

Great Ming 981

Chapter 981: I Heard You're Hiring Actors Here

The Japanese samurai fell one after another.

Once the samurai were gone, the remaining fighters collapsed immediately. Their courage evaporated as if it had never existed. The Shengsi pirates surged forward, blades flashing, cutting them down without discrimination. It was no longer a battle, only a one-sided slaughter.

After the deck was finally cleared, the Shengsi pirates kicked open the cabin doors and poured inside.

Those watching from a distance could no longer see what was happening within, but the sounds carried clearly across the water. Shrill screams, hoarse roars, the clash of steel, all mixing together into a chaotic symphony of violence.

Then, little by little, the noise faded.

The screams weakened. The shouts died out. Even the sound of fighting vanished, leaving behind an eerie, suffocating silence.

Moments later, the Shengsi pirates emerged again, faces flushed with excitement. Their hands were full of loot, weapons, silver, valuables gathered hastily from the cabins.

But the moment they looked up and saw the massive Gao Family Village ship looming nearby, their expressions changed.

As if waking from a dream, they hurriedly dropped their plunder onto the deck. One after another, they knelt and kowtowed toward the towering vessel, bowing so deeply their foreheads struck the wood. Their mouths moved rapidly as they shouted something, though the distance made the words impossible to hear.

Still, their meaning was obvious.

Everything belonged to their new overlord.

Li Daoxuan glanced at the scene and shook his head lightly, offering no response.

Jiang Cheng, however, knew exactly what to do. He raised his voice and shouted, "Send teams aboard. Register all the spoils carefully. We will decide how to handle them afterward."

"Yes!"

Several squads immediately began preparing to board.

It was at that very moment that something unexpectedly amusing occurred.

Farther out at sea, Bai Yang appeared.

This was one of Liu Xiang's subordinates, the man who had just been driven off in humiliation by the Kurushima Pirates. He returned cautiously, commanding four junk ships, stopping well outside the battlefield as if content to simply observe.

From Bai Yang's flagship, flag signals fluttered frantically, sending some kind of urgent message.

Jiang Cheng frowned. "What is he saying?"

Shi Lang squinted at the flags, then shook his head. "I don't understand."

A former pirate who had been sent to Labor Reform hurried forward. "He's requesting a parley."

Jiang Cheng immediately turned to Li Daoxuan.

Li Daoxuan laughed. "What is there to discuss with pirates? Send twenty ships. Bring them back as Labor Reform inmates."

"Understood!"

Twenty Gao Family Village warships surged forward at once, accelerating straight toward Bai Yang's small fleet.

Bai Yang, meanwhile, was still waiting eagerly for a chance to speak.

He had just watched these newcomers annihilate the Japanese pirates, then watched Shengsi pirates board the ships under their command. In his mind, this meant only one thing.

These people were allies.

After all, the Shengsi pirates nominally belonged to Liu Xiang. Since everyone served the same master, surely there was room for discussion.

So he continued sending signals, entirely unprepared for what happened next.

In the blink of an eye, twenty warships charged straight at him.

Bai Yang's face turned pale. "Damn it! They don't want to talk! They're sending ships to wipe us out!"

A subordinate beside him was drenched in cold sweat. "Boss, what do we do?"

"What else can we do?" Bai Yang shouted. "Run!"

A veteran pirate, Bai Yang had long mastered the art of survival. Even while signaling for peace, he had already prepared to flee at a moment's notice. In the pirate world, words meant nothing. Only strength mattered.

What followed was a perfect demonstration of what it meant to be quick on one's feet.

Unfortunately, no amount of experience could overcome reality.

Their junk ships simply could not outrun Gao Family Village's electric-powered vessels. Before they had even gone far, twenty warships closed in from all directions, sealing off every escape route.

The same subordinate swallowed hard. "Boss... what now?"

Bai Yang stared at the encirclement.

He had just watched these ships crush the Kurushima Pirates with overwhelming force. There was nothing left to consider.

"Lower weapons," he said hoarsely. "We surrender."

The crews raised their hands, weapons held above their heads.

The gesture needed no translation.

Without a single drop of blood being spilled, Gao Family Village captured four more junk ships.

Four ships, smoothly added to the collaborator fleet.

Puzhou. Flower World Star Agency.

The film *Bloody Battle of Liaoluo Bay*, personally produced by Dao Xuan Tianzun, exploded in popularity the moment it premiered. However, Lao Nanfeng understood that relying solely on the occasional release from Dao Xuan Tianzun was not enough.

If he wanted to survive in this industry, he had to keep producing his own films.

Even if they were crude. Even if they were rushed.

In an era starved of entertainment, people would watch anything.

At this moment, Lao Nanfeng sat hunched over a script, brows tightly knitted.

The title read: The Legend of Li Shishi.

Cai Lin stood nearby and spoke thoughtfully. "The script itself is excellent. Stories about famous courtesans are always popular. Playing the adult Li Shishi would suit me perfectly. But the real difficulty lies with young Li Shishi."

Lao Nanfeng nodded slowly. "Yes. Finding the right actress for that role will be extremely difficult."

The script chronicled the legendary life of Li Shishi, the famed Song Dynasty courtesan, her rise to fame, and her tangled relationships with several men.

Everything was ready.

Except for one thing.

They desperately needed a top-tier child actress.

Cai Lin frowned. "She has to be young, breathtakingly beautiful, and proficient in singing, dancing, music, chess, calligraphy, and painting... My goodness. Where are we supposed to find someone like that?"

Lao Nanfeng sighed deeply. "I've been thinking about it until my head hurts."

They worried so much it felt as if their hair might turn white on the spot.

At that moment, a small face peeked timidly through the doorway.

A soft voice asked hesitantly, "Hello... my name is Chen Yuanyuan. I'm twelve this year. I heard you're hiring actresses here. Can... can someone my age be considered?"

Lao Nanfeng and Cai Lin both turned at once.

They froze.

Then, together, they gasped. "Oh?"

Lao Nanfeng leaned forward. "Can you sing, dance, and play instruments?"

Chen Yuanyuan nodded. "Yes."

Cai Lin pressed on quickly. "What about music, chess, calligraphy, and painting?"

"Yes," Chen Yuanyuan replied. "I studied at the Suzhou Pear Garden for many years."

Cai Lin's eyes widened. "The Pear Garden?"

Chen Yuanyuan nodded again.

Lao Nanfeng examined the girl carefully. Her features were delicate and refined, like jade carved by heaven. Given a few more years, she would surely grow into a beauty capable of toppling cities.

He and Cai Lin exchanged a glance, then burst out laughing together.

"We've found her!"

"Young Li Shishi!"

"Hahahahaha!"

Chen Yuanyuan blinked in confusion. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

Lao Nanfeng laughed loudly. "Little girl, your timing could not be better. Come, come. Take a look at this script. There's a scene for young Li Shishi. Read it, then perform it for us. If you do well, you'll never have to worry about food again."

Chen Yuanyuan felt nervous, as anyone would during an audition.

She accepted the script and read through it quickly.

Her mind was clear and sharp, her memory astonishing. After a single read, she had already grasped most of the content.

She then picked up a zither and played. The melody flowed smoothly, elegant and refined, instantly impressing both Lao Nanfeng and Cai Lin. After that, she danced. Her movements were light and graceful, mesmerizing to watch.

Cai Lin could not help but sigh. "At such a young age, her zither playing is already better than mine. Her dancing is even more exquisite. The Suzhou Pear Garden truly deserves its reputation."

She smiled wryly. "In a few years, the title of this agency's top actress will no longer belong to me."

Chapter 982: The Production Model

Xi'an. Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Thanks to his "major scientific and technological invention," Chen Ergou now wore the coveted Red Hat, the symbol of a senior technical engineer. He had been transferred into the research department, where he focused entirely on refining and upgrading his revolutionary Steam Forging Hammer.

Qi Cheng, who had assisted him during the invention process, chose a different path.

Rather than retreat into laboratories, Qi Cheng remained on the factory floor. He lived and worked alongside the laborers, fighting directly on the front lines of production.

Naturally, he too had been promoted to senior technical engineer and now wore a Red Hat of his own. His authority extended far beyond the armored vehicle workshop. He oversaw multiple departments and workshops at once and had become one of Factory Director Gao Yiyi's most trusted lieutenants.

At this moment, Qi Cheng stood before a large group of workshop supervisors, convening an urgent meeting.

"Supervisors," Qi Cheng said solemnly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun has spoken."

The room fell instantly silent.

"With his divine vision that pierces past and future, Dao Xuan Tianzun has informed us that the peace we enjoy today is only temporary. In the ninth year of Chongzhen, chaos will once again descend upon the realm."

A ripple of unease spread through the room.

"Chaos again?"

"How bad will it be?"

"Did Dao Xuan Tianzun reveal more details?"

Qi Cheng shook his head. "Heaven's secrets cannot be fully disclosed. Dao Xuan Tianzun has already shown immense mercy by warning us in advance. We must not ask for more."

He paused, then continued firmly.

"To prepare for the coming turmoil, we must accelerate production. We must manufacture even more armored vehicles. Every workshop must raise efficiency, train more technical experts, and fully embody the spirit of Great Nation Heavy Industry."

His voice grew more impassioned.

"We will turn the Chang'an Automobile Factory into the Industrial Overlord of the world."

The supervisors straightened.

"Understood!"

"Rest assured, Engineer Qi!"

"Our workshop will become a Production Model workshop!"

Their responses overlapped in a flurry of enthusiasm, as if they were ready to swear loyalty on the spot.

Qi Cheng nodded in satisfaction. "Each workshop will nominate its best workers. We will select a batch of Production Models and publicly commend them. Let exemplary individuals inspire the masses."

The supervisors immediately began searching their memories.

After a moment, the supervisor of the steam engine assembly workshop raised his hand.

"Speaking of that," he said, "a new worker joined my section recently. He's exceptionally hardworking and eager to learn. He's on the production line every day and often forgets to eat or drink. He started knowing absolutely nothing, yet in just a few dozen days, he has already mastered techniques that normally take veterans years to grasp."

Qi Cheng's eyebrows lifted. "Oh? That sounds impressive. What is his name?"

"Bin Sheng."

Qi Cheng slapped the table. "Excellent. Issue a factory-wide commendation immediately. Prepare an awards ceremony. Bonus, red rosette, honor roll placement. Make sure the entire factory knows his name."

He spoke with conviction.

"Only by learning from individuals like him can we truly rise and become the Industrial Overlord."

Three days later, noon.

Third staff cafeteria of the Chang'an Factory.

Bin Sheng entered with a small lunchbox, collected his meal, and sat at a long table.

The cafeteria was packed. Workers from every department filled the hall, strangers sharing tables and exchanging gossip about their workshops.

Not long after Bin Sheng sat down, several men joined him, each carrying a lunchbox. They exchanged brief glances, then lowered their heads to eat.

Without lifting his eyes, Bin Sheng asked softly, "Status?"

One man replied under his breath, "I've learned how to forge gears."

Bin Sheng nodded. "Good."

Another murmured, "I've mastered transmission axle manufacturing for automobile chassis."

"Very good."

A third hesitated. "Your subordinate in the tire workshop has learned the basics, but rubber remains a mystery. Our Great Jin Kingdom cannot produce it."

Bin Sheng replied calmly, "That knowledge requires higher clearance. Perform well, earn promotion, and you will naturally gain access."

"Understood."

Bin Sheng smiled faintly. "I've also learned much about the steam engine. It's the heart of the automobile. Once I fully grasp it, our mission will be more than halfway complete."

At that moment, a pickup truck passed outside the cafeteria. A man standing in the back held a loudspeaker.

"Attention! Latest announcement!"

"Worker Bin Sheng of the steam engine assembly workshop has demonstrated outstanding diligence and rapid progress!"

"Factory management has decided to award him the title of Labor Model!"

"The awards ceremony will be held tomorrow morning during the assembly!"

The announcement echoed repeatedly as the truck drove away.

Inside the cafeteria, conversation exploded.

"Who's Bin Sheng?"

"No idea!"

"New guy, maybe?"

"I know him. He's from our workshop. He's sitting right there!"

Dozens of heads turned simultaneously.

Bin Sheng froze.

His heart plunged.

Damn it.

Everyone had just seen him sitting together with his entire support team. If even one person was exposed later, the rest would be dragged down with him.

This was a crisis. A lethal one.

Bin Sheng stood up awkwardly. "Uh... cough..."

A coworker laughed loudly. "Brother Bin, when you first came, I thought you were clueless. Now your skills are better than mine. You even became a Production Model. Incredible!"

Bin Sheng forced a smile. "So... what benefits come with being a Production Model?"

The cafeteria burst into laughter.

"Oh, you'll find out tomorrow."

"Bonuses everywhere."

"Your portrait will be posted across the factory."

"You'll be on Gaojia News."

"Promotion and pay raises are guaranteed."

Bin Sheng's smile stiffened.

As a spy, fame was poison.

If his face was everywhere, Action Code: Jiang Gan Steals the Letter would be in serious danger.

Still, the promotion had value. More authority meant deeper access. The pay raise would also help replenish their dwindling espionage funds.

He had no choice.

Bin Sheng waved cheerfully at the crowd. "I'll keep working hard!" he declared. "Strive! Endeavor! Fight!"

Inside, he was already planning damage control.

Chapter 983: Striving for Progress

Early the next morning, the Chang'an Automobile Factory convened a grand assembly.

The open square was vast enough to swallow sound. Tens of thousands of workers stood in disciplined rows, shoulder to shoulder, silent as iron, all eyes fixed on the main rostrum ahead.

On the stage, Bin Sheng stood stiffly with a huge red rosette pinned to his chest. The cloth flower looked almost comically large on him, and yet the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth refused to fade, no matter how hard he tried to suppress it.

Gao Yiyi, director of the Chang'an Automobile Factory and one of the Forty-Two Elders of Gao Family Village, stepped forward personally. Among the workers, he was a figure of unquestioned authority, someone spoken of with reverence.

He handed Bin Sheng a neatly stamped commendation certificate and even extended his hand, gripping Bin Sheng's firmly.

"Bin Sheng," Gao Yiyi said with a nod, "you have a boundless future ahead of you. I have high hopes for you."

Those simple words landed like thunder.

To be praised in public was already an honor. To be told one had a "boundless future" by a Forty-Two Elder was something else entirely. In an instant, thousands of eyes below turned red with envy.

Then Gao Yiyi produced a solid silver ingot and placed it directly into Bin Sheng's hands.

"This is your bonus."

The square erupted in murmurs. The weight alone told the story. That ingot was worth at least half a year's wages for an ordinary worker. The envy in the crowd deepened, almost tangible.

Finally, Gao Yiyi patted Bin Sheng on the shoulder.

"We have decided to promote you to group leader of the steam engine assembly workshop. Work hard. Maintain this standard. And continue striving for progress."

Bin Sheng immediately put on a display of overwhelming gratitude. His eyes reddened, his voice choked, and tears streamed down his face as he bowed.

"Thank you for the leaders' guidance and trust. I will absolutely give everything I have."

Below the stage, a group of cafeteria women exchanged glances and whispered among themselves, their eyes lingering on him a moment too long.

Just like that, Bin Sheng was silently added to several imaginary lists of future husbands.

As applause and cheers washed over him, Bin Sheng looked left and right. Everywhere he looked were faces full of admiration, envy, and awe.

For the first time, a thought surfaced clearly in his mind.

So this is what it feels like.

That afternoon, after finishing half a day of work, Bin Sheng carried his lunchbox toward the cafeteria.

Along the way, he noticed something strange.

His face was everywhere.

On corridor walls, along passageways, outside workshop entrances, posters had been pasted up one after another. Each bore a large portrait labeled "Production Pacesetter Bin Sheng," with small explanatory text beneath praising his diligence, dedication, and astonishing rate of improvement.

Most workers could not read, but Bin Sheng could.

And reading it himself made his chest swell despite his best efforts to remain calm.

People greeted him nonstop as he walked.

Workers of similar age laughed and called out, "Brother Bin! Congratulations on becoming a group leader!"

Older workers smiled and nodded. "Bin, you're impressive now."

Younger workers straightened their backs and greeted him respectfully. "Group Leader Bin, please take care of us in the future!"

At one point, a girl with a ponytail hurried over, her face flushed red. Without a word, she slipped something into his hand and ran off.

Bin Sheng unfolded the note.

The handwriting was crooked and uneven.

"Want to get to know you. Yanzi."

He felt lightheaded, as if his feet were no longer touching the ground.

Inside the cafeteria, he got his food and sat down.

Not long after, one man approached and sat beside him. Unlike before, there was no group gathering. Just one person, eating quietly.

In a low voice, the man said, "Captain, the others won't come today. There are too many eyes on you now. If we gather again, it might expose our connections."

Bin Sheng nodded slightly. "Correct. Safety first. Do not approach unless necessary. What do you have to report?"

The man kept his head down as he spoke. "Captain, I also received a commendation today. Only within my workshop, not factory-wide."

"Oh?" Bin Sheng said softly. "You're doing well."

"This subordinate is far behind the Captain," the man replied. "But after the commendation, I was made deputy group leader. Today, I already gained access to first-hand production blueprints."

Bin Sheng's eyes lit up. "Excellent. Look for opportunities to copy them. Absolutely do not steal the originals. That would be too obvious."

"Understood."

The man finished eating and quietly left.

Soon after, another man sat across from Bin Sheng.

"Captain," he whispered, "I was promoted as well. The head of the bearing workshop spoke to me today. He said I've been progressing quickly and told me to work harder. He even said I could become a Production Pacesetter like you. He used you as the example."

Bin Sheng smiled. "That means you might become a group leader too?"

"Yes," the man replied. "Soon, I'll have access to the bearing blueprints."

"Very good," Bin Sheng said. "Keep pushing. Aim for another promotion."

"Understood."

Bin Sheng and his ten subordinates continued working relentlessly, studying day and night, each striving for progress.

Then, far away at sea.

Boom!

A cannonball slammed into the flagship of the Zhoushan pirates.

It was a solid shot.

Explosive shells were too deadly. One blast could kill dozens. Gao Family Village did not need piles of corpses. What it needed was manpower.

Labor reform prisoners were the true productive force.

This single shot was enough.

The pirates froze in terror, huddling like quails. Before they could react, a massive fleet of warships closed in, completely surrounding the Zhoushan stronghold.

Dao Ke, leader of the Zhoushan pirates, roared furiously, "You flying the five-colored banner, where did you come from? You're going too far!"

No answer came from the warships.

Instead, four battered junks emerged from behind the formation. Bai Yang led the Shengsi pirates at the front.

Bai Yang shouted loudly, "Dao Ke of Zhoushan, what are you yelling for? Hurry and pay homage to Dao Xuan Tianzun. These giant ships belong to him. Obey, and you will live. You can even carry his shoes like we do. Defy him, and your head will be chopped off and hung at Quanzhou Port."

Dao Ke stared in disbelief. "Bai Yang, what are you doing? You were Liu Xiang's man, same as me. What Dao Xuan Tianzun are you talking about? If Boss Liu Xiang hears this, he'll cut you to pieces and feed you to the fish."

Bai Yang sneered. "Dao Ke, times have changed. This sea belongs to Dao Xuan Tianzun now. Liu Xiang's era is over."

Dao Ke's mind went blank.

He wanted nothing more than to kill Bai Yang on the spot. But when he raised his head, he saw forty-one enormous warships, row after row of gleaming silver cannons aimed directly at him.

One word of defiance, and he would be erased for ten straight minutes.

Under such power, resistance was meaningless.

Dao Ke slowly raised his hands. "Alright. I surrender."

At that moment, a tall and striking knight appeared on the opposing flagship. His cloak fluttered in the sea breeze as he spoke calmly.

"You're thinking of surrendering for now, then escaping later to inform Liu Xiang and have him come kill me, aren't you?"

Dao Ke's heart clenched.

He had been seen through completely.

Chapter 984: Zhoushan

Dao Ke's heart clenched in terror.

He had been exposed.

Exposure meant only one thing. Death.

There was no hesitation in his mind. Run.

Just then, Li Daoxuan chuckled lightly.

"I'll give you a chance to escape right now. Jump into the sea and swim away. If I fail to catch you, you live. If I bring you back, I'll forgive this escape attempt and no harm will come to you."

Dao Ke's heart surged with joy.

Oh? Showing off?

This was a gift from heaven. A single escape attempt, no punishment, no tricks. Only a fool would refuse.

Does he even know where we are?

This was the outer edge of the Zhoushan Archipelago. Treacherous currents, jagged reefs, strange rock formations everywhere.

If I dive down, hold my breath, swim far enough, then surface behind a reef for air before diving again, there's no guarantee he can catch me.

Dao Ke shouted loudly, "Is that a real promise? Everyone here heard it. If you go back on your word, you'll lose face in front of your men."

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly.

"A promise is a promise."

Dao Ke nodded hard.

"Good!"

He said nothing more.

Splash.

He leapt from the bow, twisting midair like a dolphin. His dive was clean and elegant, barely disturbing the surface.

The smaller the splash, the deeper the entry. And the deeper he went, the harder it would be for anyone above to track him.

Dao Ke held his breath and swam toward a nearby reef.

As he moved, confidence grew in his chest.

How will he chase me? Spread ships to search? Seal off the sea? Hmph. No matter what he tries, I have a way out.

Then he heard another splash behind him.

Someone had jumped in after him.

Dao Ke turned his head.

What?

That Dao Xuan Tianzun actually jumped in himself?

Absurd.

You want to compete with me in swimming?

He kicked hard with his legs, his body surging forward like a mermaid flicking its tail. His speed shot up sharply.

At this speed, almost no one can keep up with me.

He glanced back.

His heart skipped.

Why is he closer?

Not only was he closing the distance, the man was not even moving his limbs. His body was straight, streamlined, gliding forward like a fish cutting through water.

Impossible.

Humans do not swim like this.

Panic surged. Dao Ke flailed with all his strength, swimming desperately.

It made no difference.

Li Daoxuan soon caught up.

He did not grab him.

Instead, he swam alongside Dao Ke, perfectly matching his pace. Calm. Effortless. And he even spoke while swimming.

"Keep going. Faster. That dive earlier, I'll give you a 9.8. I only deducted 0.2 for the splash."

Dao Ke had no idea what this "decimal" nonsense meant.

He wanted to shout, What kind of monster are you?

But water flooded his mouth.

He could only swim harder.

Then he realized Li Daoxuan was circling him.

Once to the left. Once to the right.

Like a fish playing with its prey.

Every so often, that calm voice drifted over.

"You still haven't surfaced for air? Impressive lung capacity."

Dao Ke finally lost control and cursed, bubbles bursting from his mouth.

Blub blub blub.

He was out of breath.

He kicked upward with all his strength and shot toward the surface.

Whoosh.

He burst out of the water and sucked in a huge breath of air.

After a brief struggle in his not very sharp mind, Dao Ke gave up.

He sighed deeply.

"I can't escape. Your swimming skills are truly admirable."

Since he surrendered properly, Li Daoxuan did not make an example of him.

They returned to the ship.

Orders were given, and the fleet landed.

Not long after, the entire Zhoushan pirate stronghold fell into the hands of Gao Family Village.

This place was the future site of Zhoushan Dinghai Port.

Along the eastern coastline of the harbor lay another stretch of land. It would later become the Zhejiang Kailing Shipyard.

Li Daoxuan had only seen this place in news reports before. Now he stood here in person, gazing at the deep-water harbor, then at the open land across from it.

There was no need to rack his brain.

He could simply copy the layout from his own era.

He was only a shut-in, far inferior to the experts of later generations. If those experts had chosen this place for a military port and shipyard, there was certainly a reason.

He only needed to give general directions.

He waved Jiang Cheng over.

"First, pacify all pirates on the island. Those who surrender will be sent to labor reform. Those who resist will be shot on the spot. Then have Gao Family Village send more ships. Bring Blue Hats, supplies, and production technology."

He pointed to several locations.

"Here, here, and here. Build the military port."

Then he gestured outward.

"Reserve this area for a shipyard."

"The labor reform camp will be built behind the port."

Jiang Cheng accepted the orders without hesitation.

Gao Family Village already had a mature system for handling labor reform prisoners and was extremely efficient. Before long, under the muzzles of muskets, the pirates were busily constructing their own labor reform camp.

At this time, supplies and Blue Hats had not yet arrived. There was no rush to build the port.

Instead, the more articulate members of the militia sailors were dispatched to conduct ideological instruction.

While these people were being reshaped...

Back in Gao Family Village.

Young Master Bai was packing his luggage. Graduate students, Blue Hats, and technical specialists were doing the same.

Madam Bai, now over forty, hurried into his room, her eyes red with tears.

"My son, must you really go in person? For such matters, sending your expertise would be enough."

Young Master Bai shook his head firmly.

"Mother, a steam-powered giant is no small matter. There are countless technical difficulties. I have built small river steamships before, but never a massive sea-going vessel. If I don't go myself, any problem that arises will take too long to communicate back and forth."

Madam Bai's voice trembled.

"It's too dangerous. That island is far out at sea, isolated and barren."

Young Master Bai replied calmly, "The militia will be there, and Dao Xuan Tianzun's avatar as well. What is there to fear? Besides, Wang Zheng is coming too."

Madam Bai paused.

"Wang Zheng? What will he be doing there?"

"He's skilled in mechanics," Young Master Bai explained. "Using the blueprints from Dao Xuan Tianzun, he built a chronometer for determining longitude and latitude at sea. He's going this time to test whether it truly works aboard a ship."

Madam Bai let out a long sigh.

"Alright. My son has grown up and is going out to make his name. As your mother, all I can do is wish you success."

Chapter 985: The Nanhui Mouth Market

Gao Family Village's cargo ships began their long and arduous journey toward Zhoushan.

Food supplies, gold, silver, tools, construction materials.

Because Li Daoxuan could not directly deliver supplies to Zhoushan Island, everything had to be transported by the villagers themselves. The workload was heavy, and the process exhausting.

Moreover, most of Gao Family Village's sailors were accustomed to rivers, not the open sea. Even coastal waters posed serious dangers to them.

A slight deviation in course could mean missing their destination by hundreds or even thousands of miles.

At this moment, the captured pirates showed their true value.

Jiang Cheng transported the labor reform pirates to Nanhui Mouth, a place that would later become modern Shanghai. They waited there for the cargo ships from Gao Family Village, boarding them as navigators once the ships arrived. This arrangement ensured that future shipments could reliably find Zhoushan Island, while also allowing Gao Family Village's sailors to learn maritime navigation directly from experienced seafarers.

Because of this, something unexpected began to happen.

Originally, Nanhui Mouth had nothing more than a dilapidated imperial fort, standing lonely and neglected, like an abandoned ruin.

But as Gao Family Village's ships began to pass through frequently, the area around the fort changed day by day.

Since Gao Family Village's people disembarked here and often had to wait on shore for ships to arrive or depart, they naturally could not allow their own people to endure poor conditions. They simply built a cluster of temporary dwellings beside the fort.

A team was assigned to remain stationed there permanently.

The Ming soldiers guarding the fort had already received instructions from the Suzhou and Songjiang Military Preparations Commissioner. They treated these newcomers as allies and did not interfere, allowing them to operate freely.

Before long, Nanhui Mouth became a critical transit point for Gao Family Village.

With people living there, large ships transferring goods, and sailors frequently stationed, demand for supplies naturally arose. Members of Gao Family Village and labor reform pirates alike often purchased goods from nearby fishermen and farmers.

They paid generously.

As a result, they quickly became well liked among the local populace.

Whenever villagers had something worth selling, they brought it straight to Nanhui Mouth.

Whenever a Gao Family Village cargo ship docked briefly, waves of villagers arrived with bamboo baskets slung over their shoulders, filled with homemade goods, shouting loudly as they tried to sell them.

The once stern and gloomy fort of Nanhui Mouth had quietly transformed into a bustling market.

One afternoon.

The Ming garrison soldiers at the fort were drowsing when they spotted ten cargo ships approaching from the northern sea, their hulls heavy with supplies.

One soldier sighed.

"The Emperor is truly generous this time. Supplies are flowing nonstop, ship after ship, all headed southeast."

Another soldier chuckled.

"As soon as those ships dock, this place will turn into a market again."

No sooner had he spoken than villagers from the nearby fishing communities rushed toward the shore. They were far more alert than the soldiers and had already calculated the ships' arrival times.

Many had prepared their goods a full day in advance.

A crowd surged toward the coast, waving frantically.

"Over here. Over here."

The cargo ships slowed as they approached the shallows, stopping just short of running aground. Small boats were lowered and rowed toward the beach.

The labor reform pirates, already waiting, boarded these boats and climbed onto the cargo ships to guide them.

This transfer period was also the prime time for trade.

This time, however, something different happened.

A young man in white robes, around twenty years old, disembarked from one of the small boats. His clothing was not extravagant, but his bearing was refined and scholarly, the unmistakable air of a cultivated gentleman.

Unfortunately, his physical balance was clearly lacking. The boat rocked beneath his feet, and he swayed dangerously, nearly falling. A sailor hurried forward to support him.

"Young Master Bai, be careful. Nothing must happen to you."

Young Master Bai let out a helpless sigh.

"I am far inferior to my father. I cannot even stand steadily on a boat. I have disgraced the Horseshoe Lake that raised me."

His attendant quickly reassured him.

"Young Master, you devote yourself to laboratory research and have made great contributions to Gao Family Village's scientific progress. It is only natural that other skills suffer."

Young Master Bai nodded lightly and did not dwell on it. He turned his gaze toward the fort and the lively crowd of villagers below, all loudly hawking their goods.

"They are selling fresh seafood," he said thoughtfully. "Fish, shellfish, crabs. They are all still alive. I would like to buy some to bring back for my mother. She would enjoy it."

That single remark was all it took.

The sharp eared villagers immediately swarmed over.

"Young Master, buy from me."

"These crabs are big and fat. Perfect for the Madam."

"My clams are fresh and plump. Delicious when stir fried."

Young Master Bai was quickly overwhelmed. Embarrassed by the enthusiasm and unwilling to disappoint them, he waved his hand decisively.

He bought everything.

Every basket of seafood nearby was emptied into his purchase.

Meanwhile.

The Gao Family Village administrators who had arrived with the ship were considering a different matter.

"There are quite a few common folk here," said a middle school graduate. "That is a valuable labor pool. Zhoushan Island cannot rely solely on labor reform pirates. There simply are not enough people. We should recruit workers from the mainland."

Another person hesitated.

"That will not be easy. These are law abiding citizens living comfortably on the mainland. Moving to a small island will feel to them like becoming pirates or living outside the law. They will have concerns."

"Of course they will," the first replied calmly. "Whether we can address those concerns depends on us. We will use the Imperial Merchant's endorsement. We will offer high wages, strong welfare benefits, and guarantee their personal safety. Most importantly, we will promise that they can return to the mainland at any time. With these conditions, persuading them should not be impossible."

After a brief discussion, the administrators finalized their plan.

There was no need to delay.

Recruitment would begin immediately.

The sailors began shouting loudly along the shore.

"Anyone willing to work for the Imperial Merchant on the island. The work includes building ports, docks, houses, and factories. Excellent pay. Holidays. Full benefits. Guaranteed safety. Free return to the mainland on cargo ships at any time."

As the saying goes, generous rewards attract brave men.

After repeated calls, a few courageous villagers were indeed tempted.

Life was difficult, and poverty was everywhere.

Scraping by on shellfish and crabs meant a slow struggle with no future. But if they took a gamble, perhaps they could change their fate. These people had always done honest business, never cheated, never bullied. Working for them might truly lead to prosperity.

And so, hesitation slowly turned into resolve.

Chapter 986: Building Zhoushan Port

The first brave group of locals from Nanhui Mouth, those willing to venture out to the island, boarded a Gao Family Village cargo ship and set sail for Zhoushan.

Once aboard, their anxiety gradually eased.

The atmosphere on the ship was completely different from anything they had known before.

The contrast between Gao Family Village's sailors and the imperial navy was stark. Imperial sailors rarely treated common folk as people at all, barking orders and looking down on them like livestock. Gao Family Village's sailors, however, called themselves "the people's soldiers" and genuinely lived up to the name.

They chatted casually with the locals, shared their meals, and during the voyage even taught them Gao Family Village's unique, spirited songs. The deck was often filled with rough but cheerful singing, laughter carrying across the waves.

Even so, the locals still had lingering doubts.

And when they learned that their destination was Zhoushan, those doubts deepened.

Zhoushan.

Everyone knew that name.

An island long abandoned by the imperial court, infamous as a pirate stronghold. Was it really safe to go there and build ports, docks, and factories? What if pirates attacked?

All such worries vanished the moment they arrived.

Before them stood forty-one enormous warships guarding the harbor, with dozens more sailboats supporting them. The sheer scale of the fleet was overwhelming. Any pirate force foolish enough to provoke it would be crushed instantly.

Even Zheng Zhilong, the most powerful maritime lord of the southeastern seas, would not dare confront such strength head-on.

With this sight alone, the locals let out a collective breath they did not realize they had been holding.

Only then did they truly feel at ease.

After disembarking, they immediately noticed a group of rough looking men with ugly faces, chopping trees, clearing land, and leveling ground under the watchful gaze of musketeers.

The locals asked cautiously, "Who are those people?"

The sailor escorting them chuckled.

"Those are the pirates from Zhoushan and Shengsi. We defeated and captured them. Now they're repaying their crimes through work. This is called Labor Reform."

It was the first time the locals had heard the term "Labor Reform," and they looked puzzled.

Someone asked, "Isn't that the same as us? Aren't they just working too?"

"No, no, not the same at all," the sailor said with a grin. "You are free workers. You earn wages and benefits. You can quit whenever you want, or take leave to return to the mainland and visit your families. And no one stands over you with muskets while you work."

"As for the labor reform inmates, they get no wages. If they don't work, they get beaten. If they don't work, they don't eat. And they certainly don't get to leave whenever they feel like it."

The locals laughed.

Although the term "labor reform inmates" sounded strange, when they thought about it, the pirates were being treated much like an old ox back home. When told to plow, it plowed. If it refused, it got whipped. There was no quitting, and no going home.

It sounded miserable, but then again, who told them to become pirates?

The locals exclaimed happily, "Wuagei! The pirates are wuagei!"

Young Master Bai, who happened to be nearby, was curious.

"What does 'wuagei' mean?"

The locals burst out laughing.

"It means 'they deserve it!'"

Everyone laughed together. This local dialect was truly sharp and satisfying.

Soon, the newcomers were settled on the island.

Blue Hat technicians from Gao Family Village arrived one after another, along with administrative staff and research personnel. Ships came in an endless stream. Anyone could tell that Dao Xuan Tianzun placed immense importance on the sea, no less than on the threat of the Manchus.

Zhoushan was to be developed with absolute seriousness.

Zhoushan Dinghai Port and the Zhoushan Shipyard, two massive projects, began construction simultaneously.

One month later.

The locals from Nanhui Mouth received their first month's wages.

For unskilled laborers, the base pay was two taels of silver. In addition, there was a five mace island living allowance, a five mace special bonus for being part of the first group, and a one tael risk allowance.

In total, they received four taels of silver.

The amount stunned them.

"Four taels of silver..." they muttered in disbelief. "How long would it take to save that much by catching crabs and picking shells on the beach?"

And this was only unskilled labor.

One local who had carpentry skills was assigned to build wooden walkways and structural frames for the docks. His wages were calculated according to the skilled worker standard.

His base pay alone was four taels. After adding the allowances, his total income reached six taels of silver.

The entire first group of island workers was completely dumbfounded.

Once the silver was safely in their hands, they immediately applied for three days of leave.

They boarded a Gao Family Village cargo ship and returned to Nanhui Mouth.

At first, they were nervous, worried that although they had earned the money, they might not be allowed to take it home. But reality proved their fears unfounded. Gao Family Village approved their leave without hesitation and sent them off openly, allowing them to return home in full glory.

The moment they reached their villages, they began boasting loudly to those who had been too afraid to go the first time.

"I made a fortune on the island! Hahahaha!"

After that.

The outcome was inevitable.

When their three days of leave ended, they returned to the coast to wait for a ship back to Zhoushan. This time, nearly all the young men from their villages followed behind them.

And the news spread.

From Nanhui Mouth, it reached Huating County, Shanghai County, and Qingpu County.

At the time, most of the common folk in Shanghai County lived in deep poverty. Many could barely afford food and survived by eating Yangcheng Lake's famous hairy crabs day after day. After eating too many, they had grown sick of them, feeling nauseous at the mere sight of a crab.

Now, hearing about such a lucrative opportunity, how could they resist?

After earning silver, wouldn't it be far better to buy fragrant white rice? They never wanted to see another hairy crab again.

As a result, waves of impoverished people from Shanghai, Huating, and Qingpu flooded toward Nanhui Mouth, waiting eagerly by the sea each day for Gao Family Village's cargo ships to arrive.

The moment a ship docked, the crowd surged forward.

"Imperial Merchant Sir, hire me!"

"I can work hard!"

"I won't talk about anything I see on the island, not a word!"

With manpower pouring in, the construction speed of Zhoushan Dinghai Port and Zhoushan Shipyard increased severalfold.

Before long, a town began to take shape on Zhoushan.

Once the workers were fully convinced of the island's safety, some returned to their hometowns and brought their wives and children with them. Zhoushan's population swelled rapidly, and the town grew livelier by the day.

As the population increased, new needs naturally emerged.

At first, these were met entirely by Gao Family Village's transport ships. Gradually, however, the locals began meeting those needs themselves.

Carpenters crafted furniture after work, which their wives and children sold at small stalls.

Blacksmiths forged kitchen knives and tools once their shifts ended.

Even a disabled man who could not perform heavy labor opened a small snack stall. To everyone's surprise, his business flourished.

Later, a "workers' children's school" for Zhoushan Dinghai Port and Zhoushan Shipyard was established, with teachers transferred from Gao Family Village standing at the lectern.

And it was amid this scene of growing prosperity and vitality...

That an envoy from Liu Xiang's pirate group arrived.

Chapter 987: Diplomacy? Or Collusion?

A small pirate vessel crept into the outer waters of Zhoushan Dinghai Port.

Before it could get anywhere near the harbor, a twenty-meter patrol electric boat from Gao Family Village sped out to intercept it.

Unregistered ships were strictly forbidden from approaching Dinghai Port.

At present, Zhoushan Dinghai Port was being constructed according to full military specifications. It housed the core fleet of the Gao Family Village navy, and nearby, a shipyard was under construction, one that would soon produce steam-powered ironclads. Everything here was top secret.

Allowing unknown ships to wander close was out of the question.

As the electric patrol boat closed in, the pirates aboard the smaller vessel hurriedly waved signal flags, clearly requesting communication.

By now, Gao Family Village's sailors had learned a wide range of common pirate flag signals, taught by the reformed pirates undergoing Labor Reform. With these men always present, interpreting such signals posed no difficulty.

The patrol boat responded with a flag signal, agreeing to talk.

Not long after, a man from the pirate ship boarded the Gao Family Village patrol boat.

The visitor had black hair and yellow skin, clearly an East Asian man. His clothing, however, was bizarre. He wore a Western-style suit, clearly trying to project refinement and gentlemanly elegance.

It was obvious he had picked up this style from Westerners.

The captain of the patrol boat was only a middle school dropout. He had not completed his education, but he had studied the "Heavenly Books" bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. His knowledge and worldview far surpassed those of ordinary people.

Seeing the man's outfit, the captain sneered.

"Who are you, and what business do you have coming to our Zhoushan Island?"

The man in the suit straightened his posture and spoke in an affected, dignified tone.

"I am an administrator under Lord Liu Xiang, one of the last great heroes among the Wind and Cloud Eighteen Scholars. I usually handle diplomatic affairs on Brother Liu Xiang's behalf."

"Oh?" The captain laughed lightly. "Diplomacy? That word is usually used for dealings between nations. When did pirates start using it? You might want to call it something else."

"Like collusion."

The man in the suit froze.

This response caught him completely off guard.

This fellow is not some ignorant pirate brute. He is educated.

He quickly adjusted his expression.

"The wording is unimportant, as long as you understand my intent."

The captain crossed his arms.

"So you're here to strike a deal."

The man cleared his throat.

"One could put it that way. Brother Liu Xiang has always believed in befriending heroes and brave men across the seas. Within the Seven Seas, we are all brothers. He wonders whether he may have unintentionally offended you brothers flying the colorful flag, and asks that you forgive any past misunderstandings."

The captain chuckled inwardly.

So he's trying to talk things down first.

The man continued, "Brother Liu Xiang has some old comrades and subordinates stationed on Zhoushan and Shengsi. One is called Swordsman, another White Sheep. It seems they were captured by your

forces. These men are important to Brother Liu Xiang. If possible, we hope you can release them. We are willing to offer suitable compensation."

The captain shook his head decisively.

"No."

The man blinked.

"No?"

"They committed piracy and were lawfully apprehended. They cannot be released, and they cannot be bought with money."

The man frowned.

"What exactly is this crime of 'piracy'?"

The captain recited without emotion, "Piracy refers to operating a vessel without authorization from a belligerent nation or any recognized navy, with intent to commit violence, coercion, or theft against other ships, or against the people and property aboard them."

The man's jaw slowly dropped.

What in the world? He just recited a legal definition?

What country even uses this law? I've never heard of it.

Although he said nothing aloud, his expression clearly showed disdain.

The captain snorted.

"I know you don't agree with this law. To be honest, I don't fully agree with it either."

The man stared.

"Huh?"

Then why are you enforcing it?

Before he could ask, the captain laughed.

"Why bother with so much reasoning? Crime or no crime, what does it matter? Catch a pirate and shoot him. Simple. Making laws, defining crimes, Labor Reform, it's all unnecessary. Just execute them all. That's the cleanest solution."

The man in the suit was utterly stunned.

The captain waved his hand impatiently.

"Alright. Anything else?"

The man hesitated, then asked, "Who exactly is your leader?"

The captain lifted his chin proudly.

"Our leader is Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The man's pupils shrank slightly.

That name sounds disturbingly similar to the White Lotus cult's Unborn Mother. These people might be fanatic believers. Fanatics are the worst. They charge into battle screaming slogans, completely fearless, even under gunfire.

Terrifying.

But still.

No matter how fanatical they were, cannon fire killed all the same.

The man did not believe this new force could surpass Liu Xiang. His earlier humility had merely been an attempt to retrieve Swordsman and White Sheep cheaply. If that failed, force was always an option.

Since the other side showed no respect, there was no reason to continue pretending.

The man let out a cold laugh.

"Very well, you colorful-flag bearers. Brother Liu Xiang has never provoked you. Yet you arrive uninvited, shouting for war, seizing our men, occupying our islands. This is a grave insult. Go tell your so-called Dao Xuan Tianzun to immediately release Swordsman and White Sheep, and withdraw from the Zhoushan Archipelago. If you do, Brother Liu Xiang may choose to overlook this matter. Otherwise, from now on, any ship flying a colorful flag should be very careful in these waters."

The captain burst out laughing.

"There's no need to trouble Dao Xuan Tianzun with this. I can answer you myself."

He laughed even harder.

"We're terrified. Absolutely terrified. Hahahaha!"

The sailors behind him, along with the reformed pirates, roared with laughter.

"So scared! Too scared to sleep at night!"

The man in the suit clenched his fists.

"You ignorant youngsters who don't know your place! Brother Liu Xiang has the Westerners backing him. You probably don't even know how large their ships are. Your arrogance won't last long."

The captain's expression turned cold.

"Mind your words. Speak properly and I'll treat you as an envoy. Keep insulting us, and I'll treat you as a provocateur."

"When two nations go to war, envoys are spared. But no one ever said provocateurs are protected."

He grinned faintly.

"So think carefully before you speak again."

The man stiffened. He no longer dared to provoke them.

"Hmph. There is no point continuing this conversation. Take care of yourselves."

He turned and returned to his small pirate ship, steering southward.

Behind him, the Gao Family Village captain picked up a tin megaphone and shouted after the departing vessel,

"Tell Liu Xiang that he too is guilty of piracy. He can wait for us to come arrest him, or if he doesn't want to be shot, he can jump into the sea and kill himself. He can choose a more elegant death."

The man in the suit trembled with rage, but he had come alone, without force. He dared not respond, only fleeing as quickly as possible.

Chapter 988: A Prodigal Son Returning Is Worth More Than Gold

The Steam Assembly Workshop at the Chang'an Automobile Factory in Xi'an was filled with the heavy scent of oil and hot metal.

Bin Sheng had spent an exhausting day studying technical skills. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, leaving a dark smear on his sleeve, and bent back over his notes without complaint.

The workshop director happened to walk past. Seeing Bin Sheng still engrossed in his studies, he paused and nodded with quiet approval.

Among all the young workers he had seen over the years, this one stood out the most. Bin Sheng threw himself into learning like a man possessed, grinding through manuals and blueprints with desperate focus. He worked with a ferocity that reminded the director not of an apprentice, but of a soldier on campaign.

Only people who had endured military discipline carried themselves like that.

Unable to resist, the director stepped closer and gave Bin Sheng a light pat on the shoulder.

"Bin, still studying your skills?"

Bin Sheng straightened at once and offered a respectful smile. "Good evening, Director. I want to learn as much as possible. One day, I hope I can build a complete steam engine with my own hands."

The director laughed softly. "Young man, you truly impress me. If I had been even half as diligent when I was your age, I would not still be a small workshop director today."

"You praise me too highly, sir," Bin Sheng replied modestly.

The director lowered his voice. "Since you are so hardworking, I will tell you a little secret."

Bin Sheng's eyes brightened at once.

A secret. That was exactly the kind of thing a spy loved. The more, the better.

"I will soon be transferred to the Zhoushan Shipyard," the director continued. "I will be responsible for steamship assembly there. Once I leave, this workshop director position will be vacant."

"Oh?" Bin Sheng said.

For a moment, he had thought it might be some classified technical matter. Instead, it was only a personnel change. He felt a flicker of disappointment.

The director smiled faintly. "You do not yet understand how important this is. A vacant director position is a rare opportunity. You should seize it."

"Oh?" Bin Sheng asked again, more cautiously this time.

"You are willing to work, willing to learn, and willing to endure hardship," the director said patiently. "You were recently named a Labor Model as well. Among all the young workers here, you are the strongest candidate. Put in a bit more effort these days. Show everyone what you can do. When I transfer, you will naturally step up."

Bin Sheng hesitated, then asked quietly, "If I become workshop director, will I be able to learn all the secrets of building a steam engine?"

The director burst into laughter. "So that is what you care about. You really love steam engines, don't you? Do not worry. As long as you keep learning, you will master them sooner or later."

Bin Sheng's face lit up. "I will work even harder."

A few days later, the director packed his belongings and left for Zhoushan Shipyard, taking up the position of steam engine assembly director there. Several technical experts from other workshops, including armor and bearing specialists, transferred with him to assist.

With so many experienced people leaving at once, vacancies naturally appeared at the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Bin Sheng was formally promoted to workshop director.

The ten members of his support team, all of whom had worked diligently, studied hard, and made clear progress, were also promoted in varying degrees.

From the time they entered the factory to the moment they received promotions and pay raises, only a short period had passed.

As a result, these eleven young people became living examples for the new generation of workers at the factory. Their drive and determination became a topic of constant discussion among the workers.

Evening came, and a gentle breeze swept through the yard.

Bin Sheng stepped out of the workshop and saw Yanzi, a young woman from the cafeteria, waiting beneath a tree near the entrance.

The moment she saw him, her face bloomed into a bright smile. "Brother Bin Sheng."

Bin Sheng smiled back. "Little Sister Yanzi, have you been waiting long? I worked overtime without realizing it. If I had known, I would have finished earlier."

"It was not long," Yanzi said shyly, her cheeks turning red. "Brother Bin Sheng is a Labor Model. Everyone knows you work overtime often. I was prepared. Besides, I like men who are diligent and

hardworking like you. I was standing outside the window earlier. When you were working so seriously, you looked very handsome."

Bin Sheng felt his heart swell.

Yanzi took out two movie tickets. "Brother Bin Sheng, the Workers' Cinema is showing an old film tonight. 'A Soldier from the Daling River Garrison.' Would you like to go with me? I already have tickets. The auntie in charge of the cafeteria gave them to me. She said young people need to see things like this."

"There is a film like that?" Bin Sheng asked in surprise.

"Yes," Yanzi replied. "It is about the Manchus besieging Daling River City."

That immediately caught his interest. There was no reason to refuse.

They walked side by side to the cinema. Just as they reached the entrance, Bin Sheng spotted one of his subordinates in the crowd.

Then he noticed another.

Nearly all ten members of his support team were there.

The film was about the Jin army. Naturally, it drew their attention.

It was an old film rerun. Most of the audience had already watched it many times. Only Bin Sheng and his team were seeing it for the first time.

Once the film started, Bin Sheng forgot everything else, even Yanzi beside him.

Like "The Xuan-Da Defense Battle," this film was restrained and realistic. It did not preach, nor did it glorify sacrifice with hollow slogans. It simply told a bleak and tragic story.

The Eight Banners soldiers were shown as terrifyingly effective. In the end, Daling River City fell. The people were slaughtered. Zu Dashou surrendered. The protagonist changed his name and vanished into exile.

A deep heaviness settled over Bin Sheng's chest.

"The Manchus are truly hateful," Yanzi said softly. "But the Han traitors are even worse."

Bin Sheng's body stiffened.

He swallowed and whispered, "Many Han people originally lived in the Manchu lands. They grew up under the Jin, under the Manchus. They never had any real attachment to the Great Ming."

He hesitated, then continued, "And some Liaodong soldiers only knew Zu Dashou. They did not truly know the Great Ming. Asking them to die for something they never felt connected to might not be reasonable. When they surrendered with people like Kong Youde or Zu Dashou, they simply followed their former lord. Calling them traitors may be too simple."

Yanzi thought for a moment. "That makes some sense. But fallen leaves still wish to return to their roots. Do you think they do not dream of returning to the Great Ming?"

Bin Sheng trembled slightly.

"Even if they wanted to return," he said quietly, "who would accept them? They are already considered Manchus."

Yanzi smiled. "You are wrong about that. Our people are very open-minded. A prodigal son who returns is worth more than gold."

Bin Sheng said nothing.

He sat there in silence for a long time.

Chapter 989: I'm Not Listening to This Lecture

The eighth year of Chongzhen, late in the year.

Luoyang.

After several months of recuperation, Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao had finally crawled back from the gates of death.

Walking through the streets of Luoyang again, the uncle and nephew both felt as though an entire lifetime had passed.

"Uncle, we can finally walk around," Cao Bianjiao said cheerfully. "Being stuck in bed for almost half a year, lying there day after day, it nearly drove me insane."

Cao Wenzhao reached down and patted his leg. "After not moving for so long, my body feels stiff. If we do not start moving again, our martial skills are bound to decline."

The two of them walked slowly through the streets, looking around as they went.

After glancing forward and backward several times, Cao Wenzhao suddenly exclaimed, "Huh? Luoyang has changed so much."

Indeed, the changes in Luoyang were enormous.

Business was far more prosperous than before. The streets were crowded with people, carts, and horses, and everywhere one looked, faces were full of smiles. This was nothing like the Luoyang they remembered from their last visit. The entire city felt as if it had been reborn with a new spirit.

As they turned a corner, they unexpectedly ran into Gao Jie and Xing Honglang. The couple was also out shopping, followed by several personal guards.

Gao Jie immediately greeted them. "General Cao."

Cao Bianjiao blurted out in surprise, "Huh? Gao Jie? What are you doing in Luoyang?"

Gao Jie deliberately lowered his voice. "I am currently studying in Luoyang. The governor ordered me not to lead troops into battle until I finish, or he will really deal with me harshly."

"Deal with you harshly?" Cao Wenzhao was shocked. "What kind of punishment? Dismissal from your post, or fifty strokes of the rod?"

Cao Bianjiao cut in, "Uncle, should you not be more curious about what the governor is making him study?"

"Ah, right," Cao Wenzhao said, nodding.

Gao Jie looked a little embarrassed. "That governor is quite strange. He claims I was once a notorious villain and insists I learn how to be a good person. If I do not learn properly, I can forget about ever leading troops again. Truly baffling."

Cao Wenzhao raised an eyebrow. "???"

Cao Bianjiao looked just as confused. "???"

This was simply outrageous. How could a provincial governor behave like this?

Just then, a young man and a young woman walked down the street. The man wore heroic clothing and looked extraordinarily handsome. The woman was dressed in a snow white long gown, decorated with red and gold ribbons, graceful and beautiful.

As the two walked, the surrounding commoners all bowed.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

"The Saintess is in Luoyang again."

The pair were none other than Li Daoxuan and Gao Yiye.

Li Daoxuan waved casually at the people. "Hello, everyone."

Gao Yiye smiled and chatted with them. "Staying at home all day is boring. Now that transportation is so convenient, I enjoy traveling around. Luoyang really is the center of the world, full of fun things and good food."

The commoners laughed. "Please visit often. It is our honor that the Saintess likes our city. Come, have a snack at my small shop."

"My shop's specialty snacks are especially good."

Their popularity was clearly extraordinary.

At that moment, two men dressed as servants hurried over from another street and rushed straight toward Gao Jie. "Master, it is time for class. You are not there. The governor is furious and orders you to attend the ideological lecture immediately."

As soon as Gao Jie heard this, his face darkened. "I am not going. I am not going. Today I am accompanying my wife on a shopping trip. I do not have time for that cursed lecture."

The servant insisted anxiously, "The governor is angry."

Gao Jie snorted. "That Fan Shangzheng is truly annoying. He chases me to attend class every day. Do I look like someone who enjoys listening to lectures? I am not listening. I am not listening."

The servant was drenched in sweat. "Master, he is still a governor. If you offend him, the consequences will be severe."

Gao Jie retorted loudly, "I report to General He Renlong. I do not answer to the Henan governor. I am not afraid of him at all."

Xing Shi quietly reminded him, "Husband, you should speak more carefully."

"There is no need," Gao Jie said firmly. "That damned lecture is driving me mad. I refuse to go, absolutely refuse."

He then turned toward the Cao uncle and nephew. "Have the two of you also been ordered to attend that terrible lecture?"

The Cao generals shook their heads. "Not yet."

Before they could finish speaking, a group of soldiers, servants of the Henan governor Fan Shangzheng, hurried over. They stopped in front of the Cao uncle and nephew, saluted, and announced, "Generals Cao, we have heard that your injuries have healed. The governor has sent us to inform you that it is time for your ideological lecture. This humble servant searched the barracks and learned you were out shopping. It took quite some effort to find you. Please come with us to attend the lecture."

The Cao uncle and nephew looked at each other.

"So we have to go as well?" They were completely stunned.

The captain then turned to Gao Jie. "General Gao is here too. Perfect timing. Please hurry and attend the lecture as well."

Gao Jie flew into a rage. "No. Just listening makes my head ache. 'Do not take even a needle or thread from the common people.' Why is taking a needle such a big deal?"

The captain warned, "The governor is angry."

Gao Jie shouted, "Tell Fan Shangzheng to come and say it to my face and see whether I care."

The captain stammered, "But this humble servant was ordered to..."

"Orders my ass," Gao Jie cursed and kicked him.

The captain was not skilled in martial arts and could not dodge in time. He was struck in the waist, fell heavily to the ground, rolled twice, and ended up covered in dust from head to toe, looking miserable.

Cao Wenzhao said, "Why did you dodge like that? You should have used this stance to avoid the kick, then twisted like this. You could even counterattack with a punch."

Cao Bianjiao hurriedly said, "Uncle, is not the important point that hitting people is wrong?"

"Ah, you are right," Cao Wenzhao said.

He then turned to Gao Jie. "General Gao, if you do not want to attend the lecture, then do not go. Why hit someone?"

Gao Jie muttered, "That fellow surnamed Fan is infuriating."

While they were speaking, the two young people who had been adored by the commoners earlier walked over. The handsome young man bent down, helped the captain up, and sighed. "You should train your martial arts properly in the future, so you do not suffer such losses when you meet villains."

The captain was overjoyed. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you are here too."

Li Daoxuan said, "Leave this matter to me."

He then turned his gaze toward Gao Jie. "General Gao, you are quite defiant, are you not?"

Gao Jie was just about to retort when he felt a light tug on his sleeve. Xing Honglang was pulling him, giving him a strong, urgent look.

"What is it?" Gao Jie asked.

Xing Shi lowered her voice and whispered, "Be careful. Look at his face."

Gao Jie followed her gaze and looked carefully at Li Daoxuan's face.

Then he understood.

That face was exactly the same as the face of the deity depicted in The Legends of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

One could not even say it was merely similar.

It was completely identical.

Chapter 990: Let's Make a Bet

Gao Jie stared at the face before him, confusion flickering through his eyes.

Not long ago, Bai Yuan had thoughtfully sent him a full set of Tales of Dao Xuan Tianzun, Exterminator of Demons in comic form. At first, Gao Jie had not been interested. Scholarly books were not his thing. But these were different. They were full of pictures. Even someone with his limited literacy could understand the story just by looking.

Whenever he felt bored, he would casually flip through them, treating them as nothing more than illustrated folk tales. They were good enough to kill time.

Over time, he had read the entire collection from beginning to end.

Because of that, the appearance of Dao Xuan Tianzun was already deeply familiar to him.

And now, as he looked at Li Daoxuan's real face, a strange sense of disorientation rose in his heart.

Xing Shi noticed her husband's expression at once. She knew his temper too well. Afraid that he might say something offensive, she quickly leaned closer and lowered her voice.

"My husband," she whispered urgently, "you do not have to worship the gods, but you absolutely must not disrespect them. Please, watch your words."

Gao Jie had been just about to explode. His wife's warning cut through his anger and pulled him back to his senses. He forced himself to hold it in, though his tone was still sharp and hostile.

"And who are you supposed to be?" he snapped. "What right do you have to lecture me?"

From the crowd gathered along the street, someone suddenly spoke up.

"That is Dao Xuan Tianzun himself," the man said, his voice filled with awe and caution. "He has descended to walk among mortals. General, you should be careful."

Gao Jie froze.

Who would believe something like that?

He sneered inwardly. Impossible. This had to be someone who simply looked like Dao Xuan Tianzun. Or maybe the people who painted those pictures had used this man as their model.

A god descending into the mortal world was nothing but nonsense.

His thoughts were still in turmoil when Li Daoxuan spoke.

"Those who rise from humble origins often carry a certain wildness," Li Daoxuan said calmly. "Without that edge, you would never have dared to rebel in the first place. But General, you should also be aware of your many flaws. If you do not correct them, you will never truly rise. No matter how high your rank becomes, others will still look down on you. Even your children will suffer because of it."

These words were not spoken lightly.

In history, Gao Jie would indeed command massive armies and become one of the Four Great Generals of the Southern Ming. Yet despite his power, he would always be despised.

After his death, Xing Shi would seek out Shi Kefa, hoping to have her son adopted. She wanted to give her child a respectable foster father.

Shi Kefa, however, looked down on Gao Jie's origins. He saw the boy as the son of a crude bandit and firmly refused.

Was Shi Kefa wrong? Of course he was. For the sake of the nation, he should have put aside personal prejudice and gathered every usable talent.

But blaming Shi Kefa alone did not solve the root of the problem.

If one wanted respect, one first had to earn it.

People often said that heroes were not judged by their origins. But that only applied if you truly became a hero. If you were merely powerful and brutal, then your humble background would be dragged out and mocked again and again.

Take Zhu Yuanzhang as an example. He was born poor, yet later generations praised him endlessly. His background became proof of his resilience and determination.

Li Zicheng, on the other hand, also rose from obscurity. But he failed. His peasant origins were instead cited as evidence of the supposed limits of common folk.

It was not just a matter of winners writing history.

Zhu Yuanzhang studied tirelessly and constantly improved himself. Li Zicheng never did. Even after sitting on the throne, he never shed his bandit habits.

Li Daoxuan's thoughts wandered for a moment before he pulled them back.

He looked at Gao Jie and smiled.

It was a strange smile, unsettling and unnatural, the kind that made people instinctively uneasy.

"Gao Jie," Li Daoxuan said, "let's make a bet."

That smile sent a chill through Gao Jie's spine.

"What kind of bet?" he asked cautiously.

"I will stand right here," Li Daoxuan replied. "I will not dodge. I will not block. You may strike me ten times. If you knock me down, I will stop forcing Fan Shangzheng to tutor you. But if you fail, you will obediently return to your studies."

The moment he finished speaking, Gao Jie, Xing Shi, Cao Wenzhao, and Cao Bianjiao all sucked in a sharp breath.

This kind of wager was absurd.

Was this not a gift handed directly to Gao Jie?

Although Gao Jie was not famous for refined martial skill like the Cao uncle and nephew, and could not compare to the madman He Renlong, he was still a veteran of countless battles.

One punch, if aimed properly, could easily kill a man.

To stand still and take ten punches without defending himself was suicidal.

Gao Jie stared at him in disbelief. "Are you trying to die?"

Li Daoxuan kept smiling.

"If you kill me," he said lightly, "then you will never have to attend lessons again. Isn't that exactly what you want? Go on. Try."

He then raised his voice so that everyone around could hear.

"Everyone listen," Li Daoxuan announced. "Gao Jie and I have agreed on a wager. I will allow him ten punches. If he knocks me down, he is free from all future lessons. If he fails, he will return to studying. He claims to be a hero of the martial world. Surely he would not go back on his word in front of so many people."

By now, a large crowd had gathered.

As soon as the people heard this, laughter broke out everywhere.

The citizens of Luoyang had personally witnessed the divine miracles of Dao Xuan Tianzun during the Great Locust Plague. His strength needed no explanation.

They began to tease Gao Jie openly.

"General, you look like a man of honor. You would not deny your word, would you?"

"General, don't cry injustice when you lose."

"General, have you thought about how you plan to admit defeat later?"

Mockery echoed from all sides.

Gao Jie felt a deep sense of unease.

What was wrong with these people?

He was an imperial officer. Ordinary citizens should tremble at the sight of him. Yet not only did they show no fear, they openly ridiculed him.

Were they really that certain he would lose?

Something was very wrong.

Even so, he had no way out.

Refusing to strike now would be even more humiliating.

He clenched his fists, each one as large as an upturned bowl.

"Fine," he growled. "I will strike."

Li Daoxuan beckoned casually. "Come."

He waved Gao Yiye aside, slipped his hands into his pockets, and stood with his feet slightly apart, completely relaxed.

Gao Jie's anger flared.

"If you truly possess techniques like Golden Bell Shield or Iron Cloth Shirt," he said harshly, "you should take a proper stance. What is the meaning of standing there like that? Are you mocking me?"

Li Daoxuan replied smoothly, in a tone that sounded oddly modern.

"That year, with my hands in my pockets, I found no equal."

Gao Jie roared and charged forward.

His punch shot out like an arrow, aimed straight at Li Daoxuan's abdomen.

He held back slightly. He had no intention of killing him.

The fist struck true.

Li Daoxuan did not move at all.

At first, Gao Jie felt soft flesh beneath his knuckles. Then, in the next instant, it was as if he had punched solid iron.

Bone, but harder than any bone he had ever felt.

A dull thud echoed.

Gao Jie let out a muffled groan and staggered backward, clutching his fist. Pain shot up his arm, and his eyes widened in shock.