

Great Ming 951

Chapter 951: Stronger Backing?

Shi Lang held the letter of introduction in his hand, preparing to depart for Anqing Prefecture. Yet no matter how he thought about it, he felt he had received a great favor without giving anything in return, which left him uneasy.

Lowering his voice, he said, "Uncle, you have been incredibly kind. You guided me and even wrote this letter of introduction for me. I have benefited so much from you. I truly want to do something in return. How about I go beat up that madam?"

Zhu Piaoling's gloomy mood instantly lifted, and he burst into laughter.

"Don't act recklessly. As a man of my standing, do you really think I need a child like you to handle such matters for me? Hurry to Anqing Prefecture. Don't linger here."

Shi Lang glanced at the dozen guards standing behind Zhu Piaoling and thought to himself, Alright, Uncle really does not need a kid like me.

He bowed deeply and quickly set off toward Anqing Prefecture.

Once Shi Lang had left, only their own people remained.

Zhu Piaoling's expression finally darkened. He snorted coldly.

"I cannot reveal my identity here. So how am I supposed to make that brothel sell me all their girls?"

Bodyguard A spoke up. "We could stage a night raid. Kill the madam and the guards, then secretly take the girls away under cover of darkness."

Zhu Piaoling roared, "Are you trying to get the Dao Xuan Tianzun to slap this prince to death with a single palm?"

Bodyguard A immediately shut his mouth.

Bodyguard B hesitated for a moment before speaking. "My lord, in my humble opinion, why not... make use of the Emperor?"

Zhu Piaoling stared at him. "What?"

Bodyguard B explained carefully, "My lord could write a letter to His Majesty. Say that you are bored in Xi'an with nothing to do, that life feels unbearably empty. You heard that the Pear Garden in Suzhou has a group of famous courtesans skilled in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, and you wished to purchase them as concubines. You sent your subordinates to Suzhou to buy them, but the Pear Garden madam refused... You can write it dramatically, perhaps even shed a few tears. His Majesty will certainly intervene."

Zhu Piaoling's eyes widened.

"Oh? Oh, oh, oh? That is a brilliant idea!"

Crying to the Emperor for favors, or "fleecing the Emperor," was a time-honored skill among the princes of the realm. Even the most obscure princes could often obtain vast tracts of land and generous rewards simply by wailing pitifully for a while.

For Zhu Piaoling, the foremost prince of the entire empire, this was practically second nature.

After all, the Zhu imperial clan had always been exceptionally "benevolent" toward its own blood.

Zhu Piaoling grabbed a brush and immediately began writing, deliberately putting on an aggrieved expression as if tears were about to fall. He first described his unbearable boredom in Xi'an, claiming he was on the verge of losing all hope in life. Then he wrote about hearing of the beautiful women of Suzhou's Pear Garden, and how he wished to buy them to ease his loneliness.

He wrote that he had sent his head steward to Suzhou to redeem them, only to be humiliated by the Pear Garden madam. The dignity of the royal house had been trampled. The prestige of the Prince of Qin had been swept away. He begged the Emperor to uphold justice for him.

After finishing, he signed his full name, pressed his handprint onto the document, and even took out his personal seal from his bosom, stamping it heavily onto the paper. Finally, he sealed the letter with wax.

Once everything was ready, he handed the letter to Bodyguard B.

"Ride swiftly and deliver this to the capital. Remember, when you approach the capital, take a detour and pretend you are coming from Xi'an."

Bodyguard B accepted the order and immediately departed.

"Hmph," Zhu Piaoling snorted, his face filled with smug satisfaction.

"Let's see whose backing is stronger."

Gao Family Village, the main settlement.

Gao Yiye walked arm in arm with the mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun as they entered the research building of Thirty-Two Middle School.

As the number of graduate students continued to increase, the range of research departments expanded steadily.

The laboratories on the fifth floor of the old teaching building were no longer sufficient.

As a result, Gao Family Village allocated special funds to construct a brand-new research building.

The minimum qualification to work inside was a graduate degree.

Every room housed a different research project.

The entire building presented a surreal scene.

As Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye walked inside, they saw a graduate student carrying a human skeleton model pass by. Upon spotting the Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Saintess, the student hurriedly bowed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Saintess. Greetings."

He insisted on bowing at a perfect ninety-degree angle, and the human skeleton model strapped to his back also bent forward, bowing toward Li Daoxuan.

Gao Yiye let out a soft laugh.

"That's such a funny sight. What a pity we didn't record it. It would have made a great little news clip."

Li Daoxuan smiled as well, holding Gao Yiye's hand as they continued deeper into the building.

Before long, they arrived at Bai Gongzi's research laboratory.

As soon as they stepped inside, they heard a loud "woosh," the unmistakable sound of a steam engine. Gao Yiye focused her gaze and saw a massive steam engine standing in the center of the lab. A huge hammer was connected to the engine's crankshaft, rising and falling as the shaft rotated, striking downward with tremendous force.

A crowd had gathered around the machine, pointing and discussing animatedly. Bai Gongzi, Song Yingxing, Wang Zheng, and many other graduate students and senior technical engineers were all present.

Gao Yiye exclaimed, "Oh, I recognize this. This is the steam forging hammer invented by Chen Ergou, with assistance from Qi Cheng. I saw it on the news last time. Why has it been moved into the research lab?"

Hearing her voice, everyone in the laboratory turned at once. When they realized the Dao Xuan Tianzun and the Saintess had arrived, they hurriedly bowed in greeting.

Bai Gongzi replied, "The design of this steam forging hammer is still too crude. Chen Ergou invented it through pure practical experience, but his understanding of physics is limited. He cannot push it any further. So we moved it here, hoping to gather everyone's wisdom and make it more powerful."

Gao Yiye nodded.

"I see. That makes sense."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"Indeed. Many scientific inventions follow this exact path. The initial inspiration often comes from workers on the front lines. But after they conceive an idea, their own limitations prevent them from elevating it further.

At that point, scientists step in, refining and innovating upon the original design, integrating a great deal of advanced theory and technology.

Then, once that advanced technology is applied in practice, it often reveals unexpected quirks, which prompts the workers to propose new improvements.

This is what we call the combination of fundamental science and applied science. They complement each other and jointly drive the spiral advancement of science and technology."

Li Daoxuan was quite pleased to see them progressing along this route.

"Bai Gongzi, I came today to discuss the matter of steamships."

"Hm?" Bai Gongzi turned his head. "Steamships?"

In truth, many years ago, Bai Gongzi had already designed a steamship. It had been built at the shipyard at Qichuan Ferry in Heyang County and put into operation on the route between Qichuan Port and Yongji Ancient Ferry Dock.

However, because shipping on the Yellow River was unreliable, the project stalled there and saw no further development.

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "The Wanli Sunshine has successfully traveled from the Yellow River out to sea. It is time for us to consider ocean-going vessels."

Chapter 952: So Powerfull

Bai Gongzi was momentarily stunned. "Build ocean going ships? We are in Shaanxi. We are tens of thousands of li away from the sea. Building sea ships here feels a bit..."

Li Daoxuan smiled. The reaction was perfectly understandable. For people living in Shaanxi, talking about ocean going vessels at a time like this did sound baffling.

However, if one set aside the immortal ship he had personally placed inside the box and looked only at the technological level and production capacity of the people within it, starting work on sea ships now was not early at all. If anything, it was already a little late.

Western ships were already roaming across the globe, while Great Ming's maritime technology remained painfully backward. If they did not hurry and catch up, what were they waiting for? Waiting until Western steel warships sailed straight up to their doorstep before reacting?

Li Daoxuan's expression turned serious. "Everyone here has been in Shaanxi for a long time, so you may not be aware of the situation along the coast. In recent years, Western pirates have been running rampant along the southeastern shoreline. Just two years ago, there was the Battle of Liaolu Bay. In that battle, our dynasty was completely outmatched in shipbuilding technology. We only won by relying on numerical superiority."

Everyone exclaimed in surprise.

Song Yingxing suddenly spoke up. "That is correct. Western sea ships are already extremely formidable."

Wang Zheng nodded as well. "I have heard of this too."

Li Daoxuan continued, "I hope you can put in some extra effort and design a truly powerful steam-powered warship. Then we will work through Shi Kefa to establish a shipyard in the coastal regions, transfer the technology and equipment there, and attempt shipbuilding on site."

Song Yingxing hesitated. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, even if we have ships, we do not have enough sailors. Ocean navigation is completely different from river travel. That aspect..."

"I have already considered that," Li Daoxuan replied calmly. "I will also have Shi Kefa find a solution. You should focus on the technological problems. Other matters will be handled by others."

The scientists immediately understood. "We obey."

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Shi Lang sat aboard a river boat, heading toward Anqing Port.

It was already late summer, and the temperature had begun to fall. However, long hours under the sun still made river travel unbearably hot. Shi Lang wore only a short jacket. Sunlight shone on his slightly darkened skin, giving it a faint sheen.

The boatman glanced at him and laughed. "Young master, your build is nothing like that of ordinary young masters."

Shi Lang laughed. "I was never good at studying. I only enjoy practicing with blades and spears."

The boatman asked, "At your age, running around outside like this, are your parents not worried?"

Shi Lang smiled again. "My father hopes I will make a name for myself."

Shi Lang's ancestor was Shi Bing, an evaluating official during the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Southern Song. But by the time of Shi Lang's father, Shi Daxuan, the family had already begun to decline.

Shi Daxuan believed that his son's broad forehead and large face were signs of future nobility. He placed great hopes on Shi Lang, always dreaming that his son would one day become a duke or high minister and restore the family's former glory.

Because of this, Shi Lang began venturing out at a young age. Not only did his father not stop him, he actively supported him.

The boatman nodded. "Ah, trying to build a career. No wonder you are heading to Anqing Prefecture."

That remark caught Shi Lang's attention. "What? Are there opportunities there?"

The boatman replied, "Young master, do you not know? Anqing has not been peaceful lately. Huangmei river bandits are causing chaos, and bandits from Henan are pushing south. Even Fengyang was burned to the ground. That region has seen constant fighting. In just a few months, the court has replaced several officials stationed there. Right now, there is Right Provincial Administration Commissioner Lord Wang, along with a newly arrived official surnamed Shi. I hear he achieved great merit suppressing bandits in Shaanxi. Very formidable."

Shi Lang's eyes lit up.

Not only was he not afraid, he felt a surge of excitement.

Since ancient times, heroes emerged from troubled times. The more chaotic Anqing was, the greater Shi Lang's chance to rise.

As they spoke, Anqing Port came into view.

From afar, Shi Lang spotted an enormous ship.

So big.

Incredibly big.

As someone from the Fujian coast, Shi Lang had personally seen the three-masted galleons of the Franks. Yet compared to the ship before him, even those great sailing vessels looked a full size smaller.

"Wow. So it is true. There really is a giant ship here. Uncle Zhu did not lie to me." Shi Lang was overjoyed. "Quick, row over there. I want to take a closer look."

The boatman laughed and shook his head. "That is a warship. How could they allow people to board it casually?"

Shi Lang said impatiently, "Just row faster."

As they spoke, the giant ship suddenly began to move.

It did not raise sails. No oars were visible. Yet it abruptly accelerated, charging straight out of the harbor and heading upstream.

Shi Lang panicked. "What is going on? I just arrived and it is already leaving? Chase it. Hurry. I will pay extra. Extra money. Chase it."

At the mention of extra pay, the boatman immediately rowed with all his strength. The small skiff shot across the water like an arrow.

However...

The giant ship ahead was even faster.

In an instant, it reached a speed of over twenty knots, surging upstream like the wind.

Watching the distance widen, Shi Lang grew anxious. "Boatman, do you have another oar?"

"Yes. Under the plank behind you."

Shi Lang flipped the plank open, grabbed the oar, and began rowing with all his might.

The skiff sped up again.

Unfortunately, it was still useless. Shi Lang could only watch helplessly as the giant ship pulled farther and farther away.

"This makes no sense," Shi Lang shouted. "That ship is huge. It cannot possibly be this fast."

The boatman laughed helplessly. "But it really is."

"Keep chasing. Do not stop rowing. I will pay more," Shi Lang roared. "Chase it."

Just as it seemed they were about to lose it completely...

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire rang out ahead.

Shi Lang was startled. Only then did he realize that the giant ship, which had nearly vanished beyond the horizon, had stopped. It was now engaged in battle on the water with a group of small boats.

The boatman shouted, "Huangmei river bandits. So the giant ship rushed out to fight them. No wonder it ran so fast earlier."

"Row over there," Shi Lang exclaimed in delight. "Opportunities to watch a naval battle up close are rare."

The boatman protested, "Young master, do not joke. Rowing over there is far too dangerous."

Shi Lang snapped back, "If you are afraid of danger, what kind of soldier can you become?"

The boatman cried out, "But I am not a soldier."

Shi Lang pulled out all the travel money his father had given him and tossed over a bag of silver with a loud clatter. "Row closer. It is all yours."

With heavy rewards came courage.

The boatman weighed the bag, gritted his teeth, and thought, To hell with danger. Charge.

They quickly drew closer.

Ahead, three cargo ships were surrounded by a swarm of bandit boats. The giant warship maneuvered alongside them, driving the bandits back. Its massive hull rammed and turned, while gunfire erupted along the gunwales in a deafening barrage.

The bandits were beaten into utter disarray and routed on all sides.

Shi Lang jumped with excitement. "Damn. That is incredible. With a ship like this, even fighting the Franks' three-masted galleons would not be a problem. Too strong. This is far too strong."

He was shouting in exhilaration when a loud splash erupted beside them.

A bandit suddenly surfaced from beneath the water, grabbed the side of the skiff, and with a swift motion, leapt aboard.

Chapter 953: Sometimes Unreliable People Can Still Recommend Reliable Ones

Aboard the Wanli Sunshine, Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei were directing the battle.

One commanded the bow, the other the stern. Each led a squad of sailors, firing relentlessly at the river bandits.

Amid the chaos, Tie Niaofei suddenly noticed a small boat approaching from downstream. On board were an elderly boatman and a boy of fourteen or fifteen.

A battle was underway. Ordinary civilian boats would normally flee far away, yet this small vessel not only failed to retreat, it kept edging closer.

Tie Niaofei cursed inwardly. Where did this clueless old man and child come from, barging into a battlefield like this?

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a river bandit suddenly surfaced beside that boat. With a swift motion, he flipped himself over the gunwale and leapt aboard.

Tie Niaofei's heart sank. "Damn it. That old boatman and the kid are in trouble. At this distance, we cannot help them."

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The bandit who boarded the small boat had just fallen into the river from a bandit craft.

Earlier, the Wanli Sunshine had unleashed a barrage of musket fire at the enemy boats. At the time, this bandit had been aboard one of them. There were six men on that boat. The other five had already been shot dead.

Realizing there was nowhere to hide from the bullets and that staying aboard meant certain death like his companions, he decisively jumped into the river.

Carried by the current, he drifted downstream and ended up right beside Shi Lang's boat.

Grabbing the gunwale, he hauled himself up. A quick glance showed him a boatman and a teenage boy. Heh.

"You two, get off the boat. This boat belongs to me now," the bandit snarled.

The boatman cried out in despair inside his heart. It's over.

He was just about to jump into the water when he heard Shi Lang snort.

"Which foolish bandit are you, spouting such nonsense?" Shi Lang said coldly. "Put down your blade now, and I might spare your life."

Bandit: "?"

Boatman: "?"

Both were stunned. This kid's tone was outrageous.

The bandit stepped forward, raising his blade. "Die."

And then...

He died.

As the boat rocked, Shi Lang moved with it, swaying in perfect rhythm. He easily dodged the strike, drew the saber from his waist, and with a single clean slash, severed the bandit's head. The movement was crisp and decisive, utterly unlike that of a child.

The boatman stood there dumbfounded. "Young master, what incredible skill."

Shi Lang snorted. "I told you I am going to join the army. This stupid bandit even delivered a head to me. That saves me the trouble. I already have my pledge."

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Tie Niaofei's eyes widened. "Eh? That kid moves fast."

This was not solid ground, but a small skiff. The boat itself was unstable, rocking constantly. For northerners, even standing steady on such a boat was difficult. Yet that boy not only dodged and counterattacked with ease, he even made use of the boat's motion.

From this alone, his skill on the water was obvious.

Tie Niaofei could not help sighing. "Southerners truly are born water fighters. We northerners are far behind. If this kid is properly trained, he will surely become a fierce naval general."

South ships and north horses was no empty saying.

"Tie Steward, watch the port side. Someone is trying to climb aboard."

Tie Niaofei snapped out of his thoughts and rushed to the port side. He fired a musket downward with a loud bang. The bandit clinging to the hull screamed and fell back into the water.

From afar, Shi Lang witnessed this and could not help marveling. "What a powerful ship. In front of a ship like this, personal skill is useless. You cannot even climb the hull."

It did not take long before the battle ended.

The bandits' boats scattered and fled. Three cargo ships were rescued and followed behind the Wanli Sunshine like obedient attendants, heading toward Anqing Port.

Large numbers of captured bandits were hauled aboard, bound, and thrown into the hold to be taken back for labor reform. The seized bandit skiffs were all tied with ropes and dragged behind the cargo ships, forming a long trailing line.

As the sailors cleaned up the battlefield, Tie Niaofei noticed that the strange pair, the old boatman and the boy, had also come closer. They stopped beneath the ship's hull. The boy looked up and shouted loudly, "Heroes on the ship, greetings. My name is Shi Lang. Please let me come aboard. I have a letter of introduction."

The first few words drew little attention. But when he said the last three words, "letter of introduction," the people on board paused slightly. Hm?

A letter of introduction had a very Gao Family Village feel to it.

When technicians from Gao Family Village transferred jobs, they always carried letters of introduction from their original unit to the new one.

For this boy to use those words, he was immediately regarded as half one of their own.

A sailor leaned over the railing and laughed. "I will throw down a rope. Can you climb up?"

Shi Lang replied confidently, "A rope will be enough."

The sailor swung his arm, tossing down a long rope.

Shi Lang grasped it with both hands, braced his feet against the hull, and moved upward as if walking sideways. In no time, he climbed onto the deck of the Wanli Sunshine and stood firm.

The sailors could not help calling out together, "Fine skills for such a young man."

Tie Niaofei pushed through the crowd. He had already learned the boy's background earlier, so seeing his boarding skills did not surprise him. He smiled. "You said you have a letter of introduction?"

Shi Lang reached behind his back and produced a bandit's head.

The sailors fell silent.

Tie Niaofei shook his head with a smile. "That is not a letter of introduction."

Shi Lang replied, "Is a pledge not as useful as a letter of introduction?"

Everyone laughed.

Only then did Shi Lang reach into his clothes and take out the letter Zhu Piaoling had given him, handing it over respectfully with both hands.

Tie Niaofei unfolded it and clicked his tongue. It was written by that unreliable great hero Zhu Piaoling. Yet the contents forced him to take it seriously. This boy was someone personally selected by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

However...

Dao Xuan Tianzun had added a special note. "His ideological and moral education, as well as education in national righteousness, must be strengthened."

Tie Niaofei put the letter away and smiled warmly. "So you were introduced by Zhu Piaoling. Very well. On this ship, you may explore freely. There are no restrictions."

Shi Lang was overjoyed. "What? Uncle Zhu's letter is that effective? He... he is actually such an incredible person? I thought he was just an unreliable uncle. He even said he was ten times the dandy."

Tie Niaofei laughed. "It is true that he is unreliable. But unreliable people can still recommend reliable ones. Whether you can make it here depends on your own ability."

Shi Lang was brimming with confidence. "My ability will not disappoint you."

Tie Niaofei smiled. "Good. Then we shall wait and see. For now, why not take a look around?"

Shi Lang said happily, "That would be excellent."

He cheered and immediately rushed toward the interior of the ship.

The first thing he wanted to find out was exactly how many cannons this giant vessel carried. He could tell that although no guns were visible from the outside, there had to be cannons within. Those rows of small windows along the sides were clearly gun ports, merely concealed by covers.

Chapter 954: Battle at Liaoluo Bay

Shi Lang ran several full laps around the ship. The sight of its thirty-two cannons made his eyes shine. That number alone completely crushed the Frankish three-masted galleons. Moreover, the ship's cargo capacity surpassed even the great Dutch vessels.

Whether in firepower or carrying capacity, it outclassed contemporary Western ships across the board.

"This is incredible," Shi Lang exclaimed. "With ten or so ships like this, you could sail straight to the East India Company's headquarters and fight them there."

He was practically vibrating with excitement.

Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei exchanged puzzled looks.

"The East India Company?" they asked. "What's that?"

Shi Lang sighed. "It's a company established by the westerners in the Southern Seas. It may be called a company, but in truth it functions as a naval headquarters. Westerners sail massive ships across ten thousand li, constantly eyeing our southeastern coast. They have already built a base on Yizhou Island. If we do not eliminate them quickly, Yizhou may well fall into Western hands."

This was the first time Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei had heard of such matters. They were stunned.

"Can Westerners really be that formidable?" Jiang Cheng said. "That seems unlikely. How many of them could there be? Our Great Heavenly Dynasty could send out any army and crush them."

Shi Lang shook his head. "You really need to understand the coastal situation better."

In fact, Li Daoxuan was thinking the same thing.

This will not do. Even my people from Gao Family Village do not understand the situation clearly. It seems I need to show them just how dangerous the Westerners are.

But how should he explain it?

Heh.

The best method, of course, was a movie.

The Little Soldier by the Daling River had already caused a massive stir within Gao Family Village's territory. If he wanted everyone to be wary of the Westerners, the best approach was to make another similar film. One that revealed their wolfish ambitions and showcased their technological advances. Only then would people truly take it seriously.

Li Daoxuan leapt onto the two characters "Puzhou" written on the box. In an instant, his perspective shifted to the Huahua World Star Agency in Puzhou.

The moment he arrived, he saw Old Nanfeng grabbing Chen Qianhu by the collar.

"Get over here and act properly," Old Nanfeng roared. "Stop running around like a headless chicken."

"Brother Nanfeng, spare me! Spare me!" Chen Qianhu wailed. "Don't make me play Huang Taiji again. I'm begging you."

"First day working under me?" Old Nanfeng sneered. "You do not know how ruthless I am? Spare you? Spare my ass. You have five minutes to change into Huang Taiji's costume and fix your hair. If not, do not blame me for being unkind."

Once Old Nanfeng's killing intent leaked out, even Chang Wei would drop to his knees on the spot.

Chen Qianhu dared not resist. He lowered his head and obediently went to change costumes.

Just then, the Tianzun arrived.

The embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun emblem on Old Nanfeng's chest spoke.

"Greetings, comrades."

Everyone immediately replied in unison. "We pay our respects to Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan said, "Old Nanfeng, I want to shoot a naval battle film."

"A water battle?" Old Nanfeng froze. "Uh... how are we supposed to shoot that? Everyone here is a landlubber."

"Well," Li Daoxuan said, "I will have Bai Yuan dispatch naval forces to cooperate with you. What you need to do is find people to write a solid script and flesh out the story."

Old Nanfeng relaxed. "That is no problem. What naval battle does Tianzun want to film? The Battle of Red Cliffs? Han Xin's battle at the Wei River? Or Zhu Yuanzhang versus Chen Youliang at Poyang Lake?"

"None of those," Li Daoxuan replied. "I want to film the Battle of Liaoluo Bay."

Old Nanfeng froze.

Everyone present froze as well.

The Battle of Liaoluo Bay had occurred only two years earlier. Most inland people had never even heard of it.

Li Daoxuan had no choice but to give a brief explanation. "This was a naval battle between the Ming navy and the Dutch."

Before he could continue, Chen Qianhu's eyes lit up.

"So the villains in this film are Westerners?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan confirmed.

Chen Qianhu burst into laughter. "Hahahaha. I cannot play a Westerner. No matter how the script is written, I will not be the villain this time."

Li Daoxuan added calmly, "There is also a traitorous pirate who served the Westerners. A great Han traitor named Liu Xiang."

Chen Qianhu froze.

Old Nanfeng's gaze slowly shifted toward him.

"Oh? A traitorous pirate? A Western dog?"

"No. No. NOOOO!" Chen Qianhu screamed miserably.

His cries echoed throughout the agency.

Anyone who heard them was moved to tears.

That very night, the poor scholar screenwriters hired by the Huahua World Star Agency began working frantically. They developed the story, wrote the script, and designed the characters.

At the same time, Li Daoxuan made a phone call to Cai Xinzi.

"Old Cai, you should have ready-made models of Spanish galleons from the Age of Exploration, right?"

"Of course I do. If I did not have those, what kind of model business would I be running?"

"Good. I need eleven of them."

Cai Xinzi was baffled. "I would understand ten or twelve. But eleven? What does that mean? That you are a lonely bachelor?"

Li Daoxuan replied coolly, "Unlike you, I am happily single. You, on the other hand, live in terror of your wife shouting 'Laozhi Shudao Shan.'"

Cai Xinzi scoffed. "You do not know a thing. I am the boss at home. I say 'Laozhi Shudao Shan,' and she immediately cooks and does laundry without a word."

Li Daoxuan was about to mock him when a scream came from the other end of the phone.

Silence followed.

An eerie silence.

A few seconds later, a young girl's voice answered.

"Uncle Li, my dad is getting beaten. Mom says he is showing off and needs discipline. His ears are twisted into pretzel shapes."

Li Daoxuan burst out laughing. "Hahahaha."

"What does 'showing off' mean?" the girl asked innocently.

"That is a bad phrase," Li Daoxuan said solemnly. "Your dad said it, so your mom is disciplining him. Do not learn it, or your mom will discipline you too."

"Wow. Then I will not learn it."

"Good girl."

The next day, eleven Spanish galleon models were delivered. All of them were dead models, with no motors, solar panels, or any other mechanisms.

Li Daoxuan was not actually planning to fight a war. They were simply props for a film.

As the props arrived, the poor scholar screenwriters, under Li Daoxuan's hands-on guidance, finished the script.

The story's protagonist was a boy who lived peacefully in a coastal village on Yizhou Island. One day, Dutch ships arrived without warning, slaughtered everyone in the village, and burned it to the ground. They then built a fortress called Fort San Salvador.

The boy barely escaped with his life.

He fled to the mainland and joined the imperial navy.

Not long after, the Dutch set their sights on Kinmen in Fujian. Led by the pirate traitor Liu Xiang, they sailed in with eleven massive warships, bristling with aggression.

A great naval battle began.

The film's title was:

Blood Battle at Liaoluo Bay.

Chapter 955: We May Not Very Proper

Old Nanfeng stared at the script and felt a headache coming on.

"Tianzun, this Blood Battle at Liaoluo Bay story takes place almost entirely along the coast and at sea. We do not have an environment like that for filming."

"That is simple," Li Daoxuan replied. "When you are shooting indoor and dialogue scenes, just hang a large green cloth behind them."

"...What?"

Old Nanfeng did not understand. Hanging a green cloth as a backdrop? What kind of staging was that?

But since Tianzun had issued the order, there was nothing to discuss. Everyone would just do as instructed.

The next problem was the filming location.

Using the Yellow River to shoot a naval battle was completely inappropriate. First, the river was too narrow. A massive battle involving dozens or even hundreds of warships simply could not be staged there. Second, the current was far too swift. In the blink of an eye, a ship could be swept more than ten meters downstream. Filming like that would easily lead to accidents.

After much deliberation, Old Nanfeng chose a location northeast of Puzhou City, a body of water called Wuxing Lake. It was the largest freshwater lake in Shanxi, with a surface width of up to five li. The water was calm, unlike a river, making it much easier to film.

Old Nanfeng reported this to the mass produced Tianzun avatar.

"When filming long range battle scenes on the lake, we will not be able to hang green cloth in the background."

The mass produced Tianzun replied, "That is fine. Use green cloth where you can. Where you cannot, just film directly. I will have people handle the background afterward."

Old Nanfeng understood immediately.

The background would be handled by immortal arts. No need to worry.

Just get it done.

This film had been personally requested by Tianzun, with the goal of raising nationwide awareness of the Western threat. Naturally, no expense would be spared.

Bai Yuan transferred a large number of sailors from Xiaolangdi to take on the roles of Western pirates, the Ming navy, and Liu Xiang's pirate forces.

All of that was manageable.

But then a real problem appeared.

The Western pirate side required a fleet admiral, Putmans, and several close bodyguards who needed to deliver lines opposite him. These roles absolutely required blond haired, blue eyed Westerners.

In later eras, one could find Westerners anywhere to act in films. Many of them would not even mind playing villains. There were even people from the islands of the east who traveled to China specifically to play Japanese officers in anti invasion dramas.

But in the late Ming dynasty, finding a Westerner was truly difficult. Very, very difficult.

So how could they obtain Western actors?

Old Nanfeng had a sudden idea and went to find Wang Zheng.

Wang Zheng had once funded the construction of a Catholic church in Xi'an. With Wang Zheng stepping in and using the church's connections, a group of Westerners was quickly located.

These Westerners were adventurers who had failed miserably in Europe and had followed pirate ships eastward in search of the so called Land of Gold. They were all dressed in rags, their faces sallow with hunger.

By now, they had already learned the truth. The Land of Gold did exist, but if you wanted gold there, you still had to work for it. Gold was not lying around for anyone to pick up.

Old Nanfeng spent a small amount of money and sent this group onto a train bound for Puzhou.

...

Shi Lang followed Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei to Anqing Wharf, stopping beside a temporary naval barracks.

Anqing Prefecture had originally possessed a river patrol fleet, but its equipment had decayed, its ranks were undermanned, and the entire force had long since become a hollow shell. Worse still, the useless river patrol was entangled in a dense web of official relationships. Behind every idle officer drawing empty pay likely stood a spiderweb of backing connections.

Shi Kefa was not an official with overwhelming political backing or iron handed authority. He could not touch that tangled network, nor did he have the energy to try.

So he simply ignored the original river patrol and let it rot.

Starting anew was better.

When Qi Jiguang formed the Qi Family Army to resist the Japanese pirates, he had also started from scratch.

The sailors from Gao Family Village had set up a temporary camp near Anqing Wharf while organizing laborers to build a brand new naval barracks.

When Shi Lang arrived, the new barracks were not yet complete, so he entered the temporary camp instead.

The camp was not large. The Wanli Sunshine carried only one hundred and twenty sailors, so the encampment was modest.

Yet despite its size, it looked orderly and immaculate.

Shi Lang was still a boy. Stepping into the camp, he felt a surge of excitement as he looked around. Suddenly, he saw two sailors carrying a large basket. Inside was an entire basket of smoked cured pork.

He could not help blurting out, "Is that your military rations?"

The sailor laughed. "Yes. We are changing things up this time. Everyone is being issued cured pork."

Shi Lang sucked in a sharp breath.

Even though he was young and not particularly worldly, he knew that feeding ordinary soldiers food like this was not something an average general could afford. The patron behind this army must be unimaginably wealthy.

When he reached the central command tent, Shi Lang thought he was about to meet Shi Kefa himself. He felt a little excited and even rehearsed what he would say.

But when he entered the tent, he saw Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei seated at the place of honor. Shi Kefa was nowhere to be seen.

After sitting upright, Jiang Cheng spoke with a serious expression.

"Shi Lang, you came here with a letter of introduction. Are you planning to enlist? I will be blunt with you. Our unit has many rules. Far more rules than ordinary armies. At least ten times as many."

Shi Lang blinked. "Huh? This unit is under the two of you? Is it not under Lord Shi Kefa?"

Tie Niaofei smiled. "We are only a militia for now. Jiang Instructor is in charge. I am merely a guest. As for Shi Kefa, he is even more of a guest than I am. He does not fully count as one of us."

Shi Lang stared.

His face was blank with confusion. With his broad forehead and large features, his stunned expression looked even more comical than usual.

After a long moment, he said awkwardly, "I... want to rise to high office. I want to make a name for myself. I want to join a proper army."

Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei exchanged a glance and smiled.

"In name, we may not be very proper," Jiang Cheng said. "But in terms of discipline and combat strength, we are extremely proper. Whether you wish to join us is entirely up to you. You can make your decision after comparing us thoroughly."

Those words made Shi Lang hesitate again.

After touring the Wanli Sunshine, he had already felt how terrifying its combat power was. The sailors' firearms were formidable, and among the Ming navy, not a single ship could compare to it.

He had also seen the discipline aboard the ship. The soldiers were strict, polite, and restrained. There was not the slightest trace of arrogance or brutality.

This truly was a force more proper than the regular army.

But still...

From what they said, this was only a militia. If he wanted to be ennobled and restore the former glory of the Shi family, how could joining a militia be acceptable?

Just as he wavered, the tent flap was suddenly lifted.

Shi Kefa rushed in, breathless.

"Instructor Jiang, Master Tie, the rebel army of the Eight Great Kings from the Western Camp is advancing. Please come help at once."

Chapter 956: Without Comparison, There Is No Harm

Jiang Cheng let out an exasperated groan. "Again? Lord Shi, we just drove off the Huangmei river bandits and returned to camp. The soldiers have not even had two bites of hot food yet."

Shi Kefa looked awkward. "I know you are exhausted. But the bandits of the Western Camp's Eight Great Kings are advancing over land, and the damage they cause is far worse than water bandits. On land there are villages and towns everywhere. Tens of thousands of civilians are at risk. I have no choice but to trouble you again."

Jiang Cheng sighed. "If it is for the common people, then a bit of hardship is nothing."

He stood up and rushed out of the tent. Moments later, his voice rang out across the camp.

"Emergency mobilization. Emergency mobilization."

"Again?"

"We just got back."

"No time for complaints. Five minutes to prepare for departure."

The camp immediately fell silent. Five minutes was not long at all. No one had time to grumble anymore. The soldiers moved swiftly, making ready for battle.

Everything was urgent, yet orderly. There was not the slightest hint of panic.

Not far away, Shi Lang witnessed this scene with his own eyes.

This was the first time he had finally seen Shi Kefa in person. His eyes lit up at once. He strode forward and performed a deep bow.

"Lord Shi."

Shi Kefa paused. "Oh? And you are?"

"I was introduced by Uncle Zhu Piaoling," Shi Lang said. "I wish to enlist and kill the enemy. In the future, I hope to rise to rank and title and become a great general."

Shi Kefa was in the middle of a crisis and had no time for idle conversation. Hearing Zhu Piaoling's name, he waved off the rest. "You want to enlist? Go find Instructor Jiang."

"I wish to join the regular imperial army," Shi Lang said earnestly.

Shi Kefa's expression turned strange. "The regular imperial army? I see. Very well. Stay by my side for now. I will show you what a regular army looks like."

With that, Shi Kefa sprinted off. Shi Lang hurried after him.

Soon, Shi Kefa burst into the official Anqing Garrison camp and shouted loudly, "Bandits of the Eight Great Kings are looting Susong. All units, assemble and prepare to march at once."

With that order, the Anqing Garrison soldiers also began to move.

From Shi Lang's perspective, the scene that followed was almost painful to watch.

The garrison officers started putting on their armor lazily. One of them had no visible muscle at all, only sagging fat. Several retainers crowded around him, fumbling for ages without even managing to fasten his armor properly.

When the general is useless, the soldiers follow suit.

The soldiers were no better. They looked little different from ordinary farmers. The moment they heard they were going to battle, chaos immediately broke out. The camp turned into a scene of chickens flying and dogs jumping, with people running everywhere.

One man even emerged bare chested from the latrine, holding up his trousers and walking slowly, sniffing his fingers as he went.

Shi Lang fell silent.

Only then did he truly understand the saying that without comparison, there is no harm.

Just moments ago, he had seen the militia. Now he was seeing the so called imperial troops. The contrast made his face burn with embarrassment.

Shi Kefa, however, seemed long past caring. He watched coldly as the soldiers dragged their feet. He did not urge them on, because he knew it would be useless.

No matter how much you urge a snail, it will never run like a leopard.

Shi Kefa could endure it, but Shi Lang could not.

Still a teenager, he cared little for worldly tact. When something was wrong, he shouted about it.

"How can you be like this?" Shi Lang yelled. "The bandits are killing their way here, and you are still dragging your feet?"

The garrison soldiers rolled their eyes at him. If not for the fact that he had entered with Shi Kefa, someone might already have lashed out. Even so, all they did was speed up a tiny bit.

They evolved from snails into turtles.

For a snail, the speed of a turtle was already astonishing. They were truly doing their best.

"This is infuriating!" Shi Lang shouted. "Lord Shi, can you really let this go on?"

Shi Kefa sighed. "I want to manage them, but it is very difficult. You think you are dealing with an ordinary soldier, but his uncle's wife's younger brother might be a high official. That official's fellow townsman might be another official, and that official's teacher might be yet another."

Shi Lang froze.

Shi Kefa's expression darkened. "Sigh."

After who knew how long, the troops finally finished assembling. Five hundred men, scattered and disorderly, barely gathered together.

As they marched out of the camp, Shi Lang saw Jiang Cheng already waiting outside with the militia.

On one side were the imperial troops, noisy and chaotic, their formation crooked and unsightly.

On the other side was the militia. Only one hundred and twenty men, yet their ranks were neat and their bearing solemn.

Shi Lang looked left, then right. His emotions tangled.

"We take the water route," Shi Kefa ordered. "Move at full speed to Susong."

The militia boarded the Wanli Sunshine at once. The imperial troops climbed onto all kinds of shabby little boats. The garrison vessels were old and poorly maintained, falling apart at the seams. Not only did they lack cannons, even firearms, rockets, and fire oil were in short supply.

The soldiers rowed lazily, unwilling to exert themselves. Even at cruising speed, the Wanli Sunshine was far faster than they were. After sailing some distance, it had to stop and wait for them.

The more Shi Lang watched, the more alarmed he became. Which side was the regular army now? He could no longer tell.

Fortunately, water travel was still much faster than land. From Anqing Harbor to the Susong riverbank was only two hundred li. Even rowing, it took just half a day to arrive.

Ahead lay Huikou Town.

The small town was already under attack.

On the water were the Huangmei river bandits, sealing off the docks with countless small boats. On land were the bandits of the Western Camp's Eight Great Kings, numbering several thousand, attacking from all sides. Their formation made it clear that they intended to spare not a single civilian and plunder everything.

Inside the town, local gentry had organized militias to resist desperately.

Because the Jiangnan region had long suffered from pirate raids, the militias here were better equipped than those in the northwest. Many militiamen even carried their own firearms. The militia instructors were also better funded, pouring boiling oil down from the walls without restraint.

The fighting around the town walls was fierce.

At the sight of this, Shi Kefa could no longer hold back. "Rescue Huikou Town at once."

The moment the order was given, the imperial soldiers' boats slowed down in unison.

They were afraid to fight.

Shi Lang cursed aloud, "Damn it."

At that moment, the Wanli Sunshine abruptly shifted from cruising speed to combat speed and charged forward.

Like a ferocious dragon crossing the river, like divine soldiers descending from the heavens.

The Huangmei river bandits took one look at the Wanli Sunshine and reacted like mice seeing a cat.

"That monster ship is back."

"Damn it, it is that five colored flag again."

"Run. We cannot fight that thing."

The boats blocking Huikou Town's docks scattered at once, fleeing in all directions.

Chapter 957: I Have Decided

At Huikou Town's docks, the situation was decided almost in an instant.

The Wanli Sunshine reclaimed the harbor the moment it arrived.

The imperial troops trailing behind took one look and instantly understood. That was one thick thigh worth hugging.

The Caijiang naval soldiers who had just moments ago been too afraid to advance suddenly found their courage. They followed behind the Wanli Sunshine, howling as they charged forward. Their voices were loud, but in reality they still kept a certain distance from the real fighting. It was just like street brawls, where the ones shouting the loudest always stayed in the back, while the ones in front said nothing and swung their blades.

The Wanli Sunshine held position at the docks, suppressing the river bandits.

Only then did the Caijiang navy finally dare to approach the shore. The garrison soldiers aboard their boats leapt onto land in quick succession.

Although these garrison troops were as weak as chickens, their arrival still had a noticeable effect on the overall battlefield.

Inside Huikou Town, the militia's morale soared. The local gentry defending the walls shouted loudly, "The imperial troops are here. The imperial troops are here. Hold on. Victory is close."

The militia fought with renewed vigor. The civilians assisting them worked even harder, hauling rolling logs, boulders, boiling oil, and scalding water up onto the town walls without pause.

On the bandit side, a trace of panic appeared as well, and their assault slowed.

The bandit commander was known as the Prince of Taiping, a historical figure and a favored general under the Eight Great Kings. He had once followed the Eight Great Kings in attacking Fengyang and even participated in digging up the Zhu family's ancestral graves. He was a ruthless character.

He turned his gaze toward the docks. The first thing he saw was the towering, imposing Wanli Sunshine.

"Damn," the Prince of Taiping said in shock. "The Yangtze really is something else. Compared to the Yellow River where we used to roam, this place is on another level. Are all the ships here this big?"

One of his subordinates wiped sweat from his brow. "Boss, even on the Yangtze, ships like that do not exist. No idea where it came from."

The Prince of Taiping narrowed his eyes. "That ship looks dangerous. Even the Huangmei river bandits ran the moment they saw it."

"Boss, it really is dangerous. The entire deck is packed with musket troops."

At the words musket troops, the Prince of Taiping frowned deeply.

This was not the first time the Eight Great Kings' forces had fought musket units.

During their long years of rebellion, they had encountered the Gao Family Village militia more than once. The earliest clash dated back to the battle at the Longmen Yellow River Bridge.

At that time, the Prince of Taiping's unit had been in the vanguard attacking the bridge. His men had propped up the corpses of their fallen comrades as human shields and charged forward, only to be beaten back by Cheng Xu's reinforcements.

The memory jolted him awake.

"Damn it," he said sharply. "Could it be those strange musket troops again? Listen carefully. Pay attention to the interval between their musket volleys."

He pricked up his ears.

Soon, after a burst of musket fire, there was only a brief pause before the second round erupted.

The Prince of Taiping slapped his thigh. "It is them. No doubt about it. Only those bastards can fire muskets with intervals this short."

A subordinate asked anxiously, "Boss, what do we do now?"

The Prince of Taiping rolled his eyes. "Withdraw."

The bandit forces surrounding Huikou Town immediately pulled back, retreating northward and away from the Yangtze.

The Gao Family Village militia could not stray too far from their ship. If they abandoned the Wanli Sunshine to pursue the bandits on land, and the Huangmei river bandits returned and seized the ship, that would be disastrous.

Reluctantly, the militia withdrew and remained to guard the ship.

The Caijiang navy also stayed aboard their own boats.

This should have been the moment for the Anqing garrison troops to give chase. Unfortunately, their morale was abysmal, and their fear of battle overwhelming. They had neither the courage nor the ability to pursue.

All anyone could do was watch helplessly as the Prince of Taiping's forces fled toward Longgan Lake and Dagan Lake in the north.

Shi Lang gripped his spear and took several steps forward, intending to chase them. After only a few strides, he realized no one was following. He turned his head and saw that the imperial troops were only shouting, their feet firmly rooted in place.

His body seemed to freeze.

After a long sigh, he lowered his head and walked back to Shi Kefa's side. In a low voice, he said, "Lord Shi, I finally understand why the bandits are never fully eradicated, and how they always manage to escape from the imperial army."

Shi Kefa replied quietly, "You understand now? After experiencing this again and again over the years, I have gradually come to understand it as well."

Shi Lang clenched his fists. "If the imperial troops were willing to fight, how could the bandits possibly survive?"

Shi Kefa let out a long sigh. "It is not that simple. The Tianzun once said that banditry is not a military problem, but a social problem. I agree deeply."

Shi Lang stared at him in confusion.

Shi Kefa patted him on the shoulder. "You are still young. You cannot understand this yet. Just remember one thing. Military problems can be solved through fighting. Social problems cannot. Even if we chased down the Prince of Taiping today and wiped out this entire band, as long as the social problems remain, another group of bandits will emerge in a matter of days. If not in the east, then in the west. There will be no peace."

Shi Lang truly did not understand, but it did not matter to him.

What he wanted was simply to be a soldier. Soldiers did not concern themselves with abstract problems. Soldiers cared only about how to win battles. Win, and you were a good soldier. Lose, and you were not. It was that simple.

In his eyes, the imperial troops were clearly not good soldiers.

The militia on this side, however, shone brilliantly. They were exactly what soldiers should be.

Not long after, everyone returned once more to the Anqing garrison.

Shi Lang stood before Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei for the second time.

"Instructor Jiang, I have made up my mind."

"Oh?" Jiang Cheng smiled. "And what have you decided?"

Shi Lang spoke seriously. "I want to join the militia."

Jiang Cheng laughed. "You are most welcome. Very well. Starting tomorrow, you will begin with ideological education classes."

Shi Lang froze. "What? Not training?"

"No, no," Jiang Cheng said, shaking his head. "I already told you. We have many rules here. The first rule of joining the militia is to complete ideological education. Anyone who fails that class does not even earn the right to touch a musket."

Shi Lang broke into a cold sweat.

It was precisely because he disliked studying that he had gone to practice martial arts. He never imagined that he would end up sitting in a classroom again.

Awkward. Extremely awkward.

That night, Shi Lang stayed in the camp. He was assigned a tent and a standard militia uniform, but no musket or ammunition.

He also experienced the Gao Family Village militia's special ration, luncheon meat.

To him, its appeal far surpassed that of smoked cured pork.

Children favored luncheon meat. That was true not only in modern times, but even in ancient ones. Shi Lang was still a child, after all. In his eyes, smoked cured pork was nothing special. His family had plenty of it. Luncheon meat, on the other hand, was unbelievably delicious.

Chapter 958: Where Should a Naval Base Be Built?

The Capital. The Imperial Study.

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, sat at his desk as he had for decades, reviewing memorials without rest.

He casually opened one and read the opening lines.

"Wang Gongbi, Right Administration Commissioner of Nanjing, unlawfully distributed tribute grain to civilians, causing chaos at the Anqing docks. Eight thousand shi of tribute grain were lost."

The moment he read this, Zhu Youjian felt as though he had been strapped into a freefall ride.

"Outrageous!" he roared. "The court is already strapped for resources. We are fighting in Liaodong and suppressing bandits in the Central Plains. Every coin and every grain matters. How dare Wang Gongbi casually give away tribute grain? This is treasonous behavior!"

Standing nearby, Cao Huachun sighed inwardly.

Your Majesty, could you please finish reading the memorial before exploding? The second half clearly explains that river bandits were attacking, the grain was about to be seized, and it was given to the people to prevent total loss.

"I am furious!" Zhu Youjian snapped. "Strip Wang Gongbi of his office and arrest him at once!"

Cao Huachun could no longer stay silent. "Your Majesty, there is still more to the memorial."

Only then did Zhu Youjian force himself to read on.

After finishing it, he froze.

Silence.

This was awkward.

He immediately grabbed another memorial to cover the moment.

This one reported that Shi Kefa had arrived in Anqing to take up the post of Right Vice Minister, reorganized the Jiangbei forces, defeated the Huangmei river bandits and the Prince of Taiping, pursued the enemy with household troops and militia, destroyed the bandits' stronghold at Tiantang Fortress, and drove them north in disarray.

Zhu Youjian's mood shot upward like a jet.

"Well done, Shi Kefa," he said happily.

Perfect. This would neatly resolve the embarrassment from earlier.

He tapped the memorial and said, "Demote Wang Gongbi by one rank and transfer him back to Nanjing. Let Shi Kefa take full charge of military affairs in Jiangbei."

Cao Huachun thought to himself, Finally, that sounded like a proper imperial decision.

"Oh, right," Cao Huachun added quietly. "The Qin Prince's household sent a letter."

"The Qin Prince?" Zhu Youjian recalled at once. Zhu Cunji. Years ago, he had clashed fiercely with civil officials over fertilizer shipments, even sending retainers to seize transport carts. The Embroidered Guard caught him red-handed. Only after he donated fifty thousand taels of silver for disaster relief had Zhu Youjian let him off.

That memory was still fresh.

"What now?" Zhu Youjian frowned. "Who did the Qin Prince bully this time?"

Cao Huachun lowered his voice. "This time, it seems the Qin Prince was the one being bullied."

He then read out Zhu Cunji's heavily embellished letter.

Zhu Youjian rolled his eyes. "That brothel madam is too ignorant. The Qin Prince is royal blood. What is wrong with selling him a few courtesans to sing for him? She actually dared to refuse?"

"A mere brothel madam would never dare," Cao Huachun said softly. "Someone must be backing her. The Qin Prince is far away in Xi'an. High mountains, distant palace. The officials supporting her have nothing to fear."

Zhu Youjian snorted. "These civil officials have gone too far. They have blocked the Qin Prince's succession for years. He is forty now and still only a prince, with no Qin King in residence. It is humiliating. And now they even interfere when he tries to buy a few women?"

Cao Huachun gave an awkward smile.

"Do they think the imperial family has no dignity left?" Zhu Youjian said irritably. "Dragging something this trivial all the way to me. Ridiculous. Send someone to Suzhou. Handle this quietly. Make the madam sell the girls to the Qin Prince. Do not let it blow up."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Cao Huachun replied.

At noon.

Shi Lang had just finished his ideological studies class.

He walked toward the mess hall with exhaustion written all over him.

Half a day of martial training would not tire him, but sitting through lectures drained him completely. Mental fatigue left him lightheaded. He staggered inside, picked up his meal, and ate ravenously.

Just as he was getting into it, a shadow fell across the table.

Shi Kefa sat down opposite him, holding a meal tray of his own.

Shi Lang nearly jumped. "Lord Shi? You are eating in the camp?"

"I came to freeload a meal," Shi Kefa said with a smile. "I am quite fond of this luncheon meat."

Shi Lang beamed. "Me too!"

Of course, Shi Kefa had not come just to eat. He was carrying a task from the Tianzun.

After running through the instructions in his head, Shi Kefa asked casually, "Little Shi, you grew up along the Fujian coast, yes? You should know quite a bit about the sea."

"Yes," Shi Lang said quickly. "I was born in Fujian. I grew up by the shore, heard many stories about pirates, Westerners, and merchant ships."

Shi Kefa chuckled. "Then let me test you. If you were to choose a base at sea, a hidden naval port, where would you place it?"

The question stunned Shi Lang.

As a Fujian native, his first instinct was Yizhou Island.

But he immediately rejected it.

Westerners were already active there. The red-haired foreigners had built Fort Keelung. Their merchant ships radiated outward from that base across the southeastern coast.

If a naval port were built there, it would hardly remain secret. Western ships would come snooping before construction even finished.

After a long moment of careful thought, Shi Lang answered, "I would choose Zhoushan Island."

Shi Kefa felt a surge of delight.

Zhoushan Island matched the location the Tianzun had tentatively chosen. This child truly had some ability.

Keeping his expression neutral, Shi Kefa said, "And why Zhoushan? Speak of its strengths and weaknesses."

"Zhoushan has natural deepwater harbors," Shi Lang said earnestly. "Large ships can dock safely without risk of grounding. That is its first advantage."

"Second, the Ming court has already abandoned it. There is no official presence, and Western pirates do not pay it much attention. It would be easy to keep operations secret."

Now Shi Kefa truly understood.

This boy was saying exactly what the Tianzun had said.

"So by your reasoning," Shi Kefa asked, "we could build the naval port right away?"

Shi Lang shook his head. "Not yet."

"Oh?" Shi Kefa prompted. "Why not?"

"Zhoushan is currently infested with pirates," Shi Lang replied. "Beyond the main island are countless smaller islands, all used as pirate hideouts. If we wish to build a naval port there, we must first suppress the pirates."

Chapter 959: Intimidate Them

Shi Kefa smiled. "Suppressing pirates is not difficult, in my view. Once the Wanli Sunshine arrives, what sea bandits could possibly stand against it?"

Shi Lang shook his head. "Lord Shi, you are thinking about the sea too simply. Clearing pirates is not something one ship can solve. Sailing on the open sea is nothing like traveling along rivers or hugging the coast. Sailors who are skilled on inland waters will be completely lost once they reach the ocean. Some will not even know how to tell direction."

"Oh?" Shi Kefa said.

"And the waters around Zhoushan are extremely complex," Shi Lang continued. "The coastline twists constantly, reefs are everywhere. One mistake, and a large ship will run aground and sink. Without detailed nautical charts or someone familiar with the routes to guide us, trying to wipe out the Zhoushan pirates would be incredibly difficult."

"I see," Shi Kefa said slowly. "In that case, after lunch, come with me. I will take you to meet some people."

Shi Lang froze. "People?"

He hurriedly shoveled down the rest of his food. He ate fast, but Shi Kefa ate slowly. The anxious Shi Lang ended up waiting a long while before they finally finished and left the camp together.

His curiosity grew stronger with every step.

Shi Kefa led him to a hillside outside the city. There had once been a wealthy gentry estate here, but the owner had moved away years ago. The compound had fallen into disuse until Shi Kefa rented it and converted it into the first prison in the area.

Inside the courtyard, forty three men were seated neatly in rows.

One glance was enough for Shi Lang to tell they were not good people. Calling them vicious-looking was already generous.

Shi Kefa lowered his voice. "These men are pirates I captured on my way here."

Shi Lang had heard rumors in camp. The Wanli Sunshine had destroyed several pirate ships under Liu Xiang and captured dozens of men along the way.

So this was where they ended up.

"Captured pirates are usually executed," Shi Lang said cautiously. "Yet Lord Shi is keeping them alive here. Could it be..."

He suddenly realized and brightened. "You plan to make them guide us to Zhoushan."

"You are quick," Shi Kefa said. "You figured it out immediately."

Shi Lang lowered his voice. "Pirates are cruel and treacherous. If we let them guide us, they might deliberately mislead us. If our ships hit reefs, they could jump into the sea and escape."

Shi Kefa nodded. "Correct. That is why we must first reform them ideologically. Come closer and listen."

Shi Lang walked to the gate and peered inside. He instantly froze.

The pirates were not simply sitting there.

They were attending class.

An ideological education class, exactly like the ones Shi Lang attended in camp.

The difference was in content.

Shi Lang's classes focused on themes like you are the people's soldier, you come from the people, love the nation and love the people.

The pirates' lessons, however, sounded more like this.

You have committed crimes in the past, but it is not too late to repent.

Turn away from evil and you can still contribute to society.

A prodigal who returns is worth more than gold.

You must become people useful to society.

You come from the people.

Love the nation and love the people.

Shi Lang did not know whether to laugh or cry.

So you are suffering this too?

Then again, after listening carefully, it did not feel like suffering at all. The longer one listened, the more stirring it became. Some slogans almost made him want to shout along.

He leaned closer to Shi Kefa and whispered, "Will pirates really take this to heart? What if they pretend to reform, then return to crime the moment they are released?"

Shi Kefa chuckled. "You are overthinking it. Look carefully at what is teaching them."

Shi Lang had not been able to see the lectern earlier. Now he adjusted his angle and looked.

His mind went blank.

Standing at the front was a painting.

Yes, a painting.

A painted immortal with an ethereal bearing and a handsome face.

That alone was not the terrifying part.

The terrifying part was that the painted mouth was moving.

Ink lips opened and closed. The paper rippled as it spoke.

This was horrifying.

No wonder the pirates sat straight as arrows, not daring to show the slightest hint of defiance.

Who would dare misbehave in front of this thing?

The painting finished a segment and grinned darkly. "Third row from the left, fourth person. Stand up and tell me what I just said."

The pirate trembled and sprang to his feet. "Tianzun, you said that women and children must never be harmed."

"And if they are harmed?" the painting asked.

The pirate shook violently. "Then you will slap us into minced meat."

"Very good," the painting said with satisfaction. "Sit down."

The pirate collapsed back into his seat, drenched in sweat.

Shi Lang turned stiffly. "L Lord Shi. Wh what is that?"

Shi Kefa did not answer, only laughed softly.

Then the Tianzun embroidered on Shi Kefa's chest opened his mouth and said, "That is me."

Shi Lang screamed.

"What are you afraid of?" Shi Kefa said calmly. "Have you done something shameful? This is Dao Xuan Tianzun, a true immortal. If you have done no wrong, he will not punish you. He will protect you."

Shi Lang swallowed. "A god? Not a demon?"

The embroidered Tianzun chuckled. "To the righteous, I am a god. To the wicked, I am a demon."

Those words settled Shi Lang's nerves.

He did not believe himself to be wicked. His father Shi Daxuan was known for charity back home and had lived an upright life. With no guilt on his conscience, why fear heaven?

He steadied himself, looked again at Dao Xuan Tianzun, then at the pirates who now behaved like frightened quails.

Understanding dawned.

These pirates had likely been terrorized daily by this immortal.

How could they dare harbor evil thoughts anymore? They were probably too scared to steal a neighbor's chicken for the rest of their lives.

"With pirates guiding us," Shi Lang said thoughtfully, "Zhoushan can be pacified in a single campaign."

Then excitement burst forth. "If we capture all the Zhoushan pirates, intimidate them, and put them to use, our militia will immediately have a navy."

Shi Kefa laughed and shook his head. "You are still a child, yet you learned intimidation so quickly. Not a good habit."

Chapter 960: An Unreasonable Request

"Cai Xinzhi, Cai Xinzhi. Place a boat order."

Li Daoxuan called Cai Xinzhi once again.

"What kind of boats do you need this time?" Cai Xinzhi asked in surprise. "Why are you suddenly so obsessed with boats lately?"

Li Daoxuan replied casually, "Men's interests come and go in phases."

That statement actually made some sense.

Cai Xinzhi did not pursue the topic. "Alright then. What kind of boats do you want?"

Li Daoxuan said, "I need a large batch of river-sea vessels. For the big ones, make them like the seventy-meter ship we got last time, the Wanli Sunshine. As for the smaller ones, anything from twenty to fifty meters is fine. Various sizes. It would be best to assemble a huge mixed fleet."

Cai Xinzhi laughed and scolded him. "A mixed fleet in your own swimming pool? I swear, Old Li, you are becoming more and more childish. You should learn from me and cultivate some proper hobbies for a middle-aged man. Women, I'm telling you, women are a man's—"

He did not even finish his sentence before a sharp cry of pain came through the phone.

Then a little girl's voice followed. "Uncle, Daddy got hit again."

Li Daoxuan burst out laughing. "What was it this time?"

The little girl replied innocently, "Daddy was talking about women just now, and he was drooling, so Mommy hit him. I don't know why."

Li Daoxuan laughed so hard his stomach hurt. Knowing he had such a fearsome wife at home, how could Cai Xinzhi still dare to run his mouth like that? He was practically begging for a beating.

After hanging up, Li Daoxuan shifted his consciousness back into the box and immediately saw Shi Kefa busy organizing the militia.

Shi Kefa's situation was extremely complicated. He not only needed to recruit land-based militia to counter Zhang Xianzhong's forces, but also water-based militia to suppress the pirates in Huangmei. He had to fight on both land and water, and both fronts required firm control.

Jiang Cheng, who had experience in building naval forces, did his utmost to assist him. The Wanli Sunshine was constantly deployed, chasing pirates day after day.

It was far too busy.

Li Daoxuan knew that immediate reinforcements from the main village were necessary. They needed to transport large quantities of gunpowder, bullets, and military supplies to resupply the Wanli Sunshine. Otherwise, once the ammunition ran dry, the Gao Family Village militia's close-combat capability was not necessarily stronger than that of the imperial troops.

Oh, right. He had not checked on Zhu Piaoling for several days. Where had that fellow gone?

With a thought, he shifted his view to the embroidery on Zhu Piaoling's chest.

The moment the scene switched, Li Daoxuan saw Zhu Piaoling sitting proudly in the main hall of the Pear Garden. He still wore his bamboo hat and black scarf, hiding his face. However, from his posture, his movements, and the smug aura radiating from his entire body, it was obvious that he was in an extremely good mood, thoroughly enjoying himself.

The madam of the Pear Garden was kneeling before him.

The Suzhou Prefect was standing respectfully at the side, looking unusually obedient.

In the center of the hall stood another man, dressed in Daoist robes. He was plump and pale, without a beard, his features delicate and weak. One glance was enough to tell that he was a eunuch.

Zhu Piaoling said sarcastically, "Didn't you say she wasn't for sale? Then why did you invite this 'great hero' back today and claim you are willing to sell?"

The madam's face flushed crimson. "My lord, you... you did not say earlier that you were from the Prince of Qin's residence. Otherwise, how would this humble servant dare utter even a single word of refusal?"

Zhu Piaoling snorted twice. "Say it earlier? Would that have helped? Your esteemed Suzhou Prefect here was not planning to show any respect to the Prince of Qin's residence anyway. Besides, I am not even the Prince of Qin's heir, merely a steward under him. When has the Prefect ever shown respect to someone like me?"

The Suzhou Prefect cleared his throat awkwardly. "Ahem... well..."

Zhu Piaoling was about to continue his performance when the pale eunuch suddenly spoke, his words heavy with implication. "His Majesty said this matter must be handled discreetly."

Handled discreetly meant one thing. Do not let this cause trouble.

Zhu Piaoling snorted and immediately dropped his act.

The madam finally breathed a sigh of relief and hurriedly ordered all the girls of the Pear Garden to be brought out. There were indeed many of them, thirty or forty in total, young and old. The eldest were already thirty years old, while the youngest were not even ten.

Chen Yuanyuan stood among them, her eyes wide as she nervously observed the people before her.

Although she was still young, she had already spent several years in the Pear Garden and had witnessed countless ugly scenes. She had gained some understanding of the vile habits of various high-ranking officials and nobles.

She could tell that her future fate likely rested in the hands of this masked man wearing a bamboo hat. Entering the Prince of Qin's residence sounded frightening, but after careful thought, it was still far better than remaining in the Pear Garden. At the very least, she would only need to serve one master, rather than entertain countless guests of unknown origin.

As she was thinking this, she suddenly noticed that the divine figure embroidered on the masked man's chest seemed to smile at her.

She was startled and hurriedly rubbed her eyes. When she looked again, the embroidery was completely still. It must have been her imagination.

Zhu Piaoling said to the madam, "I am not forcibly taking your girls. Give me a total price for all of them. The Emperor's representative is present today as well, and the princely residence must not violate the rules."

The madam replied with a trembling voice, "Two thousand... two thousand five hundred taels."

Hearing this number, Li Daoxuan could not help sighing inwardly. So expensive. Not long ago, he had purchased eighteen girls from pirates for only four taels of silver each. Yet here, buying thirty or forty women from the Pear Garden cost two thousand five hundred taels.

They were all young women, yet their value differed by an entire world.

And yet, despite their higher price, these girls seemed even more pitiable. Clearly, a high price did not necessarily mean a better life.

Zhu Piaoling said calmly, "The price is acceptable. Pay it."

One of his guards stepped forward, holding a small box filled with gold ingots.

Zhu Piaoling added, "There is more than two thousand five hundred taels' worth of gold inside. Take it."

The madam thanked him repeatedly as she eagerly accepted the box.

Only then did Zhu Piaoling gesture to the group of women. "Ladies, come with me. We are returning to the princely residence."

The women slowly walked toward him, their expressions complicated. They did not know they were about to be saved. In their minds, they were merely jumping from one pit into another, hoping only that the fire in the new pit would burn a little less fiercely.

At that moment, the Suzhou Prefect suddenly spoke. "Steward, I have an unreasonable request."

Zhu Piaoling raised an eyebrow. "How unreasonable?"

The Suzhou Prefect said, "The princely residence surely does not need so many concubines and maids. Could you... leave one behind? Just one. Xue'er... she and I have been fond of each other for many years. To part like this, I truly cannot bear it."

Zhu Piaoling exclaimed, "Oh, a romantic fool."

Li Daoxuan muttered silently, Huh?

Everyone present was stunned by the Prefect's sudden outburst.

The Prefect's gaze was fixed on a courtesan in her early twenties. Tears streamed down his face as he called softly, "Xue'er."

The woman named Xue'er turned to look at him. Her eyes were also filled with tears, her face heavy with sorrow.

"Please do not dwell on your humble servant, Your Excellency. The Emperor himself has issued an imperial order. To defy it would mean confiscation of property and execution. We are fated to be apart in this life. Your Excellency, please forget your humble servant."