the man did not seem criminal after all, Shi Kefa lost interest in watching him and returned to his book on Management Science.

The great train continued its whistling journey, and before long, Puzhou came into view.

"Puzhou!" the masked man shouted excitedly as scenery flashed by. "The heart of the realm! I must see it!"

"My lord," the guard said, "this is a major station. The train will stop for half an hour. If you hurry, you can explore the area around the station."

"Hahaha! Then what are we waiting for?"

The masked man leapt off the train and vanished in a blink.

Shi Kefa shook his head with a smile.

Half an hour later, the masked man returned just in time, accompanied by his guards, all of them loaded down with purchases. The masked man himself clutched a wooden puppet from Xiaoyi, while his guards carried bags and bundles stacked high.

It was obvious he had gone on a shopping spree.

Shi Kefa could not help but comment, "Buying things at a train station costs dearly. An item worth two taels elsewhere might sell for five here."

The masked man turned in surprise. "Oh? Is that so?"

The guards nodded. "Yes, my lord. You overpaid."

The masked man frowned. "Then why did no one tell me?"

The guards replied honestly, "Your subordinates did not wish to ruin your enjoyment."

The masked man froze for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"You are right! Why argue over prices when it ruins the mood?" He waved his hand grandly. "Consider the extra silver as simply purchasing happiness."

Shi Kefa gave him a thumbs up. "Magnanimous."

The masked man laughed even louder. "I hate it when people praise me. I really do not like, cough, cough."

He had spoken too quickly and nearly blurted out a familiar phrase. Startled, he forcefully stopped himself.

Shi Kefa blinked. "???"

For some reason, Shi Kefa found himself growing fond of this strange masked man. Traveling alone was dull, and having such an entertaining companion made the journey far more pleasant.

The two chatted intermittently all the way to Hedong City, the end of the railway line.

Beyond that point, the railway was still under construction, so they transferred to a solar powered bus. With the two of them and their personal guards aboard, the large bus, meant to carry dozens, was completely filled, effectively becoming their private vehicle.

Seeing how long they had traveled together, Shi Kefa felt inclined to befriend him. "May I ask your esteemed name, my friend?"

The masked man replied proudly, "I am Zhu Piaoling, known in the martial world as the Wandering Swordsman of the Four Seas."

"The martial world?" Shi Kefa mused. "Have you truly roamed it? I cannot help feeling this is your first time traveling far from home."

Zhu Piaoling fell silent.

He cursed inwardly. As expected of the Judicial Commissioner, those eyes were terrifying.

He laughed awkwardly. "To walk the martial world, one must first learn to boast. Though this is indeed my first journey away from home, my boasting skills have already reached full mastery."

Shi Kefa laughed heartily. "Hahaha! I understand. So that title is self bestowed, Brother Zhu. Still, it is a fine name. What man does not dream of upholding justice and chivalry? Unfortunately, most of us are shackled by worldly affairs and cannot leave so freely. I truly admire your courage in stepping out."

Zhu Piaoling beamed. "You think I should step out? That is wonderful!"

Suddenly, the guard interrupted, "My lord, we are approaching another bridge, the Xiaolangdi Yellow River Bridge."

"A great bridge!" Zhu Piaoling instantly abandoned the conversation and rushed to the window, plastering himself against the glass like a lizard. "Magnificent! Absolutely magnificent! I want to get off. Let me onto the bridge!"

"Do not rush," the guard said gently. "Once we cross, we will arrive at Xiaolangdi Station. You will have time to play then."

Zhu Piaoling laughed uproariously. "Excellent! Truly excellent!"

As promised, once the bus came to a full stop at Xiaolangdi Station, Zhu Piaoling leapt out immediately. He sprinted onto the southern bridgehead, spread his arms wide, and ran wildly toward the northern end.

Shi Kefa stepped off the bus, laughing as he shouted, "Do not do that! You will end up on Gaojia News!"

Zhu Piaoling laughed even louder. "I am not afraid! With my perfect disguise, no one will know who I am. Why would I fear Gaojia News?"

Shi Kefa froze. "!!!"

So Zhu Piaoling was clearly an alias.

This man had a story.

Shi Kefa considered briefly. If he dispatched the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he might uncover something astonishing. However, this man seemed harmless, almost innocent. Digging into his secrets would be unkind.

Forget it. No need to invite trouble.

He waved toward Zhu Piaoling's retreating figure, then turned and headed for the military docks of the Xiaolangdi naval base.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had instructed him to transfer there, to a new ship bound for Anqing.

Chapter 932 The Wanli Sunshine

Shi Kefa soon arrived at the military port in Xiaolangdi.

As a military port, security was naturally tight. The moment he approached the entrance, several militia soldiers swiftly stepped forward.

"Who goes there?" they challenged.

Shi Kefa quickly clasped his hands in a respectful bow. "Shi Kefa, by Dao Xuan Tianzun's command, I have come to Xiaolangdi military port to board the new ship."

"What is Dao Xuan Tianzun's password for you?" the guard asked. "Without it, you could be an impostor, a false Shi Kefa."

"Three updates daily," Shi Kefa promptly replied.

"Average subscriptions over ten thousand," the guard responded.

"Thirty-Two Transformations," Shi Kefa stated.

"Is a eunuch," the guard concluded.

The codes matched!

The guard's expression instantly softened from stern to amiable. "Master Shi, please enter."

Shi Kefa mused to himself, Dao Xuan Tianzun's camps are indeed strictly managed. Far more orderly than those of some of the court's own generals.

Just as he pondered this, hurried footsteps echoed behind him.

Zhu Piaoling, who had journeyed with him, arrived practically flying forward, shouting, "Wait for me, Brother Shi! Fancy running into you again here!"

"Oh?" Shi Kefa uttered.

Zhu Piaoling reached the gate, and the guard's face snapped back to a serious expression. "Who goes there?"

Zhu Piaoling immediately declared, "Zhu Piaoling, the wandering hero of the Four Seas! Dao Xuan Tianzun has specially granted me permission to board the new ship and travel to Nanjing for leisure!"

"What is Dao Xuan Tianzun's password for you?" the guard asked.

"Subscribing is the best support," Zhu Piaoling promptly responded.

"Tipping should always be within one's means," the guard returned.

"Those who rush for updates will be executed," Zhu Piaoling stated.

"Those who praise the author will be highlighted," the guard finished.

The codes matched again!

The guard smiled. "Hero Zhu, please enter."

Shi Kefa was utterly astonished. "Brother Zhu, you actually have Dao Xuan Tianzun's password too, and are allowed into the military port? You... just what..."

He desperately wanted to ask, Just who are you?

But as the words reached his lips, his adult social instincts forced him to swallow them back.

Zhu Piaoling chuckled. "Do not underestimate me. I am also someone favored by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Now certain that Zhu Piaoling was one of their circle, Shi Kefa finally let down his guard. Together, they walked deeper toward the military port's dock, where a hidden cove concealed by Eagle's Beak Cliff lay out of sight.

But as they rounded the cliff and looked ahead, both of them sucked in sharp breaths.

Before them lay an enormous ship, over a hundred meters long.

Zhu Piaoling's jaw nearly hit the ground. "This... this is huge?"

Shi Kefa was just as stunned. He had once heard that Western three-masted galleons could reach dozens of feet in length, already considered terrifyingly large.

Yet this divine vessel bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun appeared even larger than the grandest Western warships.

"It's so massive. Can it even sail in the Yellow River?" Shi Kefa exclaimed in disbelief. "And if this were used in naval warfare, wouldn't it be invincible?"

Zhu Piaoling, however, frowned thoughtfully. "So big? Sailing such a huge ship all the way to Nanjing would draw too much attention. Every regional navy along the route would stop us for inspections."

Those words jolted Shi Kefa awake.

His mind snapped alert, and he hurried toward the ship's base. There, countless dockworkers were hauling supplies aboard with frantic energy. Vast quantities of rice, flour, oil, salt, tea, along with cotton clothes, woolen sweaters, iron equipment, and more.

Basket after basket was carried onto the ship without pause.

Bai Yuan stood on the dock, loudly directing the operation.

Shi Kefa rushed over. "Master Bai."

"Ah. You are..." Bai Yuan began.

"I am Shi Kefa," he said.

"Ah, yes, yes, of course." Bai Yuan nodded. "Shi Kefa. I remember clearly."

"This is the new ship Dao Xuan Tianzun mentioned?" Shi Kefa asked.

A look of immense pride spread across Bai Yuan's face. "Precisely! This is the one. Dao Xuan Tianzun bestowed it upon us just a few days ago and personally named it the Wanli Sunshine. I had the sailors training nonstop, and even so, it has been a challenge to get it running properly. This vessel is so immense it defies common sense. Mastering its operation is no small feat."

He gestured toward the supplies. "Everything being loaded now is for you."

Bai Yuan clapped Shi Kefa on the shoulder. "Of course, not truly for you. They are for the common people of Anqing Prefecture and Chizhou Prefecture. Minister Shi, you are an honest official. I do not even need to say more."

Shi Kefa naturally understood. He spoke anxiously, "That is not my concern. Rather... such an enormous ship sailing so openly. It will pass countless prefectures and counties on its way down the Yellow River and out to sea. How could the imperial navy not investigate? What should we do?"

"Do not worry," Bai Yuan said calmly. "We already have a solution."

He smiled and waved his hand. "Tie Niaofei, explain it to him."

From the nearby crowd, Tie Niaofei stepped forward with a grin. "Oh, Minister Shi, you are already here? Discussing inspections along the route? Hahaha, there is no need to worry."

He produced a token. "See this? An Imperial Merchant's token."

"Oh?" Shi Kefa responded.

Tie Niaofei chuckled. "I have been appointed an Imperial Merchant by the court. I may travel freely throughout the realm, conducting business everywhere. No local official may obstruct me."

"But even so," Shi Kefa hesitated, "the navy will surely question such a massive ship..."

Tie Niaofei's expression suddenly hardened. He raised the token and barked in a fierce tone, "Which naval battalion are you from? How dare you inspect my ship? Do you know who I am? I am an Imperial Merchant procuring supplies for the royal court! This vessel is a royal secret, and everything aboard is classified. Anyone who dares pry will be charged with treason! You have never seen this ship. Do you understand?"

After finishing, his face instantly relaxed, and he laughed. "Minister Shi, do you think that would scare them enough?"

Shi Kefa did not know whether to laugh or cry. "Is this not essentially forging an imperial decree?"

"I am protecting the navy, actually," Tie Niaofei laughed. "Would they really enjoy the consequences if they offended us?"

Shi Kefa thought it over carefully. It did seem true.

Sigh. Forging an imperial decree is clearly wrong, yet somehow the outcome is good.

By this point, the loading of supplies was nearly complete.

The sailors began boarding as well.

This maiden voyage carried enormous significance. The ship was vast and difficult to handle. It had to leave the Yellow River, enter the open sea, then sail into the Yangtze River.

It was a monumental test for everyone involved.

Each sailor wore a solemn expression, heavy with responsibility.

Amid this seriousness, one person stood in stark contrast.

Zhu Piaoling leapt onto the narrow gangplank with flourish. He strode, no, pranced forward, laughing loudly. "Riding such a huge ship to the Qinhuai River! All the ladies there will kneel for me, hahahaha!"

"My lord," a guard said cautiously, "although this is a river and sea vessel, it is far too large for a small river like the Qinhuai. It can only enter the Yangtze."

"Eh? Cannot go?" Zhu Piaoling asked.

Distracted as he spoke, his foot slipped.

Splash!

He fell straight into the river.

Chapter 933 Ambush on the River

Xingyang, downstream from Gubaidu Ferry, at the Sanhe Ferry crossing.

Two warships lay hidden inside a cove near the crossing, their hulls pressed tight against the shadowed riverbank.

The sailors aboard leaned over the gunwales, eyes fixed on the Yellow River ahead, their expressions cold and focused.

Standing among them was an old acquaintance of Gao Family Village.

Zhai Tang.

One of the Eight Great Jin Merchants.

Years ago, after Zhai Tang betrayed Tie Niaofei in the Hedong Circuit, Gao Family Village had reported him directly to the Supreme Commander of Xuan-Da. Supreme Commander Zhang Zongheng launched a sweeping investigation along the frontier, purging the border armies of Han traitors and collaborators.

Zhai Tang's business empire collapsed overnight.

For several years afterward, he was forced to lie low, keeping his head down, burying his ambitions, surviving quietly in the shadows.

But Zhai Tang adapted quickly.

If he could not sell supplies to the Manchus, then selling them to rebels was just as profitable. In fact, it was even better. The rebels' gold, silver, and jewels were all looted wealth. Since it was not their own, they spent freely, often far more extravagantly than the Manchus ever had.

Once again, Zhai Tang was rolling in money.

And once his financial troubles were resolved, a fierce desire for revenge ignited within his heart.

He wanted Tie Niaofei dead.

He wanted everyone standing behind Tie Niaofei dragged down with him.

However, this was no easy task.

The other side possessed flintlock rifles and strange hand grenades.

To counter them, Zhai Tang had reinforced his ships with thick wooden planks to block bullets. Behind those planks, he even constructed concealed bunkers. Whenever grenades were thrown, his men could retreat inside and avoid the blast.

Yet the result last time had been disastrous.

The boats he dispatched were completely annihilated. Not a single subordinate survived. No one escaped to report what had gone wrong.

Zhai Tang could not understand it.

But that did not matter.

Those destined for greatness had the courage to fail.

If it did not work once, he would simply try again.

This time, Zhai Tang prepared two massive tower warships, each carrying large numbers of soldiers armed with muskets and Three-Eyed Arquebuses.

"Oh, their flintlock rifles are impressive, are they?" Zhai Tang sneered. "This time, I have flintlock rifles too. And plenty of them."

He refused to believe that those flat, crude plank boats without even a deckhouse could defeat his towering warships.

"They're here!" a sailor suddenly shouted. "My lord, the cargo ship with the colorful flag has appeared!"

Zhai Tang stepped forward and looked out across the river.

Sure enough, a flat-bottomed plank boat unique to that mysterious faction emerged from Gubaidu Ferry and began sailing downstream.

Zhai Tang's spirits lifted instantly.

"Capture that boat," he shouted. "I will reward a hundred taels of gold!"

Cheers erupted from his subordinates.

Zhai Tang himself, however, jumped down into a small skiff and calmly rowed back toward the shore.

Battles were not something a man of his status needed to personally participate in.

The two tower warships surged forward, charging straight toward Gao Family Village's cargo vessel.

The cargo ship spotted them almost immediately.

After the previous ambush on Jiang Cheng, Gao Family Village's ships had become far more vigilant. Unidentified vessels were no longer allowed to approach freely.

The moment the cargo ship confirmed hostile intent, it immediately turned and fled.

Someone aboard grabbed a tin megaphone and shouted toward the pursuers.

"Who are you? State your identity and intentions immediately! Do not approach this vessel any further, or you will be deemed pirates! I repeat, who are you..."

The two tower ships ignored the warning entirely and continued their aggressive pursuit.

Gao Family Village's cargo ship was powered by an electric engine. Once it opened its throttle, its speed increased sharply. The wooden tower ships had no hope of catching up from behind alone.

But at that moment, from another cove upstream along the Yellow River, two more tower ships emerged.

They blocked the cargo ship's escape route.

Zhai Tang had prepared four warships in total, forming a deadly encirclement from both front and rear.

The sailors aboard the cargo ship tensed instantly.

There was no longer any need to question the enemy's intentions.

This was a battle.

"All hands, battle stations!"

"Prepare for combat!"

"They mean trouble. Do not let them get close!"

"Open fire!"

Flintlock rifles thundered. Bullets streaked toward the four encircling tower ships.

Zhai Tang's preparations this time were even more thorough. The wooden planks mounted on the tower ships were thicker than before. Anti-grenade bunkers were scattered across the decks. Once the towering deckhouses closed in, his men would be able to attack from a commanding height.

The sailors aboard Gao Family Village's cargo ship understood clearly.

If the enemy closed the distance, they would lose.

Yet their flintlock rifles alone could not halt the enemy's advance.

Amid the constant crack of gunfire, the encirclement tightened.

At the same time, several li upstream.

The Wanli Sunshine continued downstream at cruising speed.

On deck, the atmosphere was relaxed.

"Along the riverbanks, monkey cries never cease..." Zhu Piaoling suddenly recited.

Shi Kefa frowned. "There are no monkeys by the river at all. Do not recite poetry just for the sake of it. It does not match the scenery. Besides, it should be 'apes' cries.' What kind of poetry uses 'monkey cries'?"

Zhu Piaoling scratched his head. "Huh? Is there really a difference?"

Shi Kefa shot him a sideways glare.

Tie Niaofei laughed. "I also felt like reciting poetry on this trip. I've traveled land routes my whole life. Sailing by water feels rather novel. Although this boat rocking back and forth is making me uncomfortable."

Shi Kefa retorted irritably, "A salt smuggler getting seasick? That is unheard of."

He had barely finished speaking.

A lookout's voice rang out sharply from above.

"Water battle ahead!"

The shout jolted the entire Wanli Sunshine.

Sailors who had been resting sprang to their feet and rushed toward their stations.

Shi Kefa was startled. "What happened?"

The group hurried toward the bow.

Jiang Cheng was already there, telescope in hand, staring downstream. After only a few breaths, his face twisted with rage.

"Someone is attacking our cargo vessel!" he roared. "Damn it, is it that same bastard who ambushed me last time?"

"Prepare for battle!"

"All hands on the Wanli Sunshine, prepare for combat!"

The atmosphere aboard the ship shifted instantly.

Moments earlier, the crew had been moving casually. Now they transitioned into full combat readiness. Navigation crews, combat teams, and damage control teams moved with clear division of labor.

As this was the Wanli Sunshine's maiden voyage, there was brief confusion as sailors ran above and below deck.

But order quickly returned.

Combat sailors raised their flintlock rifles. With sharp clicks, bullets were loaded.

At the bow, Jiang Cheng roared, "Our cargo vessel is in danger! Full speed ahead! Accelerate immediately and rescue our people!"

Inside the cabin, the navigation crew seized the gear lever.

It was marked clearly with two settings.

Cruising Speed.

Combat Speed.

The lever was currently set to Cruising Speed.

The sailor shoved it forward with all his strength.

With a solid thud, the lever slammed into Combat Speed.

The motor roared.

Power surged to its maximum.

The Wanli Sunshine charged forward at full speed.

Chapter 934 Charge Through

The four towering warships were drawing closer.

If the vessel they had cornered were an ordinary merchant ship, it would have been captured long ago. Unfortunately for them, this was a Gao Family Village freight vessel. It was fast, agile, and constantly weaving and maneuvering, using its superior speed to evade capture again and again, dragging the pursuit on for what felt like an eternity.

However, the Yellow River was not the Yangtze.

Its channel was far narrower, leaving little room for prolonged evasive maneuvers.

The four warships pressed inward, their encirclement tightening with every passing moment.

If even one of them managed to secure grappling hooks, the outcome would be unimaginably grim.

The sailors fired frantically, but their bullets still failed to stop the enemy from closing in.

"They're preparing to board!"

"Everyone, be careful!"

Just then, a sailor shouted at the top of his lungs, "Look upstream!"

Everyone turned at once.

Upstream, a colossal vessel was charging toward them.

It was terrifyingly massive, a true leviathan. Its towering superstructure rose like a fortress, and atop its highest point flew a vibrant, multi-colored flag. It was the unmistakable five-colored banner of Gao Family Village, the Heavenly Lord's flag.

The crew aboard the freight vessel erupted in cheers, their morale surging instantly.

At the same time, the sailors aboard Zhai Tang's four warships also spotted the approaching behemoth.

One glance was enough to scare the souls right out of half of them.

The hundred-meter-long monster looked less like a ship and more like a moving mountain.

"What kind of ship is that?!"

"My heavens, what kind of demon-built thing is that?!"

"How could anyone possibly build something so enormous?!"

"It's coming straight at us!"

"It's flying the multi-colored flag. It's Tie Niaofei's people!"

"Aaaah!"

Panic spread instantly.

The morale of Zhai Tang's men collapsed completely.

Even as they scrambled about in utter chaos, the massive ship continued charging forward. Despite its enormous size, it cut through the waves with shocking speed, moving more like a nimble skiff than a lumbering giant.

"Impossible!" Zhai Tang, who was secretly observing from the shore, felt his heart freeze. "How can such a thing exist in this world?!"

The four tower ships descended into complete disorder. Forgetting all about surrounding the flat-bottomed freight vessel, they scattered and fled downstream in panic.

The Wanli Sunshine did not slow in the slightest.

It surged forward with overwhelming arrogance and unstoppable momentum.

"How are we supposed to fight like this?!" Zhu Piaoling bounced excitedly around the deck, his eyes shining. Not a trace of fear could be found on him. From his perspective, commanding such a massive ship to bully smaller vessels felt completely risk-free.

His personal guards, however, did not share his enthusiasm. Several of them immediately surrounded him and dragged him toward the cabin.

"My lord, please be careful. Do not get struck by flintlock fire or stray arrows."

Zhu Piaoling froze.

Only then did he remember that the enemy still possessed ranged weapons.

With a yelp, he clutched his head and scurried into the cabin at top speed.

"Fire!" Jiang Cheng roared.

The flintlock riflemen aboard the Wanli Sunshine immediately opened fire.

Their gunwales stood far higher than the enemy ships' deckhouses, allowing them to rain bullets down from above. Under the barrage, the enemy sailors scrambled desperately, ducking behind wooden shields and retreating into protected compartments.

Jiang Cheng recognized the scene instantly.

These were the same men who had ambushed him before.

Old grudges and fresh hatred surged together.

A sailor reported urgently, "Commander Jiang, they're hiding behind wooden planks. Our flintlock rifles can't hit them!"

Jiang Cheng glanced coldly at the enemy vessels, a sneer forming at the corner of his mouth.

"Then we'll use the cannons."

"Instructor Jiang," an officer quickly interjected, "Mr. Bai gave strict instructions before departure. Do not reveal the ship's cannons unless absolutely necessary. These enemies are clearly targeting us. We should not expose all our cards so easily."

Jiang Cheng paused, then nodded. "Very well."

"Then we'll ram them."

"Ram them?" Zhu Piaoling's head popped out from the cabin, eyes sparkling with excitement. "I love watching that!"

Everyone fell silent.

Zhu Piaoling pressed on enthusiastically, "Don't you all enjoy watching the big bully the small?"

Silence again.

To be honest, everyone did enjoy it a little.

"Charge!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "Ram them!"

The Wanli Sunshine surged forward at full combat speed.

Its mass and momentum were overwhelming. It cut through the water with irresistible force, its vast hull bearing down like a mountain upon a pitiful enemy warship.

The soldiers aboard the tower ship screamed in terror. They raised their matchlocks and Three-Eyed Arquebuses, firing desperately.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

It was completely useless.

Their bullets could not even scratch the composite hull of the Wanli Sunshine, which was hundreds of times thicker than it appeared.

Boom!

With a deafening crash, the Wanli Sunshine smashed into the side of the enemy warship.

Because of its tall superstructure, the warship's center of gravity was inherently unstable. Struck broadside, it immediately tipped over.

Screams echoed across the river.

With a tremendous splash, the entire ship capsized.

The Wanli Sunshine did not slow.

After crushing one warship, it continued forward, bearing down on another vessel that looked as though it desperately wanted to sprout legs and flee ashore. The crew rowed frantically.

It made no difference.

At full combat speed, the Wanli Sunshine closed the distance in moments.

"Stay away!"

Boom!

The two ships collided violently.

Another wave of screams and panicked shouts erupted as the second warship tipped and overturned.

The sailors aboard tried to leap into the water to save themselves, but the capsizing vessel acted like a massive spinning winnowing basket, dragging them under as it rolled.

As they plunged into the river, they saw the colossal shadow of the Wanli Sunshine looming overhead.

Splash.

They were pinned beneath it.

Shi Kefa gasped, "Ramming them all into the water certainly feels satisfying, but we didn't leave a single survivor!"

Jiang Cheng cursed under his breath. "Damn it, I forgot to take prisoners. Hurry, pull them out!"

"We'll handle the rescue," came a reply. "You continue."

The flat-bottomed freight vessel moved closer. Its crew laughed loudly as they threw out large fishing nets, hauling enemy soldiers from the river.

Meanwhile, the Wanli Sunshine continued its pursuit of the remaining two enemy warships.

However, ramming two vessels and maneuvering around the overturned wrecks had cost valuable time. The remaining warships had already fled far downstream. Catching them now was unlikely.

Shi Kefa spoke calmly, "Commander Jiang, pursuing too far would be unwise."

Jiang Cheng understood immediately.

Overzealous pursuit risked hidden shoals, shifting currents, and unseen hazards. A brief chase was acceptable, but sustained high-speed maneuvering invited disaster. One collision with a reef would doom everyone.

Enemies could be defeated.

Nature demanded respect.

Reluctantly, Jiang Cheng ordered the ship to slow to cruising speed and turned back.

When they returned, they saw that the freight vessel had already rescued several enemy soldiers. Dozens of bayonets surrounded the trembling captives.

The enemy soldiers raised their hands, not daring to resist.

The Wanli Sunshine pulled alongside.

Jiang Cheng leaned over the rail and shouted, "Have they confessed? Who is behind this ambush?!"

The freight vessel's captain shouted back, "They have! The man who hired them is named Zhai Tang, one of Shanxi's Jin merchants!"

"Zhai Tang?!" Tie Niaofei's face twisted with rage. "That vile wretch! That gutter maggot! It's him again! Sooner or later, I will skin him alive and avenge the blood of my brothers!"

Chapter 935 We Cannot Live Without Vinegar

The Wanli Sunshine continued its journey downstream. The flat-deck cargo ship, having survived its brush with death, also hastily returned to the Xiaolangdi naval base.

The captured Jin merchants were quickly escorted before Bai Yuan.

"So it was Zhai Tang," Bai Yuan said after the interrogation, his expression turning heavy. "Henan is already in chaos, especially around Xingyang. That area is crawling with bandits. Seventy-two groups, large and small. For Zhai Tang's ships to dare ambush us near Xingyang's waters, there is no way he has nothing to do with the rebels."

As soon as he finished speaking, the Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest chimed softly.

"Several months ago, Lu Xiangheng fought the rebels in Nanyang and seized two cannons from them. At the time, he found it strange. Now it is clear. The rebels already have the backing of Jin merchants."

Bai Yuan nodded. "So that is how it is. These Jin merchants have truly sunk to the lowest depths. Unable to trade with the Manchus anymore, they turned around and sold goods to the rebels instead. For profit, they have no bottom line at all."

The Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun did not bother to comment further.

Some people only saw money and had no sense of right or wrong. Talking about morality with such people was meaningless. Catching them and beating them senseless was far more practical.

The real problem was Henan and northern Huguang.

Rebels flooded the land, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, roaming freely. On top of that came natural disasters, floods, droughts, and swarms of locusts. The imperial court had completely lost control of these regions, and even Gao Family Village could not extend its influence there.

Defeating rebels was easy. Eradicating them completely was another matter.

This was not only a headache for the court. It was also a problem Gao Family Village would have to face sooner or later.

Seeing that Dao Xuan Tianzun had no further instructions, Bai Yuan turned to the sailors from the flat-deck cargo ship.

"These Jin merchants are a malignant tumor. From now on, they can only be dealt with together with the rebels. Once the rebels are wiped out and their trade routes to the Manchus are cut off, the Jin merchants will lose their foundation. At that point, dealing with them will be simple. As for today's ambush, remember it. We will settle accounts later."

The sailors saluted in unison. "Yes, sir!"

At that moment, a soldier hurried in and saluted.

"Report! Governor Fan Shangzheng of Henan has sent someone requesting assistance."

Bai Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Assistance? For what?"

The soldier replied, "Generals Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao were badly wounded by a rain of arrows during a battle several days ago. Their subordinates rescued them and brought them back to the barracks, but the region has suffered repeated floods and droughts. The land is barren. Even medicinal herbs are hard to find. Many physicians lack proper wound medicine. The injuries of the two General Caos have worsened, and their condition is critical."

Bai Yuan immediately understood. "He wants to know whether we have medicine."

Li Daoxuan had already heard everything.

His viewpoint quietly shifted. Hovering above the barracks south of the city, he activated the focus function and locked directly onto the uncle and nephew of the Cao family.

Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao lay on their beds, faces pale as paper. White bandages wrapped their bodies, but blood and pus had soaked through the cloth. Their condition was indeed grim.

Li Daoxuan thought to himself that this was clearly a case of wound infection and inflammation, likely progressing toward necrosis.

He had already granted Gao Family Village plenty of medicines. Bai Yuan could handle this situation easily. There was no need for him to intervene personally.

As expected, Bai Yuan soon arrived at the barracks with a military physician from Gao Family Village.

Every military physician from Gao Family Village had undergone systematic training under Madam San. The moment this physician spoke, his voice carried a faint air of mysticism.

"General Cao, I have examined your wounds. Injuries like these are difficult to heal with ordinary medicine. Fortunately, I possess celestial medicine bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

As he spoke, the military physician took out several bottles and jars.

"However, I must say this in advance. The celestial medicine only aids those with celestial destiny. If your fate is favorable, one dose will be enough. If your fate is exhausted, then even medicine from the heavens cannot save you. Even deities must observe certain boundaries. If the King of Hell insists on taking your life at the third watch, Dao Xuan Tianzun cannot simply fight him over a single mortal."

Cao Wenzhao weakly opened his eyes. "Dao Xuan Tianzun is a celestial deity? Then the King of Hell should not be very strong, right? Can Dao Xuan Tianzun defeat him?"

Cao Bianjiao, lying beside him, immediately spoke up. "Uncle, can you focus on the important part? The bureaucracy of the immortal realm must be just like ours. Full of complicated relationships. Being strong alone is not enough. Just like in the mortal world. You can kill a civil official with one finger, but if that official wants someone executed, you might not be able to save them at all."

Cao Wenzhao's eyes lit up. "Oh? That actually makes sense. You are right."

Bai Yuan fell silent.

Li Daoxuan also fell silent.

After a moment, Cao Wenzhao spoke again. "Doctor, go ahead. A general dies on the battlefield sooner or later. Whether I, Cao Wenzhao, can be healed depends entirely on fate."

The military physician nodded solemnly. "Very well. I will administer the medicine now."

The physicians of Gao Family Village had been using Dao Xuan Tianzun's medicines since 1627. By now, they were completely familiar with their effects, procedures, and dosages.

Scraping away pus. Stopping the bleeding. Disinfecting. Reducing inflammation.

Every step flowed smoothly.

The military physician worked with practiced speed. Before long, the treatment was complete.

The Cao uncle and nephew were both tough men. Throughout the painful process, they clenched their teeth and endured it without a sound. Only beads of sweat formed on their foreheads.

Once the treatment was finished and the wounds were rebandaged, Cao Wenzhao finally spoke.

"Thank you. I feel much better already. Looks like the King of Hell does not want my miserable life yet."

The military physician warned him, "Do not be careless. You still need proper rest. Also, before your wounds heal, your diet must be light. Avoid chili peppers, ginger, garlic, and all kinds of seafood."

Cao Wenzhao replied weakly, "No problem. I do not like seafood anyway. Especially crabs. They are too troublesome to peel."

Cao Bianjiao groaned. "Uncle, this is the Central Plains. Where would you even find seafood? You only need to worry about the other things."

Cao Wenzhao nodded. "That is true."

After a pause, Cao Bianjiao asked, "Doctor, can we have vinegar?"

Cao Wenzhao immediately laughed. "Did the girl you like run off with another man? You are lying here gravely wounded and still thinking about eating vinegar. If the doctor says no, will you just smile and watch her marry someone else? How pitiful. Your uncle will find you a better one later."

Cao Bianjiao shouted in frustration. "Uncle! Can you please focus on the important thing? We are from Shanxi. We cannot live without vinegar!"

"Oh?" Cao Wenzhao pondered. "That is true."

He turned to the military physician together with his nephew. "Doctor, can we have vinegar?"

The military physician felt his head throb violently.

With a sharp click, he snapped shut his medicine box, slung it onto his back, and turned to leave.

"I see you two are recovering quite well," he said coldly. "You clearly no longer need my help. I will take my leave."

"Doctor, do not go! You still have not answered us!"

"Doctor, we are from Shanxi! We really cannot live without vinegar!"

Chapter 936: Luoyang Is Under My Protection

Bai Yuan exited the tent shared by Cao Wenzhao and his nephew and headed back toward Luoyang. He had only just reached the city gate when he noticed someone approaching from the opposite direction.

Fan Shangzheng.

The two met by coincidence just outside the gate.

Fan Shangzheng raised a hand in greeting. "Mister Bai. How are General Cao and his nephew's injuries?"

"They are fine," Bai Yuan replied with a smile. "Full of energy already. They are back to arguing over trivial matters as if nothing ever happened."

Fan Shangzheng's expression stiffened for a brief instant, but he quickly let it go. He lowered his voice. "That is good to hear. However, another matter has come up. Another imperial unit has retreated to Luoyang. I need to deal with it. Would you care to come along?"

Bai Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Who retreated this time?"

"He Renlong," Fan Shangzheng answered.

The name was familiar.

Years ago, He Renlong had escorted three thousand surrendered rebels captured by Hong Chengchou to Huanglong Mountain Prison. He had even personally visited the Huanglong Mountain Labor Reform Camp.

Bai Yuan frowned.

At the same moment, far above the diorama, Li Daoxuan's gaze followed his expression, and his own brows knit together.

He Renlong had once been infamous among rebels. Ruthless, relentless, a butcher who never showed mercy. To the rebel bands, his name alone had once been enough to inspire terror.

And now he was retreating.

Time truly changed everything. As the saying went, thirty years east of the river, thirty years west. Even rebels who once fled in rags could rise, while famed generals could fall.

"Let's go take a look," Bai Yuan said.

The two left the city together and headed south along the main road. Before long, they spotted an encampment pitched by the roadside.

Two banners hung crookedly above it. One bore the character "He." The other bore "Gao."

The atmosphere around the camp was heavy, thick with defeat and embarrassment.

As Fan Shangzheng approached the entrance, two figures came out to meet them.

He Renlong.

And Gao Jie.

He Renlong bowed deeply. "Governor Fan. This general has suffered a temporary setback. We withdrew to the outskirts of Luoyang to regroup. Once the men recover and morale stabilizes, we will resume our pursuit of the rebels."

Fan Shangzheng nodded. "You have worked hard, General."

The two imperial officials began speaking in low tones about troop movements and logistics. Bai Yuan, having nothing to contribute to that discussion, turned his attention to Gao Jie instead.

Gao Jie was an old acquaintance of Gao Family Village, at least in reputation.

Years earlier, when Shanxi was still plagued by rebel activity, Gao Jie had gone by the alias Fan Shan Yao. Under that name, he had led an assault on Pingyang Prefecture, which at the time had been defended by Wang Er and Bai Mao.

Back then, Dao Xuan Tianzun had issued a now legendary instruction.

"If he is handsome, aim for his face."

The story had spread like wildfire among Gao Family Village's troops and had since become a running joke. Bai Yuan had heard it many times, but this was his first time seeing Gao Jie in person.

He looked him over carefully.

From the left. Truly handsome.

From the right. Still handsome. Excessively so.

Bai Yuan sighed inwardly. Damn it. Is he actually better looking than me?

Gao Jie noticed his stare and frowned. "What are you staring at?"

The moment he spoke, something changed.

When silent, he was striking enough to turn heads. Once he opened his mouth, however, the refinement vanished completely. What remained was a crude, unruly presence that felt straight out of a bandit camp.

Bai Yuan's heart sank, then immediately lifted again.

Good. Very good, he thought. He might outshine me when quiet, but once he starts talking, victory is clearly mine.

He flicked open his folding fan, covering half his face. The character "Gentleman" was written boldly across it.

"I have long heard that General Gao is a dragon among men," Bai Yuan said pleasantly. "As handsome as Pan An himself. Seeing you today exceeds all expectations."

Gao Jie completely missed the irony. He straightened proudly. "Naturally. A truly handsome man never needs to serve himself food."

"Oh?" Bai Yuan asked. "Why is that?"

Gao Jie laughed loudly. "Because women do it for me."

"I am deeply impressed," Bai Yuan replied sincerely.

Gao Jie glanced at him again. "You do not look like a court official. What do you do?"

"My surname is Bai," Bai Yuan said. "I oversee the local militia."

"A militia commander?" Gao Jie nodded thoughtfully. Luoyang is the center of the realm. Wealthy families are everywhere. Anyone managing the militia here must be backed by a powerful clan.

When he was a rebel, he had robbed noble families. Now that he served the court, he needed to reverse course and make connections instead.

He cupped his fists. "Mister Bai, I hope to receive your guidance in the future."

"The pleasure is mine," Bai Yuan replied.

By then, Fan Shangzheng and He Renlong had finished their discussion and returned.

As they walked away together, Fan Shangzheng leaned closer and lowered his voice. "He Renlong told me something strange. His unit keeps getting singled out. The rebels chase them day and night, even splitting forces to encircle them. It is as if they will not rest until he is dead. He does not understand why, and it has left him humiliated and helpless."

Bai Yuan let out a soft chuckle.

If only you had seen that Gao Family Village news segment about the Dashing General being cuckolded, he thought. That broadcast had aired only once before being immediately suppressed. Only the inner circle knew about it. Fan Shangzheng clearly was not among them.

Bai Yuan said nothing aloud, only chuckled twice more. Then he paused, feeling a trace of guilt. Perhaps I really should strike "ritual propriety" from my list of cultivated virtues.

Far above, outside the diorama box, Li Daoxuan's attention sharpened.

Gao Jie had now entered his field of view.

With a single thought, he could strike him down.

But should he?

Gao Jie was not like most pacified rebels.

Most so called surrenders were temporary. Those men merely waited, rebuilt their strength, and rebelled again once the Manchus invaded and imperial troops moved north.

Gao Jie was different.

History recorded that he truly surrendered.

After cuckolding Li Zicheng, there had been no path back to the rebel ranks. Redemption was his only option. From that point on, he never rebelled again. Instead, he fought fiercely against bandits and rebels, eventually becoming one of the Four Garrisons of the Southern Ming. One of the last pillars resisting the Qing.

That hope ended with his death.

To kill him now felt unjust.

Perhaps, with guidance, he could still be useful.

Li Daoxuan made his decision.

His consciousness descended and merged into the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Bai Yuan's chest. His voice echoed directly in Fan Shangzheng's mind.

"Fan Shangzheng. You do not need to worry about He Renlong."

Fan Shangzheng stiffened. "Then who should I watch?"

"Gao Jie," Dao Xuan Tianzun said calmly. "He is a pacified rebel who lacks restraint. Watch his arrogance, his cruelty, his disregard for discipline, and his tendency to allow his troops to plunder civilians."

Fan Shangzheng straightened immediately. "Understood. I will warn him at once."

"A warning alone is insufficient," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied. "Give him a copy of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Tale of Demon Extermination. Let him read it. Tell him this."

A pause.

"Luoyang is under my protection."

Chapter 937 It Is Part of My Sword

Fan Shangzheng wore a troubled expression. "Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said respectfully, "ordinary people will never truly believe Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon Extermination Saga. Unless something catastrophic occurs, like the great locust plague of the past. Otherwise, even if you were to display divine power directly, it would only shock them momentarily."

Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly, "I know this very well. But Gao Jie is not an ordinary man. I have no intention of frightening the common people. As for Gao Jie, however, a proper scare is necessary. Otherwise, he will grow arrogant and unrestrained, allowing his troops to pillage the populace. If that happens, I would not merely frighten him. I would erase him."

After a brief pause, Dao Xuan Tianzun added, "Heaven cherishes life. If someone can still be corrected, then it is worth trying."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun's benevolence is boundless," Fan Shangzheng replied solemnly. "This subordinate understands."

He immediately arranged for a complete set of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon Extermination Saga to be prepared. Carrying the books personally, he returned to the military camp for another visit.

By chance, He Renlong was not present. He had gone to Cao Wenzhao's camp to visit him and his nephew as they recovered from their injuries. Only Gao Jie remained behind.

Fan Shangzheng entered the camp, invited Gao Jie into the main tent, and only then placed the neatly stacked volumes on the table.

Gao Jie's eyes widened. "Governor, these are for me?" He hesitated, then cleared his throat. "This general... is illiterate. These books..."

Fan Shangzheng smiled faintly. "Even those who cannot read may enjoy them. They are picture stories."

At the words "picture stories," a wicked spark ignited in Gao Jie's mind.

Picture stories? Could they be those kinds of books?

He had long heard that high officials and gentry indulged in refined but peculiar tastes. Illustrated albums were often exchanged privately as elegant amusements. If he wished to truly integrate into officialdom, mastering such customs was only natural.

A knowing grin spread across his face. "I understand, I understand. Many thanks for your generosity, Governor."

Fan Shangzheng's expression turned stern. "General Gao, since you have changed paths and entered the court, you must abandon the habits of your bandit days. Otherwise..."

Gao Jie scoffed inwardly, but outwardly he maintained a respectful demeanor. He cupped his fists. "This general understands. From today onward, I shall conduct myself with propriety."

With that assurance, Fan Shangzheng rose and took his leave.

The moment he departed, the tent flap lifted.

Xing Shi stepped inside, her face filled with concern. "Husband, why did the Governor come? He is not here to settle old scores, is he?"

Gao Jie chuckled smugly. "Of course not. The Governor values me greatly. Look here. He even gifted me twelve volumes of erotic art." He rubbed his hands together. "Come, my little fox. Let us admire the pictures together and perhaps learn a few new diversions."

Xing Shi shot him a flirtatious glance. "Very well."

They sat together and opened Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon Extermination Saga.

On the very first page, bandits were shown terrorizing a mountain village. On the next, a colossal hand descended from the heavens and smashed them into dust.

Xing Shi stared, then slowly spread her hands. "This... is erotic art?"

Gao Jie froze.

The silence was deafening.

"What nonsense is this?" Gao Jie roared. "Is the Governor mocking me? Who is this so called Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

"Quiet!" Xing Shi hissed, her face pale. "You may not believe in deities, but you must never speak of them with disrespect. If this immortal is fake, then nothing will happen. But if he is real and you curse him, he might strike you dead in an instant."

Gao Jie had never cared for such superstition. Still, after her warning, he found the words stuck in his throat. He snorted. "I do not believe it."

Xing Shi pressed on urgently. "Belief aside, we must keep a low profile. My former husband hunts us relentlessly. We cannot survive among the bandits any longer. If we fail to secure a proper foothold in the court, we will die miserably, without even a grave."

"Understood," Gao Jie said gruffly.

As he spoke, his eyes drifted back to the open book.

For just an instant, he thought the image of Dao Xuan Tianzun had curled its lips into a faint smile.

He blinked hard.

The image was motionless.

A chill crept up his spine.

One must never disrespect the gods, he reminded himself. Low profile. I must absolutely keep a low profile.

Puzhou. Yellow Stone Flats. Yellow Pole Military Academy.

A newly delivered, cutting-edge combat vehicle stood proudly on the training ground.

Principal Sun stared at it, his mouth hanging open for a long time.

In his mind, countless battlefield scenarios unfolded. A man charged with a blade, only for the weapon to scrape harmlessly against steel. A flintlock rifle extended from the armored body. A sharp crack rang out. The attacker fell.

Another fired wildly. The bullets bounced away. Another crack. Another enemy fell.

All the tactics he knew were rendered meaningless by this machine.

A soldier from Gao Family Village's Armored Grenadier Battalion snapped to attention. "Reporting, Principal Sun. The Light Armored Car has been delivered. My assignment is to assist in familiarization, student training, and tactical research."

Sun Chuanting finally exhaled. "Thank you."

He walked up and placed a hand on the cold steel shell, awe filling his eyes. "This will change warfare completely. Once this enters the battlefield, blades, spears, and halberds will lose their place entirely."

"Halt!"

A loud voice rang out from afar. "Eliminating blades and spears is fine, but eliminating swords? Absolutely unacceptable!"

Sun Chuanting recognized the voice instantly.

Flat Rabbit.

He turned, and sure enough, Flat Rabbit was striding forward dramatically.

Flat Rabbit stopped before the Light Armored Car. With a flourish, he drew his ancestral treasured sword. "You lump of iron. Do you think yourself invincible? No matter how strong you are, you are no match for this lord's treasured sword."

Silence fell.

Flat Rabbit suddenly lunged forward, roaring as he raised the sword high. "Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword!"

Clang.

The sword flew from his hands and vanished into the distance.

Flat Rabbit collapsed onto the ground.

Everyone stared.

Flat Rabbit lay there, eyes hollow. "Impossible. The sword must be useful. The sword is the king of weapons. How could it be obsolete? I refuse to believe this thing can replace the sword."

Sun Chuanting glanced at Zheng Gouzi, who had followed behind. "He seems quite distressed," Sun said dryly. "Perhaps you should console him."

Zheng Gouzi coughed lightly and stepped forward.

Before he could speak, Flat Rabbit sprang up, eyes blazing with revelation. "I get it!"

He laughed loudly. "I will stand atop the Light Armored Car. As it charges into the enemy, I will leap down and strike from above with my Heaven Rabbit Rending Overlord Sword. That is how its true power is unleashed. This vehicle was born for my sword."

He spread his arms triumphantly. "It is not a weapon that replaces swords. It is part of my sword."

The onlookers exchanged confused glances.

Chapter 938 An Extraordinary Life Marches On

Flat Rabbit's awkward rambling left everyone shaking their heads.

Yet from his chaotic words, Sun Chuanting caught a flash of genuine insight.

He cleared his throat. "Everyone, gather around."

The students on the training ground immediately converged.

Sun Chuanting picked up a long spear and casually dragged its tip along the ground as he walked. He leapt lightly to the side of the armored vehicle and pointed at it. "Observe. This machine is impervious to blades and spears. Its power is undeniable. However, it also possesses a fatal weakness."

The crowd stirred. "A weakness? Where?"

"Its size," Sun Chuanting said calmly. "During its first engagement on the northern steppes, the terrain was vast and flat. The armored vehicle could rampage freely. But in the Central Plains, matters are very different."

Using the spear tip, he sketched several rough diagrams on the ground. "Mountain paths, broken city streets, collapsed walls, scattered debris. All of these restrict movement. Once slowed, this vehicle becomes vulnerable."

As he finished speaking, Sun Chuanting pushed off the ground with his toes and sprang upward in a flash. One foot landed squarely on the armored vehicle's front plate, and with a smooth motion, he vaulted onto the roof.

Standing atop the roof hatch, he continued, "If the terrain restricts movement, a skilled enemy warrior could leap onto the vehicle."

He swept his spear sideways, knocking the forward-mounted gun aside. "Once an enemy boards, the gun becomes useless. The warrior could move freely across the roof. Locating the hatch mechanism would not be difficult. If the hatch is forced open, the soldiers inside would be in mortal danger."

The driver inside the vehicle stiffened, a cold chill running down his spine.

Flat Rabbit burst into loud laughter. "That is precisely why this armored vehicle must be manned by this Lord Rabbit. If an enemy dares leap aboard, I will leap down from above and cut them down with a single sword strike."

Sun Chuanting nodded. "Although this Rabbit Lord spouts nonsense day and night, he has grasped one truth. Armored vehicles cannot fight alone. They require infantry support. If enemies attempt to board, the infantry must eliminate them immediately."

He raised his voice. "From today onward, teachers and students alike will focus on researching coordinated tactics between infantry and armored vehicles."

Flat Rabbit raised his hand enthusiastically. "Headmaster, I have a question."

Sun Chuanting replied without hesitation. "Speak."

Flat Rabbit asked, "When will everyone begin training in swordsmanship together?"

Sun Chuanting said coldly, "Go run fifty laps."

Chang'an Automobile Factory, Armored Forging Workshop.

Chen Ergou lay sprawled across a long workbench, panting like an exhausted dog, his tongue practically hanging out.

Qi Cheng walked over and gently patted his back. "Brother, break time is almost over. Let's get moving."

Chen Ergou let out a long sigh. "Another urgent task from above?"

"Of course," Qi Cheng said. "You understand the situation. The world is in chaos. War is everywhere. Gao Family Village's militia bears the responsibility of saving the common people. And we bear the responsibility of supplying them with weapons. At least our lives are not on the battlefield."

Chen Ergou pushed himself up and sprang to his feet. "Qi Ge is right. No slacking. Let's get back to forging armor plates."

The two returned to the production line, supervising workers as red hot iron plates were hammered again and again.

As Chen Ergou hurried back and forth, a sudden thought struck him. "Qi Ge, do you remember the steam powered textile machine we saw back in Gao Family Village?"

Qi Cheng nodded. "Of course I remember."

Chen Ergou lowered his voice excitedly. "The steam engine drives the axle, making the machine rotate endlessly. What if we attach a massive hammer to the axle? Each rotation lifts the hammer, then lets it fall."

Qi Cheng froze, then his eyes widened. "By the heavens. Would that not mean the hammer could strike endlessly without human effort?"

Chen Ergou laughed. "Exactly. The workers would only need to place the iron beneath it, let it strike, pull it out, reposition it, and let it strike again."

Qi Cheng slapped his thigh. "Genius. You are a damn genius."

Chen Ergou laughed loudly. "I told you long ago. Chen Ergou's extraordinary life has only just begun. Qi Ge, come. Let's try building it. If it works, everyone will save tremendous effort."

Several days later, the first Steam Forging Hammer was born.

Its design was crude to the extreme. They had simply removed the steam engine from a textile machine and attached an oval rotating shaft to the axle. When the long side of the shaft rotated upward, it lifted the hammer. When the flat side rotated downward, the hammer fell.

Again and again.

Relentless. Unceasing.

Despite its simplicity, the reaction in the Armored Forging Workshop was explosive. Workers rejoiced. They no longer needed to exhaust themselves swinging heavy hammers. They only had to position the armor plates, let the hammer strike, then rotate or flip the plate as needed.

Production efficiency skyrocketed.

The Armored Forging Workshop completed its assigned quota several days ahead of schedule. As a result, the entire workshop received a three day holiday while other departments caught up.

The news quickly reached Factory Director Gao Yiyi, who personally led an inspection team.

Gao Yiyi, himself a lifelong blacksmith, stared at the endlessly pounding hammer and shouted in astonishment, "By the gods. Which genius created this?"

A worker stepped forward. "Reporting, Director. It was Chen Ergou."

Gao Yiyi turned sharply. "You little rascal. You invented something like this and never reported it? You have been secretly using it?"

Chen Ergou scratched his head. "Ah? Something like this needed reporting?"

Gao Yiyi could only laugh helplessly. "Do you still not understand the rules of Gao Family Village? If you had reported this earlier, you would already be rich."

Chen Ergou stared blankly. "What?"

A few days later, he understood.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun Special Prize for Major Scientific and Technological Innovation was personally awarded to him. The reward was a solid silver ball the size of a human head. Qi Cheng also received half a silver ball for his assistance.

Chen Ergou, previously a Blue Hat senior technician, was promoted to Red Hat senior technical engineer.

Amid much celebration, he married Xiao Cuihua, the secretary who had followed him from the steel transport factory to the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Chen Ergou's extraordinary life marched forward once again.

Chapter 939 The Distinction of the Soul

The Wanli Sunshine was painstakingly making its way through the lower reaches of the Yellow River.

This stretch of the river was infamous among sailors.

The Yellow River carried vast quantities of silt and sand, much of which settled in its lower course. Over time, this caused the waterway to become shallow and unpredictable. The riverbed shifted constantly, changing its contours from season to season. Even in much later eras, navigating the lower Yellow River remained a daunting task. In the present age, it was nothing short of perilous.

With a draft of three to four meters, the Wanli Sunshine was pushing the limits of what was possible.

One moment of negligence was enough to run the ship aground.

The sailors from Gao Family Village were tense to the point of breathlessness. This was the divine vessel's maiden voyage. If they were to strand it here, how could they possibly face Dao Xuan Tianzun when they returned?

Everyone aboard was gripped by anxiety.

Everyone, that is, except Zhu Piaoling.

He stood at the railing, eyes sparkling, firing questions nonstop. "Are we almost at the sea? Where exactly are we now? I heard the Yellow River has changed its course countless times throughout history. Where does it finally flow into the ocean? I really want to see the sea!"

Shi Kefa, the most learned among them, stepped forward with a faint smile and shook his head. "During the Song Dynasty," he said calmly, "Du Chong, the Prefect of Kaifeng, deliberately breached the Yellow River dikes to halt the southward advance of the Jurchen armies. As a result, the Yellow River was diverted into the Huai River via the Si River."

He continued, "For several hundred years since then, the Yellow River has emptied into the sea through the Huai River system."

Ordinarily, such historical exposition would have lulled listeners to sleep. Yet Zhu Piaoling listened with keen interest, his excitement only growing.

"So that's how it is!" he exclaimed. "Fascinating, absolutely fascinating! Then does that mean we're no longer in the Yellow River at all, but in the Huai River instead?"

Shi Kefa nodded. "Exactly. The Huai River's estuary lies very close to that of the Yangtze River. In fact, the Yellow River's diversion into the Huai has worked greatly in our favor during this journey."

Zhu Piaoling burst into laughter. "Hahaha! To think that without realizing it, I've already traveled through the Huai River as well. Truly wonderful!"

"The sea is just ahead!"

The moment those words were spoken, Zhu Piaoling's excitement surged.

Far in the distance, the ocean came into view. A vast expanse of blue stretched to the horizon, meeting a golden-yellow coastline. This land had been steadily "extended" over the centuries by the Yellow River itself, which year after year deposited enormous amounts of sediment, pushing the shoreline ever farther outward.

The sight of the boundless sea made Zhu Piaoling shout in unrestrained delight.

However, Tie Niaofei, Jiang Cheng, and the others were not admiring the scenery.

Their gazes locked onto a fleet of ships visible on the horizon.

"There's a fleet over there," Tie Niaofei said, pointing toward the sea. "Six ships in total."

"They look like merchant vessels," Jiang Cheng said, lifting his spyglass. "They're carrying cargo."

Tie Niaofei felt a surge of pleasure. "Here I am, a land-based merchant, setting foot on the sea for the first time, and I immediately run into fellow traders. What a stroke of fate! Should we hail them?"

Before the words had fully left his mouth, Jiang Cheng's expression changed.

"Something's wrong," he said quietly. "Those aren't ordinary merchant ships."

Tie Niaofei froze.

He quickly raised his own spyglass and focused on the distant vessels. His face darkened at once. The ships were indeed laden with cargo, but there were also numerous people bound tightly on deck.

They were all women.

Tie Niaofei lowered his voice. "There are only two possibilities. Either this is an illegal merchant ship trafficking people, or it's a pirate vessel, and both the goods and these women were seized by force."

Jiang Cheng nodded grimly. "Either way, this is bad news. And they've already noticed us."

Through their spyglasses, both men saw figures on the opposing ships turning in their direction.

Jiang Cheng adjusted his lens and focused on the flag fluttering above the fleet. "I don't recognize that banner," he said slowly. "There are mushrooms painted on it."

"Mushrooms?" Tie Niaofei exclaimed. "Those aren't mushrooms. Those are Lingzhi!"

He squinted and counted carefully. "One, two... eighteen Lingzhi. That's strange. What could that represent?"

At that moment, a familiar voice sounded from the embroidered insignia on Tie Niaofei's chest.

"Eighteen Lingzhi?" Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "That may belong to the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars. That's odd. Their leader, Zheng Zhilong, accepted imperial pacification years ago. That banner should no longer be in use. Let me think."

Li Daoxuan immediately checked his records.

Only after reviewing them did clarity emerge.

At this time, the infamous pirate confederation known as the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars, which had once terrorized the southeastern coast, had already fractured. Their leader, Zheng Zhilong, had submitted to the court and accepted pacification.

However, one of the eighteen remained active.

His name was Liu Xiang.

Liu Xiang acted as a comprador for the Spanish and Portuguese. Backed by Western powers, he showed no respect for the authority of the Great Ming court. Even after Zheng Zhilong's submission, Liu Xiang continued to operate under the banner of the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars, rampaging across the seas with unchecked arrogance.

That said, his end was already written.

In the eighth year of Chongzhen, which was the present year, Liu Xiang would be decisively eliminated by Zheng Zhilong himself, marking the final and tragic end of the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars.

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded once more from the embroidery. "That fleet is likely Liu Xiang's. The last remnant of the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars."

"So they really are pirates!" Tie Niaofei cursed. "Damnable pirates! Everyone, stay alert!"

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. "Master Tie, pirates are half merchants and half bandits. You salt smugglers aren't much different. The only difference is that one operates at sea and the other on land. Don't point fingers so quickly."

Tie Niaofei snorted. "That's where you're wrong! We salt smugglers only clash with officials and patrols. The rest of the time, we sell salt honestly. We don't rob people. Since when has robbery ever been more profitable than selling salt?"

Jiang Cheng was left speechless.

"Enough chatter," Tie Niaofei said. "They're closing in."

Jiang Cheng turned to look. The fleet suspected to belong to Liu Xiang was indeed changing course and heading straight toward them.

Nothing good could come of this.

"What should we do?" Zhu Piaoling asked, his expression finally turning serious as he leapt over. "Should we speed up and try to escape?"

Tie Niaofei nodded. "We don't know their exact strength. Retreating is the safest option."

Jiang Cheng agreed without hesitation.

At that moment, Shi Kefa spoke.

"If we flee," he asked quietly, "what about the women on those ships?"

The question hung in the air.

Everyone froze.

Shame flickered across their faces one after another.

That was right.

How could they abandon those women?

Dao Xuan Tianzun's voice sounded again. "Those women must be rescued. This is the very soul of Gao Family Village. It is this spirit that distinguishes us from corrupt officials and ruthless rebels. Think carefully."

"Your subordinate understands," Jiang Cheng said solemnly.

"Shameful," Tie Niaofei muttered. "Truly shameful."

Zhu Piaoling roared, "By Dao Xuan Tianzun's decree, no retreat! Fight them!"

Before he could finish, the sworn guards behind him rushed forward, seized him, and dragged the struggling Zhu Piaoling into the cabin to keep him safe.

Jiang Cheng shouted at once, "Prepare for battle! We're on the open sea now. There's no need to hide our strength. Ready the cannons!"

Shi Kefa suddenly spoke again. "The women are bound on the deck. If we engage with cannons and firearms, stray shots are inevitable. Instructor Jiang, this battle will not be simple."

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Shi Kefa's words struck like a bolt of lightning, and Jiang Cheng froze on the spot.

The surrounding sailors, who had been eagerly preparing for a naval battle, also halted mid-motion. That was right. A group of women was tied up on the enemy's deck. If the cannons were fired, the pirates would certainly suffer, but those women would almost certainly die as well.

From the very first day they joined the Gao Family Village Militia, these sailors had undergone strict moral and ethical training. They saw themselves as protectors of the common people. How could they fight like imperial troops, indifferent to civilian lives? In that instant, everyone seemed to have been struck by a paralysis spell, standing stiff and unmoving.

Zhu Piaoling suddenly poked his head out from the cabin. "What do we do?" he shouted. "Hey, if we can't fight back, aren't we just going to get beaten for nothing?"

Jiang Cheng was also at a loss.

At this critical moment, Tie Niaofei stepped forward.

Among everyone present, Tie Niaofei was the most experienced. As a veteran salt smuggler who had traveled across the land and dealt with officials, bandits, and all manner of shady characters, he had seen every kind of chaotic situation imaginable.

He shouted loudly, "In a situation like this, you need to project strength first. Scare the other side so they don't dare start a fight right away. Once that's done, you can negotiate. Name a price and buy them. Just purchase those women and be done with it."

Everyone's spirits instantly lifted.

That was right. There was still this option. Those who had walked the darker paths truly knew more tricks.

Jiang Cheng immediately raised his voice. "Wanli Sunshine, drop the merchant disguise. Show them our cannons."

At his command, several small hatches along both sides of the Wanli Sunshine flipped open at the same time.

Rows of gunports were revealed.

From each opening, a cannon slowly extended outward, the barrels gleaming with the cold sheen of advanced steel alloys.

Days earlier, when Cai Xinzhi had assisted Li Daoxuan in creating the ship model, hearing him insist on adding cannon ports along the hull had nearly made her burst a blood vessel. She could not understand the purpose of such a design at all. However, the client was always right, so she had followed the request and incorporated them.

Once the ship was placed inside the box, the craftsmen of Gao Family Village immediately installed real cannons.

The sixty-meter-long vessel carried fifteen cannons on each side, along with one at the bow and one at the stern, for a total of thirty-two cannons.

In this era, such firepower was nothing short of terrifying.

The pirate ships that had been charging toward them instantly slowed.

The pirate captain, known by the alias Phantom Bat, was a subordinate of Liu Xiang, the last major pirate among the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars who had yet to submit.

Earlier, when Phantom Bat first spotted this massive ship, even larger than the Spanish galleons used by Westerners, his heart had been filled with greed. Seeing what appeared to be an unarmed vessel, he had immediately thought of capturing it. Leading six ships, he had rushed forward without hesitation.

Only now did the colossal vessel suddenly bristle with cannons.

Phantom Bat was badly startled.

"Damn it!" he cursed. "I thought it was a fat sheep, but it turns out to be a thorny hedgehog."

He roared at his crew, "Don't get any closer. Stay outside their cannon range."

He had no idea that the Wanli Sunshine's cannons were rifled, far outranging the smoothbore cannons commonly used by Westerners. In truth, they were already well within range. If not for concerns about the women tied on the enemy ships, the outcome would have been very different.

"Boss, they don't seem to want to fight," one pirate said, leaning closer. "Look, they're waving a colorful flag at us."

Phantom Bat nodded. "They must be newcomers. They don't even know standard nautical flag signals, just randomly waving a flag. Still, they clearly want to talk."

"Boss, should we talk?"

"Talk? Of course we'll talk," Phantom Bat replied. "That ship is huge, and it's packed with cannons. Are we supposed to smash our heads against it? I was already considering abandoning this job, but since they want to talk, we'll hear them out first."

Soon, all six pirate ships began waving their flags as well, using standard nautical signals capable of conveying simple messages.

The people from Gao Family Village could not understand them at all.

That was fine.

They had something better.

Tie Niaofei picked up the megaphone and shouted loudly, "Brothers of the sea, how about each side sends a small boat to talk?"

Phantom Bat was stunned. "What the hell? His voice is that loud? I can hear him clearly from this distance. I don't have a voice like that."

He waved his hand, ordered a skiff lowered, and personally jumped into it. Only two people boarded, Phantom Bat himself and a subordinate to row.

On the Gao Family Village side, a skiff was also lowered. A sailor took the oars, and Tie Niaofei jumped in as well.

The two small boats paddled toward each other and met halfway across the sea.

Tie Niaofei cupped his hands in greeting. "Are you brave heroes of the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars?"

Phantom Bat chuckled. "That's right. Our boss is Liu Xiang. And who might you be?"

Tie Niaofei produced an Imperial Merchant token with a flourish. "I am Tie Niaofei, an Imperial Merchant appointed by imperial decree, responsible for supplying goods to the imperial palace and the border armies."

Phantom Bat was startled.

No wonder that ship was so enormous and so heavily armed. So it was one of the old emperor's exclusive Imperial Merchants.

Still, so what?

Their boss, Liu Xiang, did not even fear the imperial navy. Why would he fear an Imperial Merchant?

With that thought, Phantom Bat regained his composure. "An Imperial Merchant, huh? Impressive. Such a massive ship too. What business do you want with me?"

Tie Niaofei replied calmly, "Even though I'm an Imperial Merchant, at heart I'm still a businessman. I've traveled all over and understand the rules. Wherever I go, I pay my respects to the local powers. Now that I've come to the sea, it's only proper that I first greet the brave heroes of the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars."

Seeing him speak so politely, Phantom Bat secretly gloated.

So that was how it was. Even an Imperial Merchant had to bow his head on the high seas.

Tie Niaofei continued, "Here is some silver. Consider it a token of goodwill."

He extended both hands, offering a pouch of silver.

Phantom Bat accepted it with delight. "Well said, well said. Since you've paid your protection money, we'll remember your colorful flag. If we see it again, we won't attack you."

Tie Niaofei smiled. "Now that we are friends, I have a small piece of business to discuss."

Phantom Bat frowned. "Hmm?"

Tie Niaofei said, "From afar, I noticed a group of women tied up on your ship. May I ask where they came from, and what you plan to do with them? I'm rather interested in buying them to resell, perhaps to human traffickers in the capital. Name your price."

At this, Phantom Bat's eyes lit up. "Ah, so that's it. Those women were captured from a coastal fishing village yesterday. I was planning to bring them back for my brothers to enjoy. But since Brother Tie is interested, I'll give you a discount. Five taels of silver per girl."

Tie Niaofei's heart sank.

The men of that fishing village must all be dead.

These pirates were truly despicable.

Outwardly, however, he showed no reaction at all. "Five taels is a bit expensive," he said. "I still need to make a profit. How about four taels?"

Phantom Bat laughed loudly. "Fine. Deal."