

## **Great Ming 941**

### Chapter 941: No Pressure

With the price agreed upon, the transaction was ready to begin.

The pirates herded all the women onto a single ship, which then steered closer and slowly docked alongside the Wanli Sunshine.

Only at such close range did the sheer scale of the Wanli Sunshine become fully apparent.

What the pirates considered a medium-sized vessel now looked pitiful by comparison. Standing on their own deck, they had to crane their necks and look straight up, like commoners staring at a multi-story building from the street, just to glimpse the towering deck rail of the larger ship.

Thick ropes were lowered from above.

The pirates tied the women to the ropes one by one, then signaled upward. With powerful tugs from the sailors above, the women were hauled into the air and lifted onto the Wanli Sunshine's deck.

They were treated no differently from cargo.

There was not the slightest trace of dignity or respect afforded to them as human beings.

Bitterness filled the women's hearts, yet none of them dared to cry.

They knew far too well how cruel the pirates were. A single wrong word, a single displeasing sound, and a blade would flash without warning or mercy. Now that they had fallen into pirate hands, their only choice was to endure, to lower their heads, and to cling to life however they could.

Being sold like livestock was already unbearable.

If they were to be treated as food reserves...

Tie Niaofei stood to the side, wearing a wicked grin as he counted them like sacks of grain.

"One, two, three... eighteen in total," he said. "At four taels each, that makes seventy-two taels of silver. But since we're friends, I'll round it up to eighty."

Shadow Bat's eyes nearly lit up.

Those extra eight taels of silver would, of course, quietly end up in his own pocket. There was no need to report such a thing to his boss, Liu Xiang.

The transaction concluded smoothly.

Shadow Bat could not help but gloat inwardly. As expected of Boss Liu Xiang. His name alone is enough to make even an Imperial Merchant bow his head.

"My good brother," Tie Niaofei said warmly, his smile full of roguish familiarity. "Until next time. If you have more good things, remember me."

Shadow Bat laughed. "If fate brings us together again, the best goods will be reserved for you."

The two men returned to their respective boats.

Once back aboard his ship, Shadow Bat waved his hand decisively. "We're done here. Let's go."

The six pirate ships adjusted their sails and began heading south.

Meanwhile, on the deck of the Wanli Sunshine, the eighteen women stared at the group of so-called new pirates standing before them.

Fear and unease were written all over their faces.

They had no idea what fate awaited them, only that it surely could not be good.

At that moment, Shi Kefa approached with a gentle expression and spoke softly, "Do not be afraid. We are not bad people."

The women trembled even harder.

Shi Kefa sighed and turned to a nearby attendant. "Bring my official robes."

The attendant hurried over and draped the robes over him.

Shi Kefa smiled faintly. "See? I am an official of the imperial court. I am not a bad person."

To his astonishment, the women grew even more frightened.

Their bodies shook violently, despair creeping into their eyes.

Shi Kefa inhaled sharply, completely baffled. "Why? I've shown you my official status, yet you're more afraid than before. Even more afraid than when you were with the pirates. What is going on?"

Jiang Cheng shook his head with a helpless chuckle. "Lord Shi, that won't work. Calming them down isn't something that can be done just by showing official robes. Besides, now isn't the time for that."

He raised his voice. "Guards. Escort the women into the ship's hold and make sure they are kept safe."

Several sailors stepped forward, cut the ropes binding the women, and carefully led them below deck.

Once the women were gone, Jiang Cheng and Tie Niaofei exchanged a glance.

A flash of determination appeared in both their eyes at the same time.

"Instructor Jiang," Tie Niaofei asked, "what's your call?"

"And you, Elder Tie?" Jiang Cheng replied.

Almost simultaneously, they spoke a single word.

"Attack."

Jiang Cheng straightened, his aura changing instantly. "Gao Family Village Navy, Wanli Sunshine. All hands to battle stations!"

"All hands to battle stations!"

"Engines to battle speed!"

"Gun crews, take positions!"

"Deck soldiers, ready!"

"Damage control, standing by!"

"Engage!"

The Wanli Sunshine roared to life.

Switching from cruising speed to full combat speed, the massive ship surged forward, charging straight toward the six pirate ships retreating in the distance.

Its momentum was terrifying.

Below deck, the women who had just been escorted into the hold saw the sailors around them suddenly burst into motion, preparing for battle. Instinctively, they huddled together, faces pale with fear.

A sailor quickly reassured them, "Don't be afraid. Stay here and don't come out. Hold onto something solid so you don't fall over. Look, that person next to you is a good example."

The women turned their heads.

They saw Zhu Piaoling clinging tightly to a pillar.

Zhu Piaoling immediately protested, "Why are you all staring at me? I'm not good at fighting. Is it so strange to hug a pillar during a fierce battle? Hmph!"

The women fell silent.

After a brief, awkward pause, they all reached out at the same time and grabbed the nearest pillars.

On one of the pirate ships, Shadow Bat was happily counting silver.

Tie Niaofei had paid him two separate sums. One was the so-called respect money, which had to be handed over to Liu Xiang. The other was the payment for the eighteen women, which would be distributed among the crew.

And then there were the eight extra taels.

Heh. Sweet.

Just as he was savoring his good fortune, a subordinate rushed over in a panic. "Boss, that Imperial Merchant ship is accelerating. It's charging straight at us!"

Shadow Bat scoffed. "Isn't it just sailing in the same direction? What's the fuss?"

The subordinate shook his head. "No. Something's wrong. They look like they want to fight."

Shadow Bat laughed loudly. "Fight? Don't be ridiculous. If they wanted to fight, they would have attacked us earlier. Why would they pay us silver first, then attack afterward? Didn't you see how respectful they were? Boss Liu Xiang's name alone is enough to scare these rookies who've just gone to sea."

The words had barely left his mouth when a thunderous boom echoed across the water.

"Cannon fire?"

Shadow Bat leapt to his feet, his heart pounding. Even as he stood up, his mind raced. They're firing from that far away? Are they just shooting blindly?

A moment later, a massive splash erupted beside the ship.

A towering column of white water surged into the air.

It was a near miss.

Shadow Bat sucked in a sharp breath. "They can hit us from this distance? What kind of monstrous cannons are those?"

There was no time to think further.

He turned and saw the Wanli Sunshine bearing down on them at terrifying speed, its massive hull cutting through the sea like a blade, as if determined to send all six ships to the ocean floor.

"Damn it!" Shadow Bat roared. "They're insane! Just now they were bowing and scraping, and now they turn on us without warning. Are they crazy?"

The subordinate shouted, "Boss, what do we do? Should we fight back?"

"Fight back?" Shadow Bat snarled. "With what? We don't even have cannons!"

The subordinate fell silent.

Shadow Bat waved his hand violently. "Signal them. Curse them. Then full speed ahead. Run!"

The subordinate hurried to send a flag signal.

The message read: "Go screw your mother!"

Unfortunately for Shadow Bat, not a single person aboard the Wanli Sunshine understood flag signals.

The insult drifted harmlessly across the sea, completely unnoticed.

Chapter 942: What in the World Is This Speed?

Phantom Bat launched his desperate escape.

He knew very well that, in terms of pure combat strength, his six medium-sized ships were no match for that terrifying behemoth behind them. Worse still, he did not even have a single cannon aboard.

His only remaining hopes lay in two things. One was Liu Xiang's fearsome reputation, which he believed would make the enemy hesitate. The other was the agility of his own ships. Smaller vessels were supposed to be faster, and he was confident that they could outrun any massive ship.

Yet the moment he actually fled, he realized something was terribly wrong.

The colossal ship chasing them should have been slow. Its size alone should have made it sluggish and unwieldy.

Instead, it was frighteningly fast.

Phantom Bat had encountered Western three-masted galleons before. Those were among the fastest ships on the seas, able to reach seven to ten knots at most.

But this monster behind him was easily twice as fast.

Twenty knots, at the very least.

"What in the world is this speed?!" Phantom Bat screamed inwardly.

What he did not know was that Li Daoxuan had already restrained the ship's speed.

Outside the diorama box, Li Daoxuan's miniature vehicles could reach two hundred meters per hour. Once translated into the miniature world, that still meant a terrifying forty kilometers per hour.

Any model boat equipped with even the weakest motor could far exceed such a speed.

Li Daoxuan had deliberately limited the motor's output, fearing that such insane velocity would either overwhelm the people inside the box or drive them completely mad.

Even so, the Wanli Sunshine could still cruise steadily at over twenty knots.

At that speed, the pirate ships had no chance.

Phantom Bat had barely fled a short distance before he realized the horrifying truth. The massive ship behind them was not falling behind at all.

It was closing in.

The only mercy was that, to maintain pursuit, the Wanli Sunshine had to keep its bow pointed directly at them. That meant only the forward cannon could fire.

Its terrifying broadside cannons remained unusable for the moment.

Otherwise, if dozens of those cannons fired together, his entire fleet would have been wiped out in an instant.

Cold sweat streamed down Phantom Bat's face.

"We can't escape!" he roared. "Signal the other five ships. Prepare to board!"

He clenched his teeth and shouted, "We'll grapple that monster. All six ships together. Swarm their deck and fight them up close. If we seize that ship, Captain Liu Xiang will reward us beyond imagination!"

A ripple of excitement spread through the pirates.

That ship was enormous. If they truly captured it, the profit would be unimaginable.

"Prepare to board!"

The six pirate ships erupted into activity.

Pirates flooded onto the decks. Some climbed the masts. Others swung along the rigging. The gunwales were packed shoulder to shoulder with men.

Every pirate gripped a blade. Many also carried firearms.

Phantom Bat himself held a Spanish flintlock.

This was a high-quality weapon introduced to East Asia by Spain years ago, and it had long since become a prized firearm among seafarers.

With an arrogant flick of his wrist, Phantom Bat loaded the flintlock, preparing for the chaos of close combat.

As they completed their preparations, the Wanli Sunshine loomed ever closer.

Phantom Bat bellowed, "All six ships, spread out. Encircle them!"

His subordinates hurried to relay the command using flag signals.

The six pirate ships immediately fanned out, forming a broad crescent. They planned to let the Wanli Sunshine sail straight into the trap, then swarm it from all sides.

But they had overlooked one fatal detail.

During pursuit, the Wanli Sunshine could only use its bow cannon.

Now that the pirates had spread out, its broadsides were fully exposed.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Cannons on both sides of the Wanli Sunshine roared at once.

Massive iron cannonballs screamed through the air.

One slammed into the side of a pirate ship with a deafening crash, tearing open a huge hole. Splinters flew everywhere as the cannonball smashed through the hull, destroying everything in its path.

Another struck the deck.

A pirate was pulverized instantly, his body reduced to a bloody smear. The cannonball tore through the planks and vanished into the ship's depths.

The death of a single man barely registered with the pirates.

They had fought too many battles.

They had clashed with red-haired Westerners, with Franks, with the Ming imperial navy, with Zheng Zhilong's fleet.

A cannonball killing someone nearby meant nothing. As long as it did not hit them, they would not even flinch.

What they did not realize was that after the first round of solid shot, Jiang Cheng frowned and shouted, "Switch to explosive shells!"

The second volley was completely different.

"Boom!"

An explosive shell slammed onto a pirate ship.

A heartbeat later, another explosion erupted.

Boom.

Pirates on the deck were blasted into the air, limbs torn apart as bodies flew in every direction.

"What the hell is this?!"

"What's happening?"

"They're not firing solid shot. Those are explosive shells!"

"Damn it! Explosive shells are insanely rare! Even the Westerners barely use them!"

The technology for explosive shells existed in both East and West, but it was mostly confined to legends or books like the Wubei Zhi. It was almost never used in real combat.

Only now did the pirates realize the horrifying truth.

Their enemy had not only mastered explosive shells, but was actually using them in battle.

"We can't fight their cannons!"

"Charge forward!"

"Full speed ahead!"

"Charge!"

The pirate ships surged forward under relentless cannon fire.

Boarding was their last hope.

At that moment, heads suddenly appeared along the towering gunwales of the Wanli Sunshine. One after another, gun barrels extended beside them.

From that height, the sailors looked down on the pirate ships below.

It was a perfect firing angle.

"Fire!"

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The pirate decks were packed with men preparing to board.

They were perfect targets.

A single volley dropped a large swath of pirates where they stood.

Phantom Bat raised his Spanish flintlock and fired back in desperation.

Bang.

The shot cracked loudly, but the bullet vanished into the air, its path meaningless.

Such was the cruel reality of smoothbore firearms.

"Closer!"

"Closer!"

"Grapple!"

Through cannon fire and gunshots, the pirate ships finally slammed alongside the Wanli Sunshine.

Grappling hooks flew upward.

But the gunwales were terrifyingly high.

They still had to pull themselves up.

At the same time, sailors on the Wanli Sunshine began tossing hand grenades downward.

Grappling hooks flew up.

Hand grenades fell down.

They crossed paths in mid-air.

The grappling hook seemed almost smug, waving its sharp, cross-shaped claws as if greeting the grenade proudly.

The grenade remained cold and indifferent, refusing to acknowledge it.

Each continued along its path.

Clang.

The grappling hook latched onto the gunwale, clinging firmly and fulfilling its purpose.

Boom.

The grenade exploded on the pirate deck.

The pirate who had thrown the hook was blasted backward, his body torn apart.

Only then did the grappling hook seem to look back.

"Huh? Where's my master?" it seemed to ask. "You were just here. Weren't you going to climb up? Hurry up."

The pirate, riddled with shrapnel, groaned weakly.

"I'll climb your... bloody... hell..."

His head slumped to the side.

He died.

Chapter 943: Who's Going to Kick Him Overboard?

Moments later, the battle was over.

The pirates who had been so arrogant only moments before were now nothing more than a heap of corpses.

Phantom Bat lay dead on the deck, his eyes still wide open.

His final thought before death was simple and bitter: it truly did not pay to be naive on the open sea. The very men who had just flattered him with silver had turned around and tried to kill him. One really had to be ruthless. In his next life, he would be even more vicious.

"Report," a sailor said loudly as he stood before Jiang Cheng. "Forty-three prisoners captured. How should we deal with them?"

That question immediately became a problem.

According to the established rules of Gao Family Village, criminals were to be sent to labor reform camps. However, they were now adrift at sea. Where could a labor reform camp possibly be found?

Sending them all the way back to Gao Family Village was also unrealistic. This was a super expeditionary force, already thousands of miles from home.

Everyone's gaze shifted toward Shi Kefa.

Shi Kefa thought for a moment, then said calmly, "Take them to Anqing Prefecture. I will soon assume office there. Once I arrive, I intend to follow Gao Family Village's example and establish a labor reform camp. These criminals will all be committed to labor reform."

"Oh, and there are still six pirate ships," Tie Niaofei added, pointing behind them. "Those ships are riddled with cannon holes, smeared with blood, and littered with corpses. They are not exactly pleasant to look at. Our men are not particularly skilled at handling this type of sailing ship either. Everyone is used to piloting Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine vessels and Bai Gongzi's steamships. Traditional sailing ships are truly difficult."

Shi Kefa nodded. "Perfect, then. Have these forty-three prisoners clean up the battlefield. Throw the dead pirates into the sea. After that, let them man those six ships and follow us."

With guns and cannons trained on them, the captured pirates did not dare resist.

They obediently returned to their ships, dragged the corpses together, stripped them bare, and kicked them into the sea to feed the fish. Then, with only a handful of men on each vessel, they struggled to bring the battered ships into formation behind the Wanli Sunshine.

With so few helmsmen, controlling those six ships was genuinely difficult.

The Wanli Sunshine released a massive, thick iron chain and began towing the damaged vessels. Seven ships formed a strange flotilla as they slowly advanced southward along the coastline.

With that, the skirmish was truly over.

The sailors stood down from combat readiness, and the Wanli Sunshine once again took on a calm and peaceful appearance beneath the bright sun.

Zhu Piaoling no longer needed to cling to a pillar.

He hated staying inside the cabin. After all, his entire reason for running away from home was to see the sights of the world.

The moment the all-clear was announced, Zhu Piaoling straightened his clothes and declared proudly, "Excellent. Back to the deck to admire the scenery."

He took two steps outside, then suddenly remembered something. Turning around, he addressed the eighteen rescued women. "What are you all staring at? You can go up on deck now. Come with me."

The women shivered and did not dare move.

"Still scared?" Zhu Piaoling said impatiently. "Don't be afraid. Didn't you see us fighting the pirates just now? We fought pirates, so obviously we are good people."

The women continued trembling. After a long pause, one of them whispered softly, "Pirates also fight pirates."

Zhu Piaoling immediately retorted, "Where do I look like a pirate? I am a great hero. My nickname is the Wandering Hero of the Four Seas. A hero."

"Hahaha," Tie Niaofei laughed as he walked in from outside. "Hero Zhu, you are mistaken there. Among bandits, countless villains call themselves heroes. Trying to convince them with that logic is useless."

Zhu Piaoling fell silent.

Tie Niaofei waved to the women, deliberately softening his tone. "Come on up to the deck. Lord Shi would like to speak with you for a moment."

The women were still afraid, but they dared not disobey. Step by step, they cautiously made their way onto the deck.

Outside, the sun was bright and the sea calm.

Shi Kefa had already changed into his official robes. Sitting upright, he radiated dignity and integrity as he gestured gently. "Ladies, please come this way."

The women looked at him and gasped in surprise.

Earlier, when he wore plain clothes, it had not been obvious. Now, dressed in official robes, he appeared truly upright and imposing, his features full of righteousness. He did not look like a villain at all.

Here, it was worth mentioning the Ming Dynasty's official selection system.

After passing the imperial examinations, officials did not immediately assume office. Instead, they underwent a second selection, much like modern candidates who pass a written test but must still face an interview.

During this stage, the court deliberately favored those with square faces. Since ancient times, a square face had been considered the archetypal "good person" appearance.

Shi Kefa possessed exactly such a face. Handsome, upright, and proper.

Standing there, he looked far more reliable than the decadent young master, the notorious salt smuggler, or the impoverished scholar beside him.

The women finally felt some of their fear ease. Together, they bowed to Shi Kefa.

Shi Kefa chose a simple opening. "By the look of things, you have not eaten since yesterday, have you?"

The women shivered and did not answer, but the involuntary swallowing at the mention of food betrayed them.

Shi Kefa extended his hand toward a nearby sailor.

The sailor understood immediately and hurried into the cabin. He soon returned with food. Dry rations and fresh water were always available on board. There was no need to cook anything special.

When the food was placed before them, the women were overjoyed. Shi Kefa's face now looked even more like that of a good man.

They eagerly grabbed the food and ate without restraint.

After they had taken a few bites and calmed down slightly, Shi Kefa asked again, "Where are you from?"

"We are from Yuduo Village in Ganyu County," the women replied. "Yesterday afternoon, a group of pirates rushed into our village. They killed every man they saw. They slaughtered all the men, burned the village, then tied us up and dragged us onto their ships."

As they spoke, several women began to sob quietly.

Shi Kefa nodded. The situation was clear. There was no need to ask further questions.

"So you are now homeless," he said.

A chorus of choked sobs answered him.

Shi Kefa continued, "Then follow me. I am about to take office in Anqing Prefecture. I will settle there and find work for you, so you may survive."

The women stared at him in shock.

They had never imagined that an official would take such responsibility. At best, they had expected to be set ashore and abandoned. Instead, this man was offering them work and a way to live.

Their fear finally vanished.

All of them knelt and bowed together. "Thank you, noble and righteous Lord."

Shi Kefa let out a long sigh, looked up at the sky, and said softly, "My Great Ming Dynasty. Everywhere, the common people suffer."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Zhu Piaoling, leaning over the ship's rail, pointed at a massive rock along the shoreline and burst into laughter. "Hahaha. My Great Ming Dynasty. Everywhere the scenery is like a painting."

Shi Kefa muttered under his breath, "Who is going to kick that so-called great hero overboard?"

Chapter 944: The Suzhou and Songjiang Military Preparations Commissioner

The Wanli Sunshine continued its voyage southward and before long reached the mouth of the Yangtze River.

Ahead lay a broad, beautiful island.

Chongming Island.

"How beautiful. A stunning sand island!" Zhu Piaoling stood by the railing, bouncing on his feet as he shouted in excitement.

But after shouting only twice, he realized something was wrong.

On the shore, island residents had been drying fishing nets and gear. The moment they noticed the ship, panic exploded. People screamed, cried out, and fled in all directions, some grabbing weapons as they ran.

The entire coastline descended into chaos.

Zhu Piaoling blinked. "What? Are you serious? I only shouted once and they are this scared?"

Shi Kefa shook his head and sighed. "It seems they have suffered pirate attacks for too many years. This reaction is ingrained now."

Shi Kefa was absolutely correct.

Ever since the Japanese pirate raids during the Jiajing era, Chongming Island had been tormented again and again. By the late Ming period, the islanders had become extremely sensitive to anything unfamiliar.

Historical records state that in the twenty-second year of Wanli, which was 1594, the arrival of just eighteen Ryukyuan from what is now Okinawa caused the entire island to erupt into panic.

The military commander immediately dispatched troops. They captured eighteen people who carried no weapons. Their clothing and appearance were completely different from the Chinese. When questioned, they spoke unintelligibly, only pressing their palms together and bowing repeatedly. They were sent to the Military Preparations Commissioner and identified as Ryukyans.

Three years later, in the twenty-fifth year of Wanli, a Joseon fishing boat drifted to Chongming Island and again caused widespread alarm.

For the people of Chongming Island during this era, foreigners were almost synonymous with disaster. How could they not panic?

The Wanli Sunshine was enormous, and its appearance bore no resemblance whatsoever to Ming dynasty ships. When such a strange and massive vessel approached the island, it was enough to terrify the locals out of their wits.

"Foreigners!"

"It might be Japanese pirates!"

"Be careful!"

"Quick, report to the Suzhou and Songjiang Military Preparations Commissioner!"

"Someone go get help!"

Cries echoed along the shoreline.

The Suzhou and Songjiang Military Preparations Commissioner quickly received the report and mobilized his forces. He gathered four hundred and two militiamen, four hundred Zhejiang soldiers, one thousand three hundred marines, seven Fujian Azure Boats, thirty Sand Boats, five Oar Boats, and sixteen Ferocious Tiger Boats.

The troops surged forward with imposing momentum.

In the blink of an eye, the Wanli Sunshine was surrounded by the imperial "grand army." Over a thousand soldiers lined the shore, while dozens of ships formed a tight encirclement on the water, trapping the giant vessel at the center.

Standing at the bow of an Azure Boat was the Suzhou and Songjiang Military Preparations Commissioner himself, Cui Weihua. His name alone sounded loyal and valiant.

He shouted loudly toward the Wanli Sunshine, "What nation are you from? State your name!"

Even as he shouted, Cui Weihua felt deeply uneasy.

The opposing ship was simply too large. It dwarfed his flagship, the Canshan Boat, which was only twenty-three meters long. Facing it felt like leading a pack of hunting dogs against an elephant.

Were the dogs afraid? Of course they were.

Cui Weihua silently prayed, "Please do not be Japanese pirates. Please do not be Japanese pirates. Anything but Japanese pirates."

At that moment, Shi Kefa's head appeared over the railing of the massive ship.

He burst into laughter. "Brother Cui, do you still recognize me?"

Cui Weihua squinted hard. "Eh? Shi Kefa? Brother Shi!"

Shi Kefa laughed. "It has been years since we last met. I never imagined we would reunite here. Brother Cui, you have become a Military Preparations Commissioner. Congratulations."

Cui Weihua's entire body relaxed. "Brother Shi, where on earth did you get such a monstrous ship? You nearly scared me to death. This is Chongming Island, the place most ravaged by Japanese pirates. People here scatter in panic at the sight of any unfamiliar ship. Do you know that your vessel sitting offshore caused more than a dozen people to be injured in stampedes?"

Shi Kefa could only smile bitterly. "That is truly my fault. I had no idea. Ignorance can be forgiven, right? Talking from this distance is inconvenient. Come aboard and we can speak properly."

Cui Weihua laughed. "A ship this big? Of course I want to see it."

He transferred to a small boat and soon boarded the Wanli Sunshine.

The moment he stepped on deck, his eyes widened. "So big. This ship is truly enormous. Where did you even find something like this?"

Shi Kefa immediately pulled Tie Niaofei forward. "It belongs to him."

Tie Niaofei calmly produced his Imperial Merchant token. "This is a royal cargo vessel. Everything concerning it is classified as a royal secret. Civil and military officials are not permitted to inquire."

Cui Weihua inhaled sharply and immediately dropped the topic.

Shi Kefa sighed inwardly. To witness someone falsely invoking imperial authority and yet be unable to expose it was truly a test of his integrity.

Cui Weihua changed the subject. "Why are you towing six cargo ships behind you?"

Shi Kefa chuckled. "Pirate ships. On the way here, I encountered pirates under Liu Xiang and dealt with them. These six ships were captured. I was still thinking about how to handle them, so it is perfect that you are here."

Cui Weihua's eyes lit up. "You want to sell them to me?"

Shi Kefa had already received instructions from Dao Xuan Tianzun. Gao Family Village had no use for such outdated ships. Giving them away eliminated trouble and fostered goodwill. He laughed. "Sell them? Brother Cui, we have known each other for years. I know your character well. Consider them a gift, to strengthen the defense of the realm."

Cui Weihua was overjoyed. Six medium-sized ships were a tremendous boost to his forces.

"Oh my, how can I accept this?"

Even as he spoke, his hands were already waving. "Hurry, go take over those ships."

The government sailors and marines boarded the pirate ships with barely concealed excitement. They removed the iron chains and brought the vessels into formation. Some marines who had only ever served on Sand Boats were already celebrating their promotion to larger ships.

Cui Weihua asked, "Brother Shi, where are you headed next?"

Shi Kefa smiled. "I have also been promoted. I am now the Right Supervising Secretary, responsible for garrisoning Anqing and Chizhou Prefectures. My ships will often travel between the Yangtze and the sea and will pass Chongming Island frequently. I hope Brother Cui will continue to look after us."

Cui Weihua thought bitterly that Shi Kefa had once again risen half a rank above him. Comparing oneself to others truly invited misery.

He clasped his hands and laughed. "Why speak so formally between brothers? Your affairs are my affairs. You arrive and immediately gift me six ships. From now on, Chongming Island will always welcome you."

With that, the matter was settled.

From this day forward, Shi Kefa's ships could freely operate in the waters around Chongming Island.

## Chapter 945: The Huangmei Water Pirates

Zhu Piaoling spoke cheerfully. "Chongming Island is just south of here, right? Beyond that should be Suzhou. Heh heh, I think I will disembark here and wander my way toward Nanjing. Commander Shi, Master Tie, Instructor Jiang, we will meet again!"

Shi Kefa frowned slightly. He genuinely worried whether this naive young master, wealthy but inexperienced, could handle the tangled world of Jiangnan. He lowered his voice and said seriously, "Young Master Zhu, Jiangnan is filled with formidable figures. You must be extremely careful and avoid drawing attention to yourself. I can tell that your background is extraordinary, but your masked appearance means you cannot reveal your identity or rely on your family's influence. Therefore, you must keep a low profile. A very low profile."

Zhu Piaoling laughed casually. "I know, I know. Low profile is the key, right? I am just taking a stroll. After that, I will come find you in Anqing."

Shi Kefa saw that further persuasion would be useless and said no more.

The Wanli Sunshine slowed briefly by the riverbank. Zhu Piaoling and his attendants boarded a small boat, disembarked, and disappeared into the distance like drifting smoke.

Shi Kefa watched them go and sighed. "I am still worried. He is clearly inexperienced. I fear he will offend the wrong people."

Tie Niaofei laughed. "He may be inexperienced, but his guards are not. There is no need to worry."

Shi Kefa nodded. "That is true. Besides, I have no time to concern myself with others. We will reach Anqing soon. I must roll up my sleeves and get to work. I will apply everything I learned at Gao Family Village and strive to ensure that the people of Anqing Prefecture can also live prosperous lives."

After passing Chongming Island, the Wanli Sunshine officially entered the Yangtze River.

The Yangtze's waters were far superior to those of the Yellow River. The channel was wide and deep, making navigation smooth and effortless. Before long, they reached Nanjing.

The New Jiang Estuary of Nanjing was the Ming Imperial Navy's main garrison.

At its height, more than four hundred large warships and four hundred transport vessels were stationed here, along with countless smaller craft.

But by the Chongzhen era, Nanjing had become a destination for officials nearing retirement or suffering demotion. The Ming Imperial Navy had long since declined.

Very few large warships remained at the estuary. What could still be seen were transport boats coming and going, loaded with tribute grain.

When the colossal Wanli Sunshine appeared outside the New Jiang Estuary, the transport boats scattered in panic across the river.

"Japanese pirates!"

"The Japanese pirates are here to steal the grain!"

This time, however, Shi Kefa was prepared.

Standing at the prow, he clutched an iron-sheet megaphone and shouted at the top of his lungs, "This is a court vessel! No need to panic! This is a court vessel! No need to panic!"

He shouted again and again, repeating himself endlessly.

It resembled the mechanical shouting of a Sanbengzi's electric horn endlessly repeating its warning, which made the scene unintentionally amusing.

Unfortunately, unlike the Sanbengzi, Shi Kefa was using his own voice. After shouting for a long time, his throat quickly grew hoarse.

Anqing Prefecture, Anqing Harbor.

Wang Gongbi, the Right Administration Commissioner, sat near the pier, staring at the densely packed transport boats with a deeply troubled expression.

Earlier in 1635, after Zhang Xianzhong's West Camp Eight Great Kings breached Fengyang and desecrated the Zhu family's ancestral tombs, part of their forces did not withdraw northward. Instead, they continued south and invaded Anhui.

These bandit forces soon merged with local mountain and water bandits. The strongest among them were known as the Huangmei Water Pirates.

With Zhang Xianzhong's land forces backing them, the Huangmei Water Pirates became increasingly bold. They now openly intercepted official vessels on the river.

Transport boats carrying tribute grain were their favorite targets.

At this time, Anqing still belonged to Southern Zhili under Nanjing's jurisdiction. The court had dispatched Wang Gongbi to Anqing by imperial decree, ordering him to suppress the bandits north of the Yangtze and protect the transport routes.

Wang Gongbi arrived full of ambition. His first act was to audit the Anqing Guard, intending to reorganize the troops and confront Zhang Xianzhong's forces.

The results of the audit left him stunned.

The Anqing Guard suffered from severe shortages of manpower and provisions. Their weapons were old and broken. In practical terms, they had no combat capability at all.

They could not even suppress the Huangmei Water Pirates, much less face Zhang Xianzhong's main army.

Wang Gongbi clutched his head in despair. "What am I supposed to do? What can I possibly do? It is over. Completely over."

"Report!" A scout rode up at full speed. "Your Excellency, bad news! The Huangmei Water Pirates are advancing and are less than ten li away!"

Wang Gongbi exclaimed, "What?"

He looked toward the pier and saw the dense cluster of transport boats. His heart sank. "This is disastrous. So many transport boats gathered here. If the bandits seize them, that is no different from aiding the enemy."

After a moment of hesitation, Wang Gongbi clenched his teeth. "Rather than letting the bandits take the grain, it is better to give it to the common people. Men, unload the grain immediately and distribute it to the people. Quickly!"

The Section Chief was startled. "My lord, if the court investigates afterward, you will surely be charged with a serious crime."

Wang Gongbi replied firmly, "Let them charge me. I cannot care about that now."

Orders were swiftly issued.

Wang Gongbi's family retainers, the Anqing Guard soldiers whose fighting strength was barely greater than that of peasants, and large numbers of dockworkers all rushed to unload the grain.

There was no time to transport it far. They simply pushed it into the crowds near Anqing Harbor and handed it directly to the common people.

Anqing City stood right next to the harbor. The people surged forward, each grabbing bags of grain and fleeing.

In the blink of an eye, the area around Anqing Harbor became livelier than a marketplace.

"Report! Water bandits five li away!"

"Report! A massive and strange vessel is approaching from downstream. It is at least twenty zhang long!"

Wang Gongbi was startled. "Twenty zhang long? What nonsense are you talking about?"

The scout replied, "That estimate is conservative. It may be even longer."

Wang Gongbi frowned. "Have the water bandits grown that powerful?"

The scout quickly explained, "It does not appear to be a bandit ship. There is a man in official robes standing at the prow. He seems to be shouting desperately, but his voice is hoarse, and I was too far away to hear what he was saying."

Wang Gongbi asked, "Official robes? What rank?"

"It appears to be a third-rank official."

Wang Gongbi's thoughts raced. "Could it be Shi Kefa? The court recently appointed Shi Kefa to oversee military affairs in Anqing and Chizhou. His post is Right Vice Censor in Chief, which is indeed a third-rank position."

Wang Gongbi sighed heavily. "Even if it is him, his arrival will not help. The military situation here is impossible. The guard soldiers are drawing empty pay, troop numbers are insufficient, and the court owes them provisions and wages. They have no will to fight. Shi Kefa will only end up overwhelmed, just like me."

He waved his hand forcefully. "Forget Shi Kefa. Continue distributing the grain. Let the bandits take less, and let the common people take more!"

One transport boat after another was emptied and abandoned at the pier. The grain was seized by the people.

In a very short time, eight thousand shi of grain had been distributed.

Chapter 946: Ants, However Numerous, Can Still Bite an Elephant to Death

The Wanli Sunshine maintained a steady cruising speed as it slowly approached Anqing Port.

Shi Kefa, filled with ambition, had fully prepared himself to roll up his sleeves and begin tackling real work upon arrival.

Yet before the ship had even fully docked, he noticed something was very wrong.

From afar, the pier was in chaos. Common folk were scrambling madly, scooping up grain scattered everywhere, while the soldiers present were not stopping them at all. Some were even helping.

Shi Kefa frowned deeply. "What are they doing?" he muttered.

Tie Niaofei lowered his spyglass, equally confused. "I don't understand it either," he said. "For the imperial court to distribute grain to the common people... this is unbelievable. It completely overturns my impression of them. If they had done this a few years earlier, where would all these rebels have come from?"

Shi Kefa smiled bitterly. "Don't be so cynical," he replied. "The court isn't entirely corrupt. There are still officials who genuinely care for the people."

Tie Niaofei shrugged, clearly unconvinced.

The Wanli Sunshine continued forward, closing the distance little by little.

But just at that moment, a panicked shout rang out.

"The Huangmei River Pirates are here! The Huangmei River Pirates are here! Run!"

The grain barges remained in place. Their heavy loads made rapid movement impossible. But the hundreds of merchant ships and fishing boats docked at the port reacted instantly, sailing out in all directions and fleeing downstream.

Shi Kefa thought they were frightened by his ship. He quickly grabbed a speaking trumpet and shouted in a hoarse voice, "Don't be afraid! I am an imperial official, and this is an imperial ship!"

He shouted again and again, but it was useless. The boats continued to flee in panic.

Shi Kefa blinked. "Huh?"

A medium sized merchant ship brushed past the Wanli Sunshine at close range. Shi Kefa quickly shouted to it, "Why are you running? I already told you, this is an imperial ship!"

A middle aged merchant leaned over the rail and shouted back, "We know! We're not running from you. The Huangmei River Pirates are here! You should run too!"

Shi Kefa raised his voice. "I am an imperial official. How could I flee at the sight of bandits? And who exactly are these Huangmei River Pirates?"

The merchant shouted frantically, "They are a massive band of river bandits entrenched in Huangmei County. They kill without hesitation. In the past, they were small and never dared to attack Anqing. But now they've joined forces with the Eight Great Kings. The lunatic who burned Fengyang. The Eight Great Kings fight on land, and the Huangmei River Pirates fight on the water. They advance together, brutal and unstoppable. Even the Provincial Administration Commissioner can't stop them. You really should flee!"

Shi Kefa was stunned.

He turned to look at Tie Niaofei and Jiang Cheng. Both were equally shocked. The rebels had not only ravaged Henan. They had already reached the Yangtze.

"The river pirates are coming!" the lookout shouted.

Everyone rushed to the rail.

Upstream, the river surface was completely covered by countless small boats. They surged forward in dense formation, like a massive ant colony spreading across the water.

The sight made their scalps tingle.

They had fought river battles on the Yellow River before, but those engagements involved only a handful of boats. Compared to this, they were almost playful skirmishes. Only now did they realize how terrifying the Yangtze could be. The river pirates' boats truly resembled an endless swarm of ants.

"So many..." Shi Kefa said hoarsely.

"There's no need to fear too much," Jiang Cheng said calmly. "They're all small boats. They can't ram us. Let's ram them instead."

"Yes. Fight!" Shi Kefa declared, his spirit rising. "Protect the civilian vessels. We must not retreat!"

The Wanli Sunshine increased power and charged straight into the ant like swarm.

On the pier, Wang Gongbi had also noticed the Wanli Sunshine.

Earlier, when his scouts reported a giant ship twenty zhang long, he had not fully grasped what that meant. Numbers alone could not convey its presence.

Now, seeing the enormous hull with his own eyes, Wang Gongbi was completely shaken.

"What an enormous ship!" he exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "Where did Shi Kefa get such a thing? He's charging straight at the Huangmei River Pirates. Does he even understand naval warfare? Ants, however numerous, can still bite an elephant to death!"

As he spoke, his personal guards hurried over. "Master, the pirates are here. They may attack the shore at any moment. We should retreat into Anqing City. It's too dangerous to remain on the pier."

"What?" Wang Gongbi snapped. "Shi Kefa is fighting out there. How can I retreat? If Shi Kefa doesn't retreat, neither will I. We will hold the riverbank!"

The guards had no choice but to obey.

They joined the scattered, low morale garrison soldiers and stood watch on the pier, gripping bows and spears while nervously watching the river.

The battle erupted.

Against such a mass of small boats, the Wanli Sunshine did not even bother to open its cannon ports. From the outside, it looked like nothing more than an unusually large cargo ship.

But its sheer size was terrifying.

The Huangmei River Pirates were already panicking.

Their boats were little fishing vessels, carrying only a few men each. None of them even reached the Wanli Sunshine's waterline. As the massive hull bore down on them, the pirates shouted in alarm.

"What in the world is that?"

"It's not a Western warship. Even Western warships aren't this big."

"Could it be Zheng He's Treasure Ship?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Zheng He's ships disappeared long ago."

"It's coming!"

"Fire arrows!"

The pirates still tried to fight, clinging to the delusion that ants, however numerous, could bite an elephant to death.

That illusion shattered instantly.

Gunfire erupted from above. Bang, bang, bang.

Bullets poured down into the dense swarm of boats. The pirates had no cover at all. There was nowhere to hide. In moments, the vanguard collapsed into chaos.

Watching from the shore, Wang Gongbi was ecstatic. "Shi Kefa's guards are formidable. So many firearms!"

He began cheering without restraint. "Fight! Fight well!"

The Wanli Sunshine plowed through the river like a steel wall, weaving through the boats as if entering empty ground. Some pirates still tried to approach, hoping to throw grappling hooks and climb aboard, believing numbers would decide the battle.

That tactic only worked against ships fought with cold weapons.

Against a vessel bristling with firearms, approaching meant being slaughtered from above. Boarding was impossible.

Screams filled the river.

Unable even to hold their ground on the water, the pirates abandoned all thoughts of landing and looting. At their leader's command, they fled upstream in panic, their ant like boats scattering in all directions.

"Pursue them!" Shi Kefa ordered.

"There's no need," Jiang Cheng replied calmly. "There are too many. Once they reach the complex waterways near the Jiujiang Estuary, they'll scatter into the reeds. We wouldn't catch much. Pursuit has little meaning."

Shi Kefa nodded, his thoughts settling. "You're right."

Chapter 947: Pear Garden Ahead

The Wanli Sunshine ceased its pursuit and slowly returned to the dock.

What it had just displayed was witnessed not only by Wang Gongbi, who stood waiting on the shore, but also by every merchant ship and fishing boat on the river. All of them were left staring in stunned silence, deeply shaken by the terrifying combat strength of this massive vessel.

Only when the ship gradually drew close to the pier did thunderous cheers finally erupt, spreading across the shore and echoing over the water.

As the ship settled firmly against the dock, Shi Kefa was the first to leap ashore.

Wang Gongbi immediately stepped forward to greet him.

The two men quickly glanced at each other's official robes, and in that instant, both understood the other's identity.

"Your humble subordinate, Shi Kefa, by His Majesty's grace, has come to this place to assume the post of Right Counselor and to supervise the Jiangbei army."

"This old official is Wang Gongbi, Right Administrative Commissioner of Southern Zhili," Wang Gongbi replied warmly. "Master Shi, your arrival truly could not have come at a better time. Witnessing your performance just now has greatly put my heart at ease. With you here, the bandits of this region will surely be swept away."

Shi Kefa felt a trace of embarrassment. That is far too much praise, he thought. I do not possess such ability.

His gaze shifted toward the ship. "This vessel is..."

Tie Niaofei once again stepped forward and smoothly repeated the prepared explanation. He claimed that it was an Huangshang vessel, a royal secret, and not something that could be casually investigated. The excuse was delivered flawlessly, leaving Wang Gongbi completely confused.

After listening, Wang Gongbi nodded repeatedly. "So it is a royal treasure ship. No wonder, no wonder..."

Afterward, concern crept onto his face. "A royal merchant ship will surely depart before long. When that happens, what shall we do about the Huangmei water bandits?"

"Do not worry," Tie Niaofei replied calmly. "We will not be leaving anytime soon. We will be imposing upon you here for a while."

Wang Gongbi was immediately overjoyed. "Excellent! Since Master Shi has arrived, this old official will entrust all matters of military preparation in Jiangbei entirely to you."

Shi Kefa swept his gaze across the pier, where a scattering of garrison soldiers stood about in lax disorder. He could not help but shake his head inwardly.

These Weisuo soldiers, he thought, will be extraordinarily difficult to reform. For centuries, the hereditary centurions and chiliarchs of these garrisons have been drawing ghost payrolls and wasting their days in idleness. To straighten them out now would be no easy task.

No, he decided. I must follow the Dao Xuan Tianzun's method and train new militia directly. A people's militia will be far more reliable in suppressing bandits than trying to salvage these rotten elements of the regular army.

In any case, it was not uncommon these days for civil officials to spend their own money to raise private forces. Hong Chengchou had his Hong Army, and Lu Xiangheng commanded three thousand soldiers of the Tianxiong Army.

I, Shi Kefa, can also raise an army of my own, he thought. Although it will bear my name in title, in truth it will be raised by the Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Shi Kefa was very clear about his own limitations. He knew that he could never train an army as organized, disciplined, and principled as that of Gao Family Village. Professional matters were best left to the specialized systems of Gao Family Village.

As for himself, he would simply fulfill his assigned role.

First, he would settle his own residence and arrange temporary lodging there for Tie Niaofei and Jiang Cheng. Next, he would establish a labor reform camp to hold all the captured pirates and water bandits. He also needed to properly resettle the group of rescued women.

Only after all that was done could he begin planning for even greater undertakings.

Suzhou.

Zhu Piaoling was strolling happily through the streets of Suzhou City.

The golden-thread image of the Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered upon his chest was directly linked to Li Daoxuan. It accompanied him closely, seemingly sharing in the enjoyment of Suzhou's bustling scenery.

The reason Li Daoxuan had allowed Zhu Piaoling to board the Wanli Sunshine was simple. Zhu Piaoling's destination lay in Jiangnan, and he even planned to visit the Qinhuai River.

There was no exaggeration in this. If one had the chance to travel to the late Ming Dynasty, who would not want to see the Qinhuai River with their own eyes?

Thus, Li Daoxuan had permitted this extravagant prince to board the Wanli Sunshine.

At this moment, Zhu Piaoling served as Li Daoxuan's eyes. Wherever Zhu Piaoling went, Li Daoxuan could see as well.

"Jiangnan truly is a marvelous place," Zhu Piaoling said with a laugh. "There are people everywhere."

At this time, Jiangnan's prosperity far exceeded that of Shaanxi. Here, even an oil vendor in a bustling county town could earn more than four taels of silver each month. Casual laborers could easily earn over four catties of rice a day. Anyone who earned less than four catties of rice per day was considered poor.

The income level here already surpassed the standard of three catties of wheat flour per day that the Dao Xuan Tianzun provided to the common folk of the northwest and the central plains.

As Zhu Piaoling wandered through the streets, asking about local customs and traditions, he could not help but exclaim in admiration, "Jiangnan has not suffered drought, and its people are wealthy. It truly is different from our Shaanxi."

The golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest spoke, "Indeed. Jiangnan's circumstances are entirely different from those of the northwest and the central plains. The economy here is highly developed, and the rudiments of capitalism have already begun to appear. In terms of commerce, it is far ahead of the west. Zhu Cunji, if you truly wish to make railways succeed, you could try implementing them here in Jiangnan."

Zhu Piaoling did not understand what "rudiments of capitalism" meant, but he grasped the rest at once. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, please do not use my real name. It would be troublesome if others overheard. Just

call me Zhu Piaoling. Cough, cough. Does the Dao Xuan Tianzun mean that because there are more people here, and the common folk are wealthier, train tickets would sell better?"

"Yes," Li Daoxuan replied. He did not elaborate further, only telling him that it would be very profitable. There was no need to explain that it would also benefit the populace. He wanted to see whether Zhu Piaoling could realize that on his own.

Zhu Cunji thought for a moment, then laughed. "You are right. It does seem easier to make money here. Selling train tickets would certainly be simpler. And I have thought of another point. With trains, transporting goods becomes far more convenient. In a place like Jiangnan, where commerce is already so developed, would that not make them even more useful? Goods would circulate in greater volume and at greater speed. The economy would become even more prosperous, and even more people would buy tickets. Would that not create an upward cycle of success?"

Li Daoxuan chuckled inwardly. This fellow figured it out.

On reflection, it was not surprising at all.

When common folk considered problems, they often focused only on themselves and their immediate surroundings. But Zhu Cunji was a prince, not an ordinary commoner. He was accustomed to viewing matters from a higher vantage point, and his understanding was naturally different.

"That you could reach this conclusion is excellent," Li Daoxuan said. "Accelerating the movement of people does not merely stimulate the economy. It also promotes the exchange of culture and ideas. When people's thoughts and culture gradually align, they become more united, and the nation grows more stable."

Zhu Piaoling seemed to gain some insight. "Is this why the Yuan Dynasty, after conquering the Central Plains, gradually became more and more like the Han people?"

Li Daoxuan was quietly amused. Conversing with this person is actually quite interesting.

At that moment, an attendant stepped forward and reported, "My lord, your subordinate has inquired. The most famous brothel nearby, known as the Pear Garden, lies just ahead."

Zhu Piaoling was overjoyed. "Then let us go and have a look at once!"

The golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun cast him a sideways glance.

Zhu Piaoling hurriedly explained, "Only to look, I promise. I will not do anything improper. I still remember the Dao Xuan Tianzun's teachings. Courtesans are mostly unfortunate souls. Being sold into a brothel is already tragic enough. We should not bully them. We should save them."

Chapter 948: The Peculiar Young Man

The courtesan houses of Jiangnan were truly a world apart from those of Shaanxi.

The moment Zhu Piaoling stepped up to the entrance, a completely different atmosphere washed over him.

The gates of the Pear Garden were draped in red banners and colorful streamers, with silks and satins hanging everywhere. On the second floor, a row of small balconies was crowded with beautiful women. They leaned against the railings, smiling coyly and batting their eyelashes at the passersby below.

From time to time, voices rang out.

"Come up and enjoy yourself, handsome!"

"Brother Li, it has been so long. Don't you miss me?"

The sound of strings and flutes drifted gently through the air. From somewhere deeper inside, a woman's song floated out, soft and melodious, so alluring that anyone who heard it would instantly imagine a peerless beauty singing behind the curtains.

Zhu Piaoling's eyes widened at once.

Even Li Daoxuan, who had scrolled through countless online videos and seen photos of innumerable beautiful actresses from the future, could not help but sigh inwardly in admiration.

Unbelievable, he thought. They have not even reached the Qinhuai River yet. This is only a Pear Garden in Suzhou, and it is already overflowing with beauties. And these women are all naturally beautiful, at most with a light touch of rouge and powder. There are no cosmetic enhancements, no heavy filters. Not like women in the future, who wear so much makeup that you would not recognize them once it is washed off.

Zhu Piaoling's legs went weak, and his steps faltered.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun cleared his throat lightly.

Zhu Piaoling snapped back to his senses at once. "Whoa. I almost lost myself!"

"Not almost," the Dao Xuan Tianzun corrected calmly. "You already did."

"Forgive me, Dao Xuan Tianzun," Zhu Piaoling said in shame. "It seems this humble one is still deeply accustomed to luxury, indulgence, and a restless, aimless life. Even though I have tried to reform myself under your guidance, my resolve is still lacking."

Li Daoxuan replied, "Attraction between men and women is a natural thing. However, a man must not lose his composure in the face of beauty. He must hold firm to his principles, neither behaving obsequiously nor acting without propriety. Do you understand?"

"I understand!"

"Good. Go inside."

With his spirits renewed, Zhu Piaoling strode toward the entrance of the Pear Garden.

The madam hurried over at once to greet him. Although Zhu Piaoling's face was hidden beneath a straw hat and veil, the imposing presence of his guards made it obvious that he was no ordinary guest. Even a fool could tell that he was a man of great wealth.

Her smile instantly grew broader as she welcomed him inside, her words overflowing with flattery. "Esteemed sir, since this is your first visit and you have yet to find a familiar companion, why not sit in the main hall for a while? You can enjoy the music and dances. If later you find a young lady who catches your eye, it will not be too late to go upstairs to a private room on the second floor for a few cups of wine."

Zhu Piaoling had no intention of going upstairs. The main hall suited him perfectly. He merely wished to experience the unique cultural atmosphere of a Jiangnan pleasure quarter.

Li Daoxuan felt the same way.

Unexpectedly, they had not even finished their first cup of tea when loud voices rang out from a nearby table. Several young men were talking boisterously, their words carrying clearly through the hall, revealing a complete lack of refinement.

Both Zhu Piaoling and Li Daoxuan instinctively turned to look.

At first glance, the group appeared to be a gathering of privileged young men, most of them in their early twenties. However, one among them stood out sharply. He was only fourteen or fifteen years old, with a broad face and wide forehead. His manner was rough and unpolished, completely at odds with the rest of the group.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun could not help but voice his displeasure. "What kind of world is this? Boys of fourteen or fifteen already visiting courtesan houses. They are not even adults yet. Utterly improper."

"Huh? Is that considered early?" Zhu Piaoling blurted out. "I was already twelve when I first went to a courtesan—"

He stopped himself abruptly, realizing his slip.

Although he had only spoken half the word, Li Daoxuan immediately understood what he meant. It seemed that in this era, visiting courtesan houses at fourteen or fifteen was not considered unusual at all.

Alas.

Would such a lifestyle not ruin people from childhood?

As Li Daoxuan was lamenting inwardly, the fourteen or fifteen year old boy with the broad face suddenly spoke up.

"Gentlemen, please stop indulging yourselves in music and wine," he said with a frown. "I only came out with you because you promised we would drink and discuss serious affairs of state. Yet all you have done is drink and listen to songs. Not a single word about the nation has been spoken."

The young men in their twenties laughed. "What is the point of discussing affairs of state in a place like this? We came out to enjoy ourselves. Of course we should enjoy ourselves."

The boy refused to give up. "The nation is already in grave danger. Do you truly not realize it? The southeastern seas are filled with enormous Western ships. There are Japanese, Arabs, Persians. Their warships cross vast oceans, traveling tens of thousands of li to reach our shores. Yet our own ships can barely sail beyond coastal waters. This is extremely dangerous. The consequences are unimaginable!"

The young men scoffed. "What danger are you talking about? The Westerners' ships may be large, but they are few in number, and their fighting strength is mediocre. Our mighty Great Ming navy would scatter them in a single battle."

The fourteen or fifteen year old boy opened his mouth. "But you all—"

Before he could finish, the others burst into laughter again. "Look at that dance. And her waist. Truly exquisite!"

The boy clenched his fists, rendered speechless for a long moment. After several breaths, he finally let out a deep sigh.

"I cannot live like this," he said quietly. "I will enlist. I will join the navy and fight against these Westerners."

This entire exchange unfolded clearly before the eyes of Zhu Piaoling and Li Daoxuan.

Zhu Piaoling chuckled softly. "This boy has ambition. He will certainly amount to more than those others. They are just like my younger self. Destined to become useless as adults."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed, with a hint of reproach. "So you recognize that about yourself?"

Zhu Piaoling sighed. "What else could I be? Useless is all I could ever be. There was truly nothing I could do. Even when going out to amuse myself, I needed a double to replace me."

A trace of melancholy surfaced in his expression.

Li Daoxuan found himself unable to say anything further. From Zhu Piaoling's standpoint, this lonely path was indeed the only one available to him.

Zhu Piaoling then said, "Still, this boy's worries seem a bit excessive. What is there to fear from the Westerners? The true threat at present should be the Manchu."

The Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled faintly. "No. This boy has remarkable foresight. The threat posed by the Westerners may appear small now, but in the future it will far surpass that of the Manchu."

"What?" Zhu Piaoling exclaimed in shock.

He knew that the Dao Xuan Tianzun could see five centuries into the past and five centuries into the future. If he said it, then it must be true. Zhu Piaoling's heart jolted violently. "Greater than the Manchu?"

"Go," Li Daoxuan instructed. "Invite that young man over. I wish to speak with him."

Zhu Piaoling's spirits immediately lifted. "Yes, Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

He waved toward the neighboring table and called out loudly, "You there. Young man. Yes, you. Stop looking around. I am calling you."

The boy looked over, his face filled with confusion.

Zhu Piaoling smiled at him. "I overheard you discussing the Westerners earlier. It seemed no one else was willing to listen, but I am. Would you be willing to come over and explain your thoughts?"

The boy's eyes lit up at once. "You are willing to listen, sir?"

Zhu Piaoling nodded.

The young man was overjoyed. He quickly walked over and sat down opposite Zhu Piaoling. Despite his young age, his posture was upright and confident, his bearing surprisingly composed.

"Sir," he said, "what are your views on the affairs of the southeastern coast?"

Zhu Piaoling, who in truth had no views of his own, could only repeat what the Dao Xuan Tianzun had just said.

"I believe that although the threat from the Westerners is not great at present, in the future it will far exceed that posed by the Manchu..."

Chapter 949: Good Heavens!

The young man listened to Zhu Piaoling's words, his face filled with complete bewilderment.

He was well aware that the Westerners posed a serious threat, but he had never imagined that they could be more dangerous than the Manchus. His thoughts churned chaotically, and he looked at Zhu Piaoling with a strange expression.

"Are you just talking nonsense?"

Zhu Piaoling immediately retorted, "Nonsense? How could I be talking nonsense? I have solid reasons and evidence."

"Oh?" the young man pressed. "Then where are your reasons and evidence?"

"Well..."

Zhu Piaoling froze.

For a brief moment, silence hung between them.

At that instant, the voice of the Dao Xuan Tianzun faintly echoed in Zhu Piaoling's ears.

Zhu Piaoling's spirits lifted at once. Following the instructions he received, he spoke with confidence.

"The threat of the Westerners lies in their technology. They already possess the ability to cross vast oceans, something we completely lack. Science and technology form a massive interconnected system. A lead in one area often means a lead everywhere. In the end, technological superiority can make up for numerical inferiority. When that happens, the Westerners could trample us underfoot."

The young man did not fully understand these words, but he could feel that Zhu Piaoling sounded extraordinarily knowledgeable.

"Uncle," he said sincerely, "you truly seem to possess great learning."

Zhu Piaoling puffed out his chest. "Naturally."

"Then tell me," the young man continued eagerly, "how can we win a naval battle against the Westerners?"

Zhu Piaoling declared without hesitation, "Build ships. Big ships. Enormous ships, even larger than those of the Westerners. Equip them with more cannons. If we do that, how could we lose? Afterward, we will cross the oceans ourselves, sail to the Westerners' lands, blast them apart with our cannons, and force them to open their ports for trade. Then we will shove our silks and porcelain in their faces and make them spend all their money buying them."

The young man stammered, "That... that sounds impossible, doesn't it?"

Zhu Piaoling burst into laughter. "Impossible? It is entirely achievable."

Doubt flickered in the young man's eyes.

Zhu Piaoling continued, "If you do not believe me, go to Anqing Port and see for yourself. There is a colossal ship there, even larger than the Westerners' vessels."

"Really?" the young man exclaimed.

"What kind of person do you think I am?" Zhu Piaoling scoffed. "Would I lie to a child like you? Do you think I am like those profligate friends of yours, who only know how to eat, drink, and fool around? I am different. I stand on a completely different level from them."

The young man smiled broadly. "Indeed. Listening to you speak, you are clearly not in the same league as them."

Zhu Piaoling nodded smugly. "I am ten times more profligate than them."

The young man fell silent.

This was awkward. That handsome image collapsed rather quickly.

Fortunately, the young man was quick-witted and had a strong tolerance for jokes. He sensed that Zhu Piaoling's last remark was meant humorously, so he did not dwell on it.

He cupped his hands and bowed. "Uncle, my name is Shi Lang. I will take your advice and go to Anqing Port to see this great ship."

Shi Lang?

Li Daoxuan almost blurted out a curse from the modern era.

Was this not the infamous naval commander from *The Deer and the Cauldron*, the one who wiped out Zheng Chenggong's descendants and extinguished the final hope of restoring the Ming?

For an instant, Li Daoxuan felt the urge to have Zhu Piaoling's bodyguards strike this young man down on the spot.

But after thinking it over, he dismissed the idea.

One could not judge a person by deeds not yet committed. Moreover, with his own intervention in this world, even the flutter of a butterfly's wings could change countless destinies.

As long as this Shi Lang was not given the chance to defect to the Qing, the future described in *The Deer and the Cauldron* would never occur. He might even grow into a loyal and upright man.

In the future, Gao Family Village was destined to develop a navy.

Bai Yuan was already nearing fifty and would not remain on the front lines for many more years. In time, he would retreat to the rear to oversee grand strategy. As for Jiang Cheng, his abilities were not sufficient to shoulder such an immense responsibility.

This Shi Lang, however, was only fourteen or fifteen, standing at the prime of his youth. He had decades of service ahead of him, making him a promising candidate for a great naval general.

While Li Daoxuan was still thinking along these lines, Zhu Piaoling laughed and said, "Shi Lang, your surname is quite rare. We must share some karmic connection. I might as well write you a letter of introduction."

Shi Lang was startled. "A letter of introduction? What for?"

Zhu Piaoling explained patiently, "Silly boy. The great ship you want to see belongs to the military and is meant for war. Do you think they would allow some unknown youth to board it casually? But if you carry a letter from me, explaining that you wish to observe the ship..."

Shi Lang immediately understood. His face lit up with excitement, and he bowed deeply. "Thank you, Uncle. May I ask your name?"

Zhu Piaoling replied calmly, "I am Zhu Piaoling, the Wanderer of the Four Seas."

Shi Lang nodded solemnly. "I will remember it, sir."

Zhu Piaoling grinned. "I see great potential in you. Did you not say you wanted to join the army? Take my letter. It will make enlistment much easier. Perhaps the general commanding that great ship will take a liking to you and bring you into his ranks."

Shi Lang was overjoyed. "Thank you, Uncle!"

Zhu Piaoling ordered the four treasures of the study to be brought over. His brush moved swiftly across the paper.

Though he was known as a profligate, he was far from incompetent. His handwriting was neat and upright. Shi Lang, whose literacy was only basic, could not help but admire it secretly.

This man truly is learned, he thought.

Zhu Piaoling finished writing the letter and prepared to sign his name. His hand moved smoothly.

"Zhu... Cun..."

His mind intended to write "Zhu Piaoling," but his hand instinctively began forming the characters for "Zhu Cunji."

There was no helping it. When signing one's name, muscle memory often acted faster than conscious thought.

Just as the character "ji" was about to take shape, the bodyguard beside him panicked and struck Zhu Cunji's elbow forcefully.

Zhu Cunji's arm jerked, and the brush flew from his hand.

It sailed across the corridor, where a delicate girl of twelve or thirteen was carrying a tray of tea toward a table. The brush struck her face with a soft thump, leaving a black streak on her cheek.

The girl turned her head in shock.

She had been facing away before, but now her full face was revealed to everyone present. A collective gasp spread through the room.

Beautiful.

So beautiful.

She was only twelve or thirteen, still bearing traces of childish innocence, yet her face was already of peerless beauty, the kind that defied description. The black line on her cheek should have marred her appearance, but even with it, she was stunning beyond belief.

If she were to grow to eighteen or nineteen, at the height of a woman's beauty, how many hearts would she steal?

Zhu Cunji stood frozen. "Good heavens!"

Even Li Daoxuan paused slightly.

So beautiful? This is bad. I have a feeling this girl must become someone extremely famous.

The little girl puffed out her cheeks. She clearly wanted to be angry, yet did not dare.

Those working in service trades often lived difficult lives. Even after being struck in the face by a brush, she could not show anger toward a guest and could only endure it silently.

At that moment, the madam's voice rang out from afar. "Chen Yuanyuan! Why are you standing there? Mr. Zhang's tea, hurry and deliver it!"

The little girl exclaimed softly, "Ah!" and hurried away.

Chapter 950: Buy Them All

Zhu Piaoling's face slackened into a dazed expression.

"So her name is Chen Yuanyuan," he murmured softly. "What a truly beautiful name."

A wave of regret surged through his heart. Faced with such a stunning girl, he could not help but feel an impulse to buy her, secure her freedom, and bring her back to his princely estate.

But then he remembered the Dao Xuan Tianzun, present right there on his chest.

The trafficking of human beings was strictly forbidden in Gao Family Village, especially the sale of women and children. Anyone caught violating this rule by the Dao Xuan Tianzun would face certain death.

He sat there, stewing in melancholy.

Just then, the voice of the Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun echoed in his mind.

"Zhu Cunji, it is time to unleash your financial might."

Zhu Piaoling blinked. "Huh? Has the Dao Xuan Tianzun taken a liking to her?"

The Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun replied calmly, "Yes. Secure her freedom."

Zhu Piaoling pondered inwardly.

If the Dao Xuan Tianzun has taken an interest in her, then my own foolish daydreams are meaningless. Still... there is one small grievance I must voice.

With a dejected expression, he protested aloud, "Dao Xuan Tianzun, do you not strictly forbid human trafficking?"

Li Daoxuan explained, "Trafficking for personal gain is absolutely forbidden. However, if the purpose of the transaction is salvation, then it is permissible."

Only then did Zhu Piaoling truly understand. So that was the meaning behind it. Purchasing Chen Yuanyuan was akin to Tie Niaofei rescuing eighteen women from pirates. The key lay in the intent. The purpose had to be saving lives.

Once freed, they would not be taken into his household. Their liberty would simply be restored.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun was still the Dao Xuan Tianzun. In terms of moral conduct, he far surpassed a wastrel like himself.

This realization struck Zhu Piaoling deeply. Most women in the Pear Garden were unfortunate souls. When encountering a brothel, one should think only of liberating them all. It was no different from seeing women bound aboard a pirate ship. One should rescue them first without hesitation, and only afterward consider what came next.

Zhu Piaoling felt as if enlightenment had dawned upon him.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun's guidance is profound. I understand."

Since joining the Dao Xuan Tianzun's sect, he had never truly distinguished himself. Now that the Dao Xuan Tianzun had issued a direct instruction, this was a rare opportunity to accumulate merit. His blood stirred with excitement.

He sprang to his feet. "Where is the madam? Where is she?"

Moments later, the madam hurried over, her face wearing a practiced smile.

"My lord, how may this humble one serve you?"

Zhu Piaoling let out a sly laugh. "The girls of your Pear Garden are all delightful. I have taken a fancy to every one of them. I intend to buy them all."

Imitating Tie Niaofei's bold bearing, he added, "Name your price."

He had assumed such words would immediately elevate him to the status of an honored guest, with silver exchanged and the girls handed over without delay. Instead, the madam gasped, a strained smile appearing on her face.

"My lord, what are you saying? That cannot be done. These girls were raised by me from infancy. They are like daughters to me. How could I sell them?"

Zhu Piaoling snorted. "So you plan to play tricks with me? Do you think I cannot afford them?"

"It is not a matter of silver," the madam replied politely, though her tone subtly changed. "Our Pear Garden is a foremost establishment in Suzhou. The officials who frequent us are countless. Why, the Prefect himself is drinking upstairs on the second floor at this very moment."

Her voice grew heavier as she continued, "Here, even with boundless wealth, one cannot buy people at will. If you were to purchase all the girls favored by other esteemed guests, they would certainly object."

Zhu Piaoling fell silent.

The Golden Thread Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed inwardly.

Heh. She is putting on airs now.

Though unspoken, the message was clear. Wealth alone held no authority here. The Pear Garden was shielded by powerful officials. These women were, in effect, possessions of the local gentry. Without sufficient status and influence, money meant nothing.

Zhu Piaoling's mood darkened.

Within the Dao Xuan Tianzun's domain, he was usually easygoing and cheerful. Yet at his core, he was the heir of the Prince of Qin, ruler of the most powerful princely fief in the realm. When had anyone dared treat him with such disregard?

He merely wished to purchase a few courtesans, yet this woman dared posture before him, even implying that these girls belonged to officials and could not be sold to him. A reckless thought surfaced. What if he simply seized them by force?

His anger cooled quickly.

No. I cannot cause trouble. My current identity makes that impossible. If things spiral out of control, it could cost me my life.

"So you believe my status is insufficient?" Zhu Piaoling rose abruptly. "Very well. I will not waste words with you. Later, you will see what I am capable of."

The madam remained composed. "My lord, what are you saying? I would never belittle you. No matter who enters the Pear Garden, I extend courtesy and hospitality. I would never slight a guest based on status."

"Let us go," Zhu Piaoling said coldly, turning toward the exit.

His guards followed at once.

Shi Lang exclaimed anxiously, "Wait. My letter of introduction is not finished yet."

He hurriedly grabbed the letter from the table. It lacked only a final signature. Clutching it, he chased after them.

The madam watched their retreating backs and sneered.

"A wandering adventurer, is that it? With a bit of silver, he dares act arrogantly in my Pear Garden, even boasting he will buy all my girls. Such empty bravado. Still, these wandering types can become troublesome if they cause a scene. I should prepare."

She quickly went upstairs to the private room where the Suzhou Prefect was drinking. The guards at the door stopped her.

"What is it?" one demanded.

The madam explained hurriedly, "Just now, a wandering adventurer entered the Pear Garden. It seemed he intended to cause trouble."

The guard went inside to report. Soon after, he emerged with a disdainful snort.

"Our master says there is no need for concern. If any ignorant ruffian dares stir up trouble here, immediately send word to the Prefect's yamen. Bailiffs will be dispatched to seize him and administer fifty heavy blows."

The madam was overjoyed.

"Many thanks to the Prefect for his protection."

Zhu Piaoling stormed out of the Pear Garden and turned into a side street, fury boiling within him. Shi Lang followed behind, wanting to ask him to sign the letter of introduction. However, sensing Zhu Piaoling's foul mood, he dared not speak and merely kept pace.

After a long walk, Shi Lang noticed a stone table with four stone stools beneath a tree. Zhu Piaoling walked over, sat down, and suddenly shouted, "Writing implements."

A guard hurried forward and presented them.

Zhu Piaoling took the letter of introduction from Shi Lang, swiftly wrote his name, Zhu Piaoling, and handed it back.

"Go to Anqing at once," he instructed.