

Great Ming 971

Chapter 971: No Arrangement

Ships from Gao Family Village arrived in Anqing Prefecture one after another.

There was no way to hurry the process. Cai Xinzhi had to construct each river-sea vessel individually. After that came cannon installation, recruiting sailors, and training them. Only when all of that was finished could a ship begin its long voyage. Everything had to be done step by step.

Still, each arriving vessel strengthened Shi Kefa's hand.

The Gao Family Village Militia detachment stationed in Anqing steadily grew in combat power. At first they could only scatter the Huangmei river pirates. Later, they became capable of sealing off the river itself, sweeping for pirates as though casting a giant fishing net.

After a major naval battle at the Jiujiang Estuary, the main force of the Huangmei river pirates was wiped out. The survivors fled into Poyang Lake and scattered among its countless inlets. Once broken apart like that, they barely posed a threat, not even to ordinary villagers.

On land, the army was expanding as well.

With the continuous arrival of militia troops, Shi Kefa assembled a formidable force. Several hundred Gao Family Village Militia soldiers served as the backbone, supported by Anqing garrison troops and local militias. This combined army repeatedly defeated the Sweeping King and the Peaceful King when they attacked from land. In the final decisive battle, they destroyed the Heavenly Stockade the bandit army had built inside Anqing Prefecture.

The Sweeping King and the Peaceful King were both driven out of Anqing entirely.

"All aboard, ladies. We are heading to Shaanxi."

The Black Pearl was preparing to depart again. This time, it would carry Chen Yuanyuan and the other courtesans back to Shaanxi. Zhu Piaoling, who had also exhausted his funds, would be returning with them.

More than a hundred women boarded the ship in orderly lines.

Meanwhile, the ten women who had chosen to remain behind and manage the Anqing Yingjiang Sericulture Cooperative stood at the dock to see them off.

Xue'er waved toward Chen Yuanyuan. "Take care. Write to me if you ever get the chance."

"I will," Chen Yuanyuan replied.

Although they said it aloud, both understood the truth in their hearts. They would likely never meet again in this lifetime.

Strangely, neither of them felt afraid anymore.

Xue'er had truly regained her status as a civilian. No so called monsters had harmed her.

In fact, Shi Kefa relied heavily on her. When establishing the Sericulture Cooperative, he granted her significant authority and placed great value on her opinions.

Shi Kefa, as Right Vice Censor in Chief, already carried an overwhelming workload. Grain storage, military farms, military affairs, courier networks, water conservancy, and maintaining public order all demanded his attention.

Originally, these matters had fallen under Wang Gongbi, the Right Provincial Administration Commissioner. However, Wang Gongbi's distribution of eight thousand shi of grain to commoners had been reported to the Emperor. A few days earlier, an imperial decree arrived, demoting Wang Gongbi and transferring him to Nanjing.

The burden of responsibility therefore landed entirely on Shi Kefa.

There was no way he could spare time to personally manage a sericulture cooperative. Naturally, he entrusted the matter to Xue'er.

Now restored to civilian life, trusted with genuine responsibility, and no longer living in fear of being devoured or forcibly married off, Xue'er became more confident each day. She handled affairs decisively and without hesitation. The timid woman who once bowed and smiled submissively at powerful patrons in the Pear Garden seemed like a different person altogether.

Wearing plain but dignified clothing, her face bright with confidence, she waved vigorously toward the Black Pearl. "Sisters, we must find a way to meet again."

The Black Pearl slowly departed.

It first sailed from the Yangtze River into the open sea, then followed the coastline into the Huai River. From there, it carefully traveled upstream and eventually returned toward Xiaolangdi.

Fortunately, these women were not fragile flowers raised in comfort. Many had endured hardship and long journeys before. Some had been trafficked hundreds or even thousands of li from their homes to Suzhou.

They were capable of enduring such travel.

The sailors aboard also treated them with courtesy and respect, which eased their hearts and drove away lingering fear.

Several days later, Zhu Piaoling pointed toward the forward left.

"Xiaolangdi is almost here, ladies. This is one of our bases, but we will not disembark here. We still need to travel a little farther upstream."

Before he finished speaking, a small boat approached from the riverbank.

A camera was mounted aboard it. Zhou Daya, a war correspondent and disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun, stood waving energetically at Zhu Piaoling.

"Heroic Brother," she called, "may this humble one come aboard for an interview?"

The moment she spoke, something felt strangely familiar.

A ripple of surprise spread among the women.

"Her manner of speech sounds very similar to ours."

Under their curious stares, Zhou Daya and her companions boarded the Black Pearl.

Her camera, nearly two meters wide, was hauled aboard with ropes by several sailors working together. It took considerable effort.

Once on deck, Zhou Daya set up the camera and turned it on. Then she smiled at Zhu Piaoling.

"Heroic Brother, your trip to Nanjing has produced quite a harvest. You have brought back so many ladies. Are these..."

"These are courtesans I redeemed from Suzhou and Nanjing," Zhu Piaoling said with a laugh.

Zhou Daya smiled. "Then they are just like this humble one."

At those words, the nearby women exchanged glances.

Just as they suspected. Her way of speaking felt familiar because she had also once been a redeemed courtesan.

Their attitudes toward her subtly changed.

Perhaps Zhou Daya represented the path that lay ahead for them.

Among them, Chen Yuanyuan watched especially closely. She wanted to know what kind of life awaited women who had been "bought" by these so called monsters.

Zhou Daya turned toward the group with a warm smile. "Sisters, by coming here, you have truly escaped a living hell. Your future lives will be good."

Gathering her courage, Chen Yuanyuan asked, "Elder Sister, we have just arrived from Jiangnan and know nothing about the customs here. How will our futures be arranged?"

"Arranged?" Zhou Daya gave a small laugh. "You will arrange them yourselves."

"Ourselves?" Chen Yuanyuan gasped.

Zhou Daya nodded. "No one will force you to do anything. You are free to choose the life you wish to live. However, you cannot return to your old profession. In Dao Xuan Tianzun's territory, brothels are illegal. Anyone discovered operating one will be punished."

The women collectively inhaled sharply.

In this place, the brothel trade was forbidden.

Chen Yuanyuan lowered her head slightly. "Elder Sister, may this humble one ask another question? If no one supervises us after arrival, must we earn our own food, clothing, and daily necessities?"

Zhou Daya smiled gently. "When you first arrive and have not yet found work, you will receive relief supplies and temporary housing. Once you find employment, you will not even care about those things anymore."

The women looked at one another, astonishment filling their eyes.

Chapter 972: The Giant Green Screen

Zhou Daya let out a soft chuckle. "Since I have already walked this road, let me share a bit of experience. When my mentor first took me in, he said something that stayed with me."

She folded her hands behind her back and looked at the young women one by one.

"He said that women like us, who can read and calculate, should not waste our abilities weaving cotton in factories. Especially in times like these. Illiteracy is everywhere. Most people cannot read a contract, much less keep accounts. Those of us who have learned characters are already considered rare."

The young women exchanged stunned glances.

That did not sound right at all.

Everywhere they had gone in the past, they had been treated as stained goods. Former courtesans, nothing more. Yet in Zhou Daya's words, or rather in her mentor's words, they were being described as valuable talents. As people with knowledge.

It felt unreal.

A faint warmth quietly spread through their chests.

Zhou Daya smiled at their reactions. "The professions I would recommend include management, accounting, and secretarial work in factories. You could also become performers at the Stars Performing Arts Agency, illustrators or designers for bookstores, or art teachers at schools."

She tapped her own chest lightly.

"And there is also my line of work. Journalism."

The girls blinked.

"Working in news is excellent. Dao Xuan Tianzun himself will teach you. Once you finish studying, you will be considered his direct disciples. People everywhere will show you respect."

She paused, then added with a casual shrug, "Although it can be dangerous. Especially if you become a war correspondent. You might be sent to the front lines at any time."

Several of the girls inhaled sharply.

Some had just been about to ask what journalism meant, but the moment they heard the words "front lines," they immediately swallowed the question.

Zhou Daya laughed softly. "Not everyone has to become a war correspondent. You could stay behind the lines and work as a news anchor. That is also a fine job."

She gestured as she spoke, clearly enjoying herself.

"Our mentor has also been planning new science and education programs lately. Things like the 'Shi Kefa Legal Enlightenment Series.' We will also teach cooking, dancing, and practical skills through the Immortal Treasure Mirrors."

The young women listened with blank expressions. Most of it sailed straight over their heads.

Zhou Daya could tell. She did not mind. Understanding would come later once they reached Gao Family Village. There was no need to rush.

Originally, she had boarded the ship to interview Zhu Piaoling about his travels. But after speaking with these girls, she quietly turned off her camera.

If she placed herself in their shoes, she knew she would hate having her past broadcast to the world. These girls would feel the same.

News was not meant to reopen old wounds.

So instead, she simply took on the role of guide and led them personally toward Gao Family Village.

Puzhou City, Wuxing Lake

Lao Nanfeng, Cai Lin, Chen Qianhu, a full troupe of actors, and several Western performers recruited through the church gathered around an editing tablet. They were watching fragments of the newly filmed Battle of Liaoluowan.

On the screen, Lao Nanfeng, playing the protagonist, stood opposite Cai Lin, who portrayed the female lead.

The scene was meant to show them talking on the deck of a ship with the vast ocean behind them. Unfortunately, filming on the open sea was impossible. Following Dao Xuan Tianzun's instructions, they had recorded everything in front of a huge sheet of green cloth.

Watching themselves perform emotional dialogue while standing before a flat green wall felt deeply awkward.

Chen Qianhu scratched his head. "Brother Nanfeng, can this really be used? It looks ridiculous."

Lao Nanfeng spread his hands helplessly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun told us to film it like this. I have no idea why. Let us check the next clip and see how it looks."

He switched the footage.

This scene showed Liu Xiang, the pirate leader, disguised as a comprador for the Dutch, speaking with Admiral Putmans of the Dutch fleet.

Naturally, Chen Qianhu was playing Liu Xiang. The admiral was portrayed by a rather handsome Western adventurer. To be fair, most people of the Heavenly Dynasty struggled to tell Western appearances apart. Blond hair and blue eyes were already enough to blur everyone together.

The adventurer leaned forward, studying the tablet with interest. He pointed at the screen and spoke in clumsy Mandarin.

"I believe I acted quite well. I sailed to the Great Ming aboard a large ship before, so I understand how one behaves while speaking on a deck. Still, this green background feels strange. I cannot imagine how such a film will be presented."

Before anyone could respond, the embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on Lao Nanfeng's chest suddenly spoke.

"Oh? You have already filmed several segments?"

The tablet abruptly lifted into the air. It floated upward, streaked toward the sky, and vanished into the clouds.

The entire group stared upward, frozen in place.

Several minutes passed in silence before the embroidered voice returned with a satisfied chuckle.

"Excellent work. You followed my instructions well. Since you filmed against a green background, leave the rest to me."

Lao Nanfeng still looked confused. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... how exactly will you process it?"

"That is none of your concern. You will see the results in a few days. Tell me, have you finished only dialogue scenes? What about the large naval battles?"

Lao Nanfeng straightened immediately. "Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun, we are prepared to film the battle scenes. The fleet is already arranged on Wuxing Lake. However..."

He hesitated.

"The lake is enormous. We cannot cover the entire background with green cloth. The cameras will capture the distant shoreline, farmland, and hills."

"That is simple," Dao Xuan Tianzun replied casually. "I have already prepared something."

As his voice faded, the sky darkened.

Something enormous descended from the clouds.

A colossal green screen dropped down and suspended itself over the center of Wuxing Lake. It stretched across the horizon like a massive curtain standing between heaven and earth.

Behind the assembled fleet, every trace of shoreline vanished. Only endless green remained.

The local actors erupted into cheers. They were excited but not entirely shocked. By now, they had grown somewhat used to Dao Xuan Tianzun's miracles.

The Western performers, however, stared with open mouths, completely overwhelmed by the divine spectacle.

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing. "So this is the trick! Dao Xuan Tianzun is truly incredible! With this, the entire lake becomes our stage."

He clapped loudly.

"All actors to your positions! Why are you extras still staring like stunned chickens? Prepare to start filming!"

He kicked Chen Qianhu squarely on the backside.

"Liu Xiang, hurry and bring your pirate crew. It is time for you to die properly!"

Chen Qianhu jumped forward with a yelp. "I am not Liu Xiang! Stop calling me Liu Xiang!"

Lao Nanfeng waved dismissively. "Less whining. Get ready for the naval battle."

At his command, the entire cast sprang into action.

Soon, the reenactment of the Battle of Liaoluowan exploded into life.

Unloaded cannons thundered. Flintlock muskets snapped and cracked without bullets, filling the air with sharp bursts of noise.

Extras rushed across decks, clashing blades and sabers in chaotic melees.

The model Dutch tall ships provided by Li Daoxuan surged across Wuxing Lake, plowing through formations of smaller Ming vessels that swarmed around them like ants attacking a towering beast.

Lao Nanfeng, playing the hero, raised a massive saber and charged across the deck after Chen Qianhu.

"Traitor Liu Xiang, prepare to die!"

Chen Qianhu twisted his lips into a mocking grin.

"You are nothing but a fisherman. You are not even worthy of my blade."

The two men launched into a furious duel, both using genuine martial skill. Their movements were fast, precise, and dangerous, creating an action sequence that felt thrillingly authentic. Compared to the soft, stylized fighting performed by pampered young idols, this was raw and explosive.

Watching from above, Li Daoxuan was thoroughly entertained.

Chapter 973: What Belongs to Us Must Be Learned

Night had already deepened.

Li Daoxuan opened QQ and began sending files one after another to Qianyan Queen M.

"Here, brother," he typed. "Old Nanfeng just finished filming the raw footage for the new short series. The rest depends on your special effects magic."

Qianyan Queen M opened the videos and burst into laughter.

"You even prepared the green screen for me? That makes things ridiculously easy."

One click.

The background vanished.

Another click.

Ocean scenery replaced it.

Done.

The process was so effortless that he almost felt embarrassed calling it special effects. Without much thought, he sent the finished clip back to Li Daoxuan.

"Take a look."

Li Daoxuan glanced at it and chuckled.

"Make it look more real. Yours looks too fake. If the box office flops, your commission disappears along with it."

Qianyan Queen M laughed again.

"Relax. That was just the comedy version. I will produce a proper realistic one for you. The high quality version will take a little longer though."

"Fine. Take your time. Quality comes first."

Li Daoxuan closed QQ. He then uploaded the quickly produced one click background removal version into his tablet before lowering it into the diorama world.

The embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

"Old Nanfeng, I will show you the effect after green screen processing. Once you see it, you will better understand how to shoot future scenes."

The tablet began playing the freshly edited footage.

To modern viewers, the effects looked crude and unfinished. To Old Nanfeng and the others, it was nothing short of miraculous.

"Our green cloth is gone," someone shouted. "It really turned into the ocean!"

Putmans clutched his head dramatically.

"My God. If I saw this without knowing, I would swear we were truly sailing the open sea."

Others quickly joined in.

"These celestial techniques are unbelievable."

"If scenes can be changed like this, could you not turn any place into anywhere you desire?"

"Incredible."

Several days later.

A sixty meter river sea vessel slowly entered Anqing Port.

The cargo ship carried almost nothing. Only a single Divine Mirror rested within its hold.

After docking, the sailors aimed the tablet toward an empty clearing near the pier before lowering anchor. One sailor leaned out of the ship and shouted toward a patrolling dock guard.

"Go inform everyone immediately. By decree of Dao Xuan Tianzun, all of our people must come study this film."

Orders from Dao Xuan Tianzun were never taken lightly.

The dock guard sprinted off without hesitation. Before long, both naval and ground troops stationed in Anqing gathered at the harbor. Shi Kefa arrived as well, bringing newly recruited militia forces with him.

The order specified the phrase "our people." The interpretation quickly grew broad.

Xue'er and the ten women managing the sericulture cooperative were summoned.

Even the prisoners undergoing labor reform were included. After all, they were still considered "our own labor reform prisoners." The forty three captured pirates were dragged along as well.

A wide open space was cleared on the dock. Hundreds of people sat in a large fan shaped formation facing the massive ship.

Xue'er whispered with a puzzled expression, "What exactly are we supposed to learn?"

Shi Lang stared at the ship with equal confusion.

"I do not understand either. What is that large black square? Why place such a thing on the vessel?"

Shi Kefa glanced at them and answered calmly.

"That object is called a Divine Mirror. It can replay events that have already happened. It can also show events that have yet to occur."

Both Xue'er and Shi Lang jumped in shock.

"Truly?"

Shi Kefa snorted lightly.

"Why would this official deceive you? Stay quiet and watch carefully. If Dao Xuan Tianzun commands us to learn, then there must be knowledge worth learning."

At that moment, the screen suddenly lit up.

The villagers from Gao Family Village were already accustomed to such scenes. Xue'er and Shi Lang, however, nearly leapt to their feet in fright.

The film began without text or narration.

The visuals came first.

A small fishing village appeared along the coastline. Waves rolled gently onto the shore. A young boy crouched near the water, gathering shells and crabs.

Then a three masted Western sailing ship appeared on the horizon.

Shi Lang gasped loudly.

"A Western pirate ship."

The vessel surged toward shore. Western pirates swarmed off the decks, muskets in one hand, sabers in the other, charging straight into the helpless village.

The boy fled in panic.

Behind him, flames erupted. Screams filled the air. Pirates butchered villagers without mercy. Men, women, elderly, children, none were spared.

A Western officer stood proudly at the bow of the ship and spoke in awkward Chinese.

"This is a good place to build a city. We will construct a fortress here and claim this island."

The scene shifted.

Months passed in moments. Workers constructed stone walls and defensive towers.

The scene shifted again.

The fortress stood completed in rough form.

Another shift.

Western soldiers slaughtered the surrounding inhabitants of Treasure Island.

The film changed once more.

Inside the residence of Zheng Zhilong, Ming naval guerrilla general, a soldier reported grimly.

"General, the red haired barbarians have built a fortress on Yizhou Island. They are preparing to strike the mainland."

Zheng Zhilong slammed his palm onto the table, the crack echoing through the hall.

"Do they believe the Great Ming lacks men? Issue orders. The entire fleet prepares for war."

Only then did a massive title slowly emerge across the screen.

The Bloody Battle of Liaoluo Bay

Many soldiers present had never heard of the battle.

Shi Lang suddenly shot to his feet, pointing wildly at the screen.

"The Battle of Liaoluo Bay. This Divine Mirror is showing that battle. I have only heard of it in stories. I never imagined I would witness it with my own eyes."

A cluster of sailors turned and shouted at him.

"Stop yelling during the film. You are blocking the dialogue."

Shi Lang froze, embarrassed.

"Ah. Forgive me."

He quickly sat down.

The main feature continued.

The Dutch warships appeared massive and towering. Compared to them, Ming vessels seemed fragile and poorly armed. In the opening engagements, the Ming navy suffered repeated losses, retreating step by painful step.

When the final decisive battle began, the Dutch deployed eleven massive three masted warships.

Zheng Zhilong assembled over one hundred fifty warships in response. Among them were fifty specialized gunboats, supported by tens of thousands of sailors and soldiers.

Despite overwhelming numbers, the Ming fleet struggled fiercely.

Zheng Zhilong could only gather his strongest ships into a concentrated strike formation. He ordered the fifty gunboats to unleash relentless Western style cannon bombardments against the Dutch fleet.

The battle dragged on with brutal intensity.

Only after heavy casualties and desperate maneuvering did victory finally come.

Even then, the film refused to end triumphantly.

The protagonist failed to kill the Western officer who had slaughtered his village. He could only stand on his ship as enemy vessels escaped across the sea.

Clenching both fists, he screamed toward the distant horizon.

"Western bandits, remember this day. One day I will sail westward and avenge my parents' blood."

The film ended.

Silence spread across the dock.

No one spoke for a long time.

Chapter 974: The Objectives of the First Phase

The dock remained unusually quiet after the film ended.

No one spoke for a while. The sailors were still digesting the battle they had just witnessed. The Westerners' strength and brutality lingered in their minds like the aftertaste of strong liquor.

Finally, one sailor nudged Shi Lang with his elbow.

"Young Shi, you're from Fujian, right? Tell us honestly. Are Western ships really that enormous? They looked almost as big as the Wanli Sunshine."

Shi Lang nodded without hesitation.

"They really are that large. I saw them with my own eyes when I used to play along the coast."

The surrounding sailors immediately leaned closer.

"Each one carries more than a dozen cannons," Shi Lang continued. "Slightly fewer than the Wanli Sunshine, but still terrifying."

"They pack soldiers tightly inside. The crews fight from those towering upper decks."

"And their seamanship," he added, shaking his head, "is far ahead of ours."

The sailors erupted into noisy discussion.

Before long, Shi Lang found himself surrounded. Everyone bombarded him with questions from every direction. He clearly enjoyed the attention. After all, the first time Li Daoxuan and Zhu Piaoling noticed him had been when he entertained young noblemen in a brothel with sea stories. Now he had an even larger audience, and his enthusiasm burned brighter than ever.

He spoke endlessly about Western pirates, their ships, their tactics, their navigation skills.

Gradually, the sailors realized something unsettling. The film had not exaggerated anything. If anything, it might have softened reality.

One sailor sighed heavily.

"What should we do?"

Another scratched his head.

"Our navigation skills are far behind theirs."

"If we cannot match their navigation, we will always be stuck defending our own shores. They can cross thousands of miles to reach us, but we cannot even sail to their homeland."

"That means we are trapped in a losing position," someone muttered.

The discussion grew heated.

At that moment, the water warfare Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly appeared before the giant screen.

The credits still rolled behind him. Names such as Lao Nanfeng, Chen Qianhu, Cai Lin, and Zheng Dazhuang scrolled across the tablet, but no one paid attention anymore.

Li Daoxuan stood before the glowing light, his figure reduced to a dark silhouette.

He cleared his throat and spoke into the tablet's microphone.

"Listen carefully, all of you."

The tablet amplified his voice so clearly that even those standing at the farthest edge of the crowd heard every word.

The dock instantly fell silent. Every sailor straightened their posture.

Li Daoxuan spoke in a firm, ringing tone.

"From this moment forward, our forces will begin the assault on Zhoushan."

He paused briefly before continuing.

"The objective of Phase One is to wipe out every pirate occupying that island."

The sailors erupted.

"Oorah!"

Li Daoxuan raised his voice again.

"The objective of Phase Two is to establish Zhoushan as our forward base and secure control of the entire southeastern coastline."

"Oorah!"

His tone grew even sharper.

"The objective of Phase Three is to advance into Southeast Asia and destroy the Westerners' East India Company."

The cheers became thunderous.

"Oorah! Oorah! Oorah!"

Li Daoxuan lifted his hand.

"The objective of Phase Four is to cross the vast oceans and strike directly at the Western nations themselves."

The sailors shouted until their voices grew hoarse.

"Strike back! Strike back!"

Shi Lang felt his blood boil. Without thinking, he joined the roar.

"Strike back!"

Li Daoxuan swept his gaze across the crowd.

"What are you waiting for? Move!"

The sailors exploded into motion. Orders flew across the dock. Men sprinted toward their assigned vessels.

Meanwhile, the ground troops could only watch with complicated expressions. Some waved farewell. Others stood stiffly, their envy barely concealed.

At the docks of Anqing Prefecture, a massive fleet gathered.

With the Huangmei River pirates largely suppressed, the Gao Family Village navy finally freed its strength to carry out Dao Xuan Tianzun's Phase One objective.

The Wanli Sunshine naturally served as the flagship.

Ten additional warships, each roughly sixty meters long, lined up beside it.

Behind them floated another thirty vessels ranging from twenty to fifty meters in length.

All were river sea hybrid ships.

These ships were suitable for coastal travel but far from ideal for deep ocean voyages. True ocean going vessels required deep hull drafts to withstand violent storms and towering waves.

There was another problem.

Most sailors aboard these ships were technically river sailors rather than true ocean sailors. Their experience remained limited to coastlines. Sending them directly into deep ocean waters would likely end in disaster.

Everyone understood the truth.

Their current strength could only support the first two phases. Beginning with Phase Three, they would need to develop true ocean navigation skills.

The forty three pirates undergoing labor reform were distributed among the fleet.

After Li Daoxuan frightened them repeatedly using the talking portrait method, their attitude toward re education improved dramatically. When a portrait of what might be either an immortal or a demon constantly threatened to devour you, learning obedience became surprisingly easy.

These forty three pirates effectively served as guides.

Without them, the navy would panic the moment they sailed too far from shore. With them, an assault on Zhoushan became possible.

Li Daoxuan stood at the bow of the Wanli Sunshine and turned toward Tie Niaofei.

"You will not participate in this expedition. You are a land merchant, and you still suffer from seasickness. Return to Shanxi. The border army still requires your logistical coordination."

Tie Niaofei bowed respectfully with clasped fists before stepping off the ship.

Li Daoxuan then looked toward Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng quickly spoke.

"I lack experience in deep sea navigation, but at present I am the only one capable of commanding this fleet."

Li Daoxuan nodded and then glanced toward Shi Lang, who stood nearby.

Shi Lang instantly snapped into a salute. He already understood that the man before him held true authority. The embroidered image worn by everyone confirmed it.

"What are your orders for me, sir?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly.

"You are young, but you grew up by the sea and possess valuable navigation knowledge. Do your best to assist Instructor Jiang."

Shi Lang nearly burst with excitement.

Is this not basically making me vice admiral, he thought wildly.

Li Daoxuan sighed quietly to himself.

Such a shortage of talent. When will I finally manage to bring Zheng Sen over? And if Zheng Sen arrives... will he and Shi Lang end up clashing?

Li Daoxuan turned toward one of the labor reform pirates standing nearby.

The man stared at him with miserable fear. His entire body trembled. Seeing the living figure from the portrait standing before him nearly shattered his nerves.

Li Daoxuan smiled at him.

The strange, unnatural feeling created by the smile only made the pirate more terrified.

"G Great Immortal... what command do you give?"

Li Daoxuan spoke in a cold tone.

"You will guide us to Zhoushan. If you attempt any tricks, I will personally devour you piece by piece."

The pirate screamed in panic.

"I would never dare. Never. This humble one truly wishes to reform and become a proper human again. Please grant me this chance, Great Immortal."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Good. Set sail."

The combined fleet of Gao Family Village slowly departed Anqing and headed toward Zhoushan.

Chapter 975: Setting Sail

A fleet of forty one ships moved together down the Yangtze River, their destination the open sea.

Among them sailed ten giant vessels, each stretching nearly sixty meters long. When those enormous hulls lined up across the river, the sight alone made the waterway feel too narrow to hold them.

River barges and fishing boats scattered in a hurry, scrambling toward the banks to clear the path. Yet no one panicked.

Every ship in the fleet flew the multi colored banners of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Along this stretch of river, those banners carried a reputation as solid as iron. Ships under those colors hunted pirates relentlessly, helped common folk whenever disaster struck, and never bullied civilians or flaunted power without reason. Over time, the banners had become a strange symbol of reassurance. When villagers saw them, they relaxed instead of running.

As for the official Ming naval patrols, their reaction was even simpler.

Once they spotted the banners, they immediately reached the same quiet conclusion.

Imperial merchants. Secret decree. Best not to ask questions.

No officer wanted to be the fool who poked his nose into something connected to the throne. Maintaining distance and pretending ignorance felt far safer for one's career and lifespan.

The fleet continued forward until it reached the Yangtze estuary near Chongming Island.

From the side, a Cangshan patrol vessel approached. Standing at its bow was Cui Weihua, the Military Preparations Commissioner overseeing Suzhou and Songjiang.

He cupped his hands and called across the water.

"May I ask if Captain Shi is aboard?"

Jiang Cheng leaned over the railing and returned the salute.

"Commander Cui, I hope you are well. Lord Shi is currently stationed in Anqing. He is not with this fleet."

Cui Weihua nodded slowly, though his eyes remained fixed on the enormous formation stretching across the water.

As the highest ranking naval officer in the region, he commanded the largest fleet in the surrounding waters. Yet when he compared his own forces to the armada before him, the difference made him feel like a county militia captain staring at the Imperial Guards.

He let out a long breath.

"When your ships passed Chongming Island one by one, I did not think much of it. But seeing them assembled together like this..." He shook his head. "This is no ordinary force. Judging from such a deployment, you do not intend to return to the Yangtze anytime soon, do you?"

Listening nearby, Li Daoxuan felt slightly amused.

Sharp fellow. He pieced it together from formation alone.

Jiang Cheng nodded calmly.

"You are correct. We are carrying out a confidential mission under imperial decree. If our ships return to the Yangtze in the future, they will do so individually. You will not see them assembled like this again."

Cui Weihua's face revealed open disappointment.

"Why would His Majesty not allow an official like me to participate? I also wish to earn merit for the empire."

Jiang Cheng laughed lightly.

"Commander Cui, the position you hold is already critical to the realm. Opportunities for merit will not be lacking in the future."

That was not polite comfort. It was simple truth.

Li Daoxuan had already selected Zhoushan as a dedicated naval base. A base of that scale could not exist beside civilian ports. Meanwhile, the territory under Cui Weihua's jurisdiction included the region that would one day become Shanghai.

The future importance of Shanghai hardly needed explanation. Trade, shipbuilding, logistics, taxation. Every artery of maritime power would eventually run through it. Cui Weihua's aging Ming era fleet might look outdated in battle, but for commerce and transport, it still had tremendous value.

The two sides exchanged final courtesies. Then the fleet adjusted formation and sailed southeast.

Cui Weihua stood at the bow of his patrol boat, watching the ships shrink into the horizon. After several moments, he lifted his gaze toward the sky, thinking carefully.

Then realization struck him.

"Southeast?" he muttered aloud. "Such a massive fleet heading southeast... They are either hunting pirates or confronting Westerners. What has His Majesty seen or obtained that he suddenly shows such resolve?"

After leaving the Yangtze estuary, the fleet followed the coastline for a short distance.

Ahead, the mainland curved into a sharp, protruding point.

This was Nanhui Mouth, a location that would become a famous tourist site in the distant future of Shanghai.

At present, however, there was nothing scenic about it.

The coastline held only a crumbling military outpost. Years earlier, during waves of Japanese pirate invasions, the imperial court had constructed a fortress here and stationed troops to guard the waters. Time, war, and neglect had turned the installation into a half collapsed skeleton of stone and timber.

Several thin, hollow cheeked garrison soldiers stood atop the broken structure. They stared at the massive fleet in stunned silence, as if watching sea monsters crawl out of legend.

At the front of the fleet, the labor reform pirate who served as their guide spoke up.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Instructor Jiang, we cannot follow the coastline any further. From here we must head southeast into open water, straight toward Shengsi Island, north of the Zhoushan archipelago. Pirates are stationed there. It would be best to strike from the outer perimeter first."

None of the sailors from Gao Family Village had ever sailed true ocean waters. Jiang Cheng answered with rare humility.

"How do we navigate once we leave the coast? The sea ahead has no landmarks at all. If we lose sight of land, how do we know where we are?"

The pirate scratched his chin before replying.

"The sun, the monsoon winds, and ocean currents can all be used. The sun is the most reliable reference. But sailors who spend years navigating by staring into sunlight usually pay a price."

He tapped the patch covering his own eye.

"Nine out of ten captains lose one eye eventually."

Jiang Cheng stiffened.

"I have no desire to become half blind."

Li Daoxuan, listening nearby, could not help chuckling quietly.

He thought it through. Sextants had not yet been invented in this era. Even European sailors of the time could only determine latitude using the sun. Longitude remained largely guesswork.

Because of that limitation, ships traveling across oceans often sailed along shared latitude lines. Pirates took advantage of this habit. They did not need to search the endless sea. They simply waited along common routes like hunters waiting beside watering holes.

Li Daoxuan withdrew his awareness from the miniature world, stepped outside the diorama box, and searched modern historical data about the compass, sextant, and marine chronometer. After compiling the information into a text titled *Comprehensive Guide to Navigation Artifacts of the Age of Sail*, he casually dropped the manual beside Gao Family Village's research institute.

When he returned his gaze to the world inside the box, he saw the pirate guide squinting toward the sun, then adjusting direction, then squinting again, carefully steering the fleet deeper into open sea.

The direct distance from Nanhui Mouth to Shengsi Island was less than fifty kilometers.

For seasoned pirates, such a journey barely qualified as a trip.

For Gao Family Village's sailors, it felt like stepping off the edge of the world.

Soon, land vanished in every direction. Water stretched endlessly ahead, behind, and to both sides. The familiar comfort of coastlines disappeared entirely.

Nervous murmurs spread across the ships.

"Where are we now?"

"How long until we arrive?"

"Heavens above... where exactly are we sailing?"

The crew grew increasingly unsettled.

A heavy swell rolled beneath the flagship Wanli Sunshine. The vessel pitched violently as it climbed and dropped with the waves. Compared to the Yellow River or the Yangtze, the ocean moved with frightening, unpredictable power. Many sailors clung to ropes and railings with white knuckles.

Observing their pale faces, the labor reform pirate leaned toward Jiang Cheng and spoke in a low voice.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, Instructor Jiang, the entire crew looks seasick and frightened. Perhaps it would be wiser to recruit sailors raised along the coast."

Li Daoxuan only smiled and said nothing.

Jiang Cheng answered instead.

"No one is born knowing everything. They will learn through experience. We do not have time to begin from nothing and build a navy from scratch. If we wait that long, the opportunity will pass us by."

At that moment, Shi Lang stepped forward from the rear deck. The young man still carried the fierce excitement he had gained after studying the Battle of Liaoluowan. His eyes burned with determination.

"Exactly!"

His voice rang across the deck.

"We must act quickly and seize the moment. The longer we hesitate, the stronger the Western pirates become. It does not matter if our sailors are inexperienced. We will catch them. We will capture every pirate on Zhoushan Island. Not one will escape!"

Chapter 976: The Day We Became the Villains

The fleet's inexperienced sailors struggled badly once they entered open sea.

Mistakes piled on top of mistakes. Orders were misheard. Timing was off. More than once, entire teams moved half a beat too late or too early, causing minor chaos across the decks.

Yet after traveling more than twenty kilometers, the worst of the panic slowly began to settle.

The endless water no longer felt quite as terrifying. Sailors started to grow accustomed to steering without the comfort of shorelines or visible landmarks. The sea remained vast and unsettling, but it no longer felt like it was about to swallow them whole.

Some soldiers began gathering around the reformed pirates aboard their ships, listening carefully as they explained how to navigate using the sun, how monsoon winds shifted with the seasons, and how ocean currents could either guide or doom a vessel.

The sailors of Gao Family Village possessed one major advantage that pirates of this era could only envy.

Their ships ran on electric propulsion.

A single helmsman could manage steering. That was all. They did not need to master the complicated coordination required for sail handling, which was an art that often took years to learn and still ruined countless crews.

Time passed in uneasy steadiness.

Then suddenly, the lookout cried out from the mast.

"Island! I see an island! Hahaha! Finally, a landmark! Mother of Heaven, finally a landmark!"

The man sounded so relieved that he nearly sobbed with laughter. For sailors who had spent hours staring at featureless water, that sliver of land might as well have been paradise itself.

Cheers erupted across the fleet. Men slapped each other's backs. Some nearly collapsed from relief.

The guiding pirate, however, remained calm.

"That is Shengsi Island," he said quietly. "Once we see them, they will see us soon after. Prepare for battle."

Jiang Cheng raised his voice.

"Prepare for combat!"

The transformation was immediate.

Moments earlier, the sailors had looked like frightened recruits barely holding themselves together. Now their movements sharpened. Fear retreated behind discipline. Faces hardened. Men moved to their assigned positions with practiced efficiency.

Watching them, the reformed pirate realized his earlier judgment had been shallow.

They were inexperienced sailors, yes. That did not make them inexperienced fighters.

He cleared his throat and began explaining the situation.

"The pirates stationed on Shengsi Island, including my former associates, are nominally under Liu Xiang's command. In reality, they operate independently. Their strength is not impressive. Most of the time they simply prey on merchant ships near Nanhui Mouth."

He paused, then added with a knowing tone.

"They are clever. If they detect a strong opponent, they flee immediately. They never fight to the death."

Jiang Cheng nodded thoughtfully.

"So capturing them will be difficult."

"Exactly," the pirate replied. "The authorities have failed to eliminate them for that very reason. The waters around Shengsi Island are dangerous, full of hidden reefs. If they scatter and flee, pursuing them recklessly will only run our ships aground."

He hesitated before continuing.

"However, there is one method to prevent their escape."

Jiang Cheng raised an eyebrow.

"Let's hear it."

"Most pirate families live on the island. If we send troops ashore and capture their families, hold blades to their wives and children, they will have no choice but to surrender or fight. Unless they are willing to abandon their own blood."

Jiang Cheng spread his hands slowly and gave a faint, helpless smile.

"So today, we are the villains."

The pirate shrugged.

"Out here, there is no villain or hero. The sea has no laws. Strength decides everything. Justice only exists within the range of a cannon."

As they spoke, Shengsi Island grew closer.

The pirates stationed there had already noticed the approaching fleet. Several pirate ships hurriedly launched from shore, but none attempted to engage. They scattered in multiple directions, retreating quickly into distant waters.

Jiang Cheng knew pursuit would be reckless. In a maze of reefs and currents, unfamiliarity meant disaster.

It seemed there was no avoiding the pirate's strategy.

Very well.

Today, they would play the role of villains.

The fleet advanced to the waters just offshore.

Massive ships such as the Wanli Sunshine could not risk approaching too close to the beach, but the smaller vessels encountered no such problem. Boats lowered swiftly, slicing through the water toward shore.

Sailors leapt into the surf and rushed onto the sand.

Within a short time, two hundred armed men had landed.

Five reformed pirates led them forward, guiding them through hidden paths as they moved deeper into the pirate settlement with practiced stealth.

Far out at sea, the fleeing pirate ships watched the landing unfold.

Panic spread across their decks.

"They landed on the island!"

"Where did these ships even come from?"

"We thought they were passing through! We could have waited them out, but they actually landed. What do we do now?"

Another pirate shouted back.

"Calm down! Our families are hidden inside the caves. The forest outside hides the entrances. Outsiders will never find them."

"That's right. The women know how to hide."

The pirate families had long learned survival through hardship. They had fled government crackdowns before. The moment they saw their men retreating and unknown forces landing, the women gathered the elderly and children and retreated into hidden cave systems.

Stones were stacked across entrances. Branches and leaves covered every sign of passage.

Inside the caves, mothers pressed hands over their children's mouths, forcing them into silence as they waited in suffocating darkness.

Time dragged endlessly.

Then, at last, sounds echoed from outside. Stones shifted. Branches scraped aside.

A voice called out from the cave entrance.

"You can hide, but you cannot hide from me. I am one of your own kind. Come out and surrender. Resist, and you know what will follow."

The women refused to respond. They clutched crude weapons, bodies trembling.

Moments later, thick smoke began pouring into the cave.

The attackers had piled burning pine branches outside, forcing heavy smoke inward like hunters smoking animals from their dens.

There was no resisting it.

Coughing and choking, the women abandoned their weapons, gathered their children, and slowly stepped into the open.

The pirate world had never been kind. Many of them had already accepted their fate before emerging. Survival, no matter the cost, was their only thought.

Yet what they saw outside surprised them completely.

The soldiers waiting were not savage raiders or drunken brigands. Their clothing was orderly and uniform. Their formation was neat. Their discipline radiated quiet authority. Flintlock rifles rested in their hands, but their expressions showed restraint rather than cruelty.

One captain stepped forward and spoke clearly.

"As long as you cooperate, everyone here will remain safe. We are not bandits. Let me repeat, we are not bandits, and we do not kill civilians without cause. However, understand this. We are soldiers. If any of you resist or attempt to harm us, then you will see the military side of us without mercy."

The women exchanged uncertain glances. The words did not erase their fear, but they loosened it enough to allow movement.

They gathered the elderly and children and followed the soldiers toward the shoreline.

At the beach, they were arranged into a large square formation. Flintlock riflemen surrounded them from a distance, maintaining tight formation and strict vigilance.

Then, from the anchored fleet offshore, dozens of warships extended their cannon barrels outward.

Countless black muzzles slowly rotated until they pointed directly toward the gathered families.

The effect was immediate.

Cries erupted across the beach.

"No! Please don't!"

Children screamed. Mothers collapsed to their knees. Even hardened survivors trembled at the sight of that silent ring of cannons.

Among the militia soldiers standing guard, several quietly turned their faces aside, unable to watch without discomfort.

Aboard the Wanli Sunshine, Jiang Cheng lifted a massive loudspeaker and faced the distant pirate ships hiding on the horizon.

His voice thundered across the sea.

"Come forward and surrender. Every one of you. If you refuse, your wives and children will be obliterated by cannon fire!"

Chapter 977: None of This Is Easy

Dozens of ships loomed offshore. Hundreds of cannons stared silently toward the beach.

Lines of musketeers formed a tight ring around the gathered prisoners, firearms raised and steady, as if awaiting a single command to fire.

The pirate world had never been gentle. The women and children standing on the sand had no way of knowing who their captors truly were. To them, these soldiers were merely another group of sea raiders flying colorful banners. They had seen such men before, and mercy was rarely part of the story.

Terror spread through the crowd.

Crying rose into the air and carried across the shoreline, echoing against the cliffs and forests.

The pirate ships watching from a distance could not bear the sight for long.

Before long, one vessel broke formation and sailed cautiously toward the beach. As it approached shallow water, several men jumped into the surf and rushed forward, dropping to their knees the moment they reached land.

"Don't fire! Don't fire! We surrender! We surrender!"

Jiang Cheng rubbed his temple and muttered quietly, "If Commander Chen were handling this, it would look far more convincing. I am not exactly suited for this kind of performance."

One of the pirates undergoing Labor Reform immediately raised his hand.

"I can do it, sir. Let me handle it."

Jiang Cheng nodded. "Go ahead."

The man stepped forward with obvious enthusiasm. He stopped in front of the surrendering pirates and glanced around with deliberate arrogance before letting out a snort.

"You lot who surrendered first, not bad," he said. "Go into the crowd and bring out your wives, children, and elders."

The kneeling men nearly wept with relief. They scrambled into the surrounded group, quickly finding their families and dragging them aside, forcing them to kneel together in a separate cluster.

Once the cannons shifted away from them, their bodies visibly loosened. A faint sense of survival settled over them.

For those left behind, the cries only grew louder.

The reformed pirate threw back his head and laughed harshly.

"You see that? Anyone who returns and surrenders will spare their families. Anyone who refuses can watch from afar as the cannons tear their wives and children into pieces."

The words spread across the sea like poison.

"Ahhh! We surrender too!"

Two more pirate ships rushed toward the shore almost immediately. More men leapt out, sprinted through the surf, and fell to their knees. Once again, they rushed into the crowd, pulling their families aside.

Fear was contagious. Surrender spread even faster.

Within a short time, every pirate vessel had returned. The entire beach filled with kneeling figures. Pirates pressed their foreheads to the sand while their wives, children, and elders knelt beside them, trembling as they waited to learn whether they would live or die.

Handling surrendered enemies was something Gao Family Village had already grown experienced with.

Food was distributed first. Full stomachs made people calmer and less desperate.

After that, officials announced each pirate's crimes and declared their assigned Labor Reform sentences. The rules were explained carefully, including the forty percent reduction granted for voluntary surrender.

Young children, who had committed no wrongdoing, were granted household registration and restored civilian status. Because they were too young to live independently, they were permitted to remain with their parents during the Labor Reform period.

This system, which had once been used to stabilize displaced refugees, proved just as effective with pirates.

One by one, resistance drained away.

The elderly, the weak, the women, and the children were escorted onto ten of the massive ships and placed under supervised protection. The male pirates were ordered back onto their own vessels, where they were reassigned as pathfinders guiding the fleet through dangerous waters.

With these unwilling guides, navigating the surrounding archipelago became significantly easier.

Island after island fell in rapid succession.

Luhua Island. Huania Island. Anji Island. Shengshan Island. Huanglong Island. Beidingxing Island.

Every hiding place capable of sheltering pirates across the entire Shengsi Archipelago was swept clean. Those willing to surrender were absorbed into the fleet as navigational guides. Those who resisted until the end met a far simpler fate and sank beneath the waves.

Three days later, the Shengsi Archipelago was completely pacified.

Not a single pirate remained.

The fleet gathered again. The sailors who had once trembled at open sea now carried themselves with noticeable confidence. They were still inexperienced, but the worst of their fear had burned away through necessity.

It was time to move toward the Zhoushan Archipelago.

A dozen pathfinder pirate ships took the lead. Behind them, forty-one electric vessels from Gao Family Village followed in steady formation, sailing slowly toward their next objective.

Jiang Cheng stood at the railing, clearly pleased.

"I expected suppressing pirates to be extremely difficult," he said. "Instead, the Shengsi campaign went smoothly. The Zhoushan Archipelago should not be much harder."

Shi Lang's head popped up from behind him.

"Instructor Jiang," he said cautiously, "it will not be that simple."

Jiang Cheng frowned. "But we cleared the Shengsi Archipelago completely."

Shi Lang let out a quiet sigh.

"If it were truly that easy, the imperial court would never have abandoned so many offshore islands. My father told me stories when I was young. The court has launched campaigns like this countless times. Every time, they cleared the islands of pirates just as thoroughly as we did."

Jiang Cheng felt the familiar sensation that a second half of the story was about to fall on him.

Shi Lang continued, "It never lasted. New pirates always appeared. Some came from within the empire, some were Westerners, some were Japanese."

Jiang Cheng inhaled sharply. "Why?"

"Because empty islands invite occupation," Shi Lang replied. "The court did not lack desire to control them. The problem was that pirates would be eliminated today and replaced tomorrow. Eliminate them again, and they would return again. After endless campaigns with no lasting result, the court eventually abandoned the effort entirely."

Understanding dawned slowly across Jiang Cheng's face.

"So that is the truth."

At that moment, Li Daoxuan spoke from nearby.

"Correct. The court abandoned those islands because they brought only trouble and no reliable benefit."

Shi Lang turned respectfully.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, how can such a problem be solved?"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"The answer is simpler than it appears. Place your own people on the islands and have them guard the territory permanently."

Shi Lang hesitated. "But our own people could not endure the harsh conditions pirate families live under."

"Exactly," Li Daoxuan said. "Imperial soldiers cannot survive the same brutal lifestyle pirates accept. It is too demanding. However, if your settlers receive reliable logistical support and live without constant hardship, they will gladly remain and defend those islands themselves."

Jiang Cheng's eyes brightened with sudden realization.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, you mean that if we station our own settlers there and supply them continuously with our ships, they can hold those islands permanently?"

"The method is simple," Li Daoxuan replied. "But it requires a strong nation, stable logistics, and abundant resources."

He did not elaborate further.

The younger generation of Gao Family Village would eventually understand the deeper meaning on their own.

Even in later centuries, piracy never vanished completely. Somali pirates, for example, continued to exist due to fractured governance and weak national infrastructure. Where authority and supply collapsed, piracy found fertile ground.

Where a nation grew strong, where resources flowed steadily, and where even the smallest islands were populated and supported by their own people, pirates lost their shelter.

In later ages, the Shengsi Archipelago would become populated with thriving communities, filled with fishing harbors, tourist villages, and bustling maritime trade. No pirate would find a place to hide there again.

For the Great Ming, however, that future remained distant.

For now, only persistence and human effort could bridge the gap.

Chapter 978: Aid for the Junks

The fleet left the Shengsi Archipelago and angled southwest across the sea.

This time, far more local pilots sailed with them compared to when they first arrived. With experienced hands guiding the route, the journey became noticeably smoother.

Jiang Cheng, Shi Lang, and the sailors from Gao Family Village treated this trip like a moving classroom. Nobody wasted the chance. They crowded around the pilots, asking questions non stop, memorizing every trick they could.

How to judge direction by the sun.

How to read ocean currents from the color and movement of water.

How to anticipate monsoon winds.

A trip of only a few dozen kilometers somehow turned into the most valuable lesson they had ever received.

Before long, an island appeared ahead of them.

A tall mountain rose sharply from its center, standing like a stone guardian watching the sea.

One of the former pirates, now serving as a guide, pointed toward it.

"That is Guanyin Mountain. One of the more famous spots in the Zhoushan Archipelago. Once we pass around that mountain, we reach Daishan Island. After that, Zhoushan Island is right ahead."

The sailors instantly perked up.

If Zhoushan was close, then battle was probably close too. Everyone subconsciously tightened their grips on weapons and adjusted their armor straps.

Then suddenly, a lookout sailor screamed from above.

"Battle ahead! Ships fighting ahead!"

The entire fleet stirred like someone had kicked a hornet's nest.

Officers rushed to the rails. Telescopes snapped open. Dozens of eyes locked onto the distant waves.

It did not take long before the scene became clear.

Two fleets were tearing into each other on the restless sea.

One side only had three or four ships.

The other had roughly ten.

Even without explanation, the difference in pressure was obvious.

The smaller fleet used the typical junk design common among Ming coastal pirates. The opposing ships looked slightly different. Their hulls were leaner, their sails carried a foreign style, and their formation showed unusually tight coordination.

One of the surrendered pirates suddenly shouted.

"Those are Japanese Red Seal ships!"

The deck erupted in murmurs.

"Japanese ships?"

"Then the ones fighting them..."

"That is Liu Xiang's fleet!"

"Those four are Liu Xiang's junks!"

Cannons thundered across the sea. Smoke rolled between waves. The sound crashed over the water like continuous thunderclaps.

Anyone with basic combat experience could see the situation immediately.

Liu Xiang's ships were losing.

Four junks were being surrounded and battered from all sides by ten Red Seal ships. The imbalance was brutal. Ten against four rarely ended with miracles.

The four junks were already retreating southward while firing desperately.

The Japanese ships clung to them like wolves chasing wounded prey. They refused to loosen their grip even slightly.

Both sides had raised every sail possible. The vessels cut across the waves at their limits, masts groaning under pressure.

One of the reformed pirates clenched his fists. He used to serve under Meiyang Bianfu, one of Liu Xiang's minor commanders. Seeing Liu Xiang's fleet getting bullied stirred complicated emotions inside him.

The guides captured on Shengsi Island also technically belonged under Liu Xiang's banner, at least on paper. The relationship was similar to how Zhang Xianzhong once nominally served under Gao Yingxiang.

Watching the scene lit a fire in their chests.

"Those damned Japanese pirates!" one of them roared. "They bully our ships every time!"

The reformed pirate turned nervously toward Jiang Cheng, clearly hoping for orders.

Jiang Cheng froze.

He blinked. His mouth opened slightly.

"What... what should we do now?"

He looked exactly like a student suddenly dragged onto a battlefield exam.

Before the awkward silence stretched further, Li Daoxuan spoke calmly.

"Aid the junks. Attack the Red Seal ships."

The reformed pirate's eyes instantly lit up with relief.

Jiang Cheng snapped back to his senses and shouted loudly.

"Signal the fleet! Prepare for battle! Assist our domestic junks! Target Japanese Red Seal ships!"

The signal officer on the flagship climbed onto the highest platform and began waving signal flags with sharp, practiced movements.

Their earlier encounters with pirates had already exposed how disastrous unclear battlefield communication could be. Because of that, Gao Family Village had spent considerable effort developing their own naval signal system.

Explaining the entire system would require several thick manuals. Fortunately, the fleet did not need explanations. They only needed results.

Flag after flag unfolded.

Within moments, the message spread across all forty warships.

"Prepare for battle!"

"Assist our domestic junks!"

"Attack the Japanese fleet!"

"Switch to combat speed!"

The forty one electric warships that had been quietly following the wooden guide boats suddenly awakened like beasts released from chains.

Engines roared to life.

Their speed surged to twenty knots almost instantly.

Huge hulls sliced through waves, spraying seawater in shining arcs. One after another, they shot forward and overtook the guide boats like steel dragons rushing across the ocean.

The surrendered pirates aboard the guide boats stared in disbelief.

They had only submitted to Gao Family Village because cannons were pointed at their families back home. Deep down, they still carried lingering resentment and doubt.

That doubt shattered right now.

They watched enormous ships surge past them without sails. Without oars. Yet moving faster than any vessel they had ever seen.

Each passing warship created violent wakes that tossed their tiny wooden boats like leaves in a storm. Several pirates turned pale as paper while gripping the railings tightly.

"Terrifying..." one whispered.

"No sails... no rowing... yet this speed... What kind of ghost ships are these?"

Another swallowed hard.

"Thank the heavens we surrendered. Fighting these monsters would have been suicide."

Soon, the guide boats were left far behind, shrinking into distant specks swallowed by the horizon.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield ahead, the commander of the four retreating junks was Bai Yang, a minor chieftain serving under Liu Xiang.

He had originally set out to patrol near Zhoushan Island and look for merchant vessels traveling toward Hangzhou. Instead, he stumbled straight into Japanese pirates.

The sea followed its own brutal rules. Pirates robbed merchants, strong pirates robbed weaker pirates, and sometimes everyone robbed each other.

This fight had no grand cause. It simply erupted because two predators crossed paths.

Their opponents were known as the Yokuhisa Pirates.

The name came from "Murakami," the legendary Murakami Suigun of Japan's Warring States period. That once powerful naval force was divided into three main branches: Nojima, Kushima, and Innoshima.

One of the Kushima branch leaders had been Kushima Michifusa, a daimyo controlling fourteen thousand koku of land in Iyo Province.

During the Imjin War, he was defeated by Joseon's legendary admiral Yi Sun-sin and died in battle. After that disaster, the Kushima family's influence collapsed. Some of their surviving descendants drifted into piracy. They gathered disgraced samurai, wandering ronin, and various sea outlaws. Over time, they reorganized themselves into the feared Laidao Pirates.

For decades, possibly over a century, they roamed the East China Sea and built a terrifying reputation.

Their notoriety even inspired the character Lai Dao Suo Jing in the game "Uncharted Waters IV."

Right now, they held absolute advantage over Bai Yang.

The four junks were barely holding formation while retreating in chaos. Yet the Laidao Pirates showed no intention of easing off.

They saw this as a chance to crush Liu Xiang's influence near Zhoushan Island completely. If they eliminated him, they could seize the deep water port there and transform it into their own permanent stronghold.

The pirate commander leading the assault was Kurushima Yokuhisa, a relatively minor noble from the Kushima lineage.

He stood at the bow of his ship, katana raised high, his face flushed with excitement.

"Chase them!" he shouted. "Do not let them escape! Break the Great Ming pirates! Make them fear us! Once they fall, this entire sea will belong to us!"

His crew howled in agreement, intoxicated by their overwhelming advantage.

Kurushima Yokuhisa was still laughing triumphantly when a terrified scream erupted behind him.

"Behind us! Look behind us!"

He spun around instinctively.

Then he froze.

Chapter 979: A Bit Bouncy

Kurushima Yokuhisa turned his head.

What he saw made his breath stop.

Ships.

An entire sea filled with ships.

Forty-one of them.

And every single one was gigantic.

The flagship, the Wanli Sunshine, stretched nearly seventy meters from bow to stern. Even the triple-masted Western galleons that occasionally sailed these waters would look small beside it.

The smallest vessel in the fleet was still around twenty meters long. That alone already matched the size of Yokuhisa's own red-seal ships.

In simple terms, their smallest warship was equal to his flagship.

Yokuhisa sucked in a cold breath.

"What faction is that? How could anyone possess ships that large? Westerners?"

One of his subordinates stared helplessly across the waves.

"I cannot tell. I only saw them flying a multicolored flag."

"A multicolored flag?" Yokuhisa frowned. "Which nation uses such a banner?"

Silence followed.

Nobody knew.

"Send flag signals. Ask them to identify themselves."

Moments passed.

"They are ignoring us."

Yokuhisa felt a heavy weight settle in his chest.

Ignoring signals meant only one thing.

They had no interest in negotiation.

And in the pirate world, that meant blood.

There were no laws at sea.

Justice traveled only as far as cannon range.

Yokuhisa let out a harsh laugh.

"Their ships are large, but large ships are clumsy. I see no cannons. There is nothing to fear. If they want to fight, let them come."

The words had barely left his mouth when reality slapped him hard across the face.

Dozens of massive vessels surged forward.

Rows of hatch covers flipped open along their hulls. Dark gun ports revealed themselves one after another. From inside each port, a polished silver cannon barrel slid outward.

The sunlight reflected off the metal, almost dazzling.

Yokuhisa's eyes widened.

"Have they lost their minds? Are those cannons made from silver? And so many of them?"

A pirate beside him scratched his head in confusion.

"Can silver even be used to cast cannons? Would it not be too soft?"

"Idiot. This is not the time for metallurgy," another man snapped before turning toward Yokuhisa.
"Kurushima-sama, their cannons greatly outnumber ours. We cannot win."

Yokuhisa sneered.

"You call yourselves warriors? Cannons are only frightening if they strike you."

The subordinate flushed with shame.

"You are correct, Kurushima-sama."

Yokuhisa raised his katana and pointed it toward the approaching fleet.

"We came to Zhoushan to establish our dominance. We will crush the Ming pirates and claim these seas. Do not cower simply because the enemy appears larger. Difficult battles are decided by courage."

He lowered his blade slightly and barked his final order.

"Prepare for boarding combat. Close the distance and carve them apart. Show them the spirit of Bushido."

Steel rasped as warriors drew their blades.

"Forget Liu Xiang's ships. Focus on these newcomers. Prepare for cannon engagement."

The ten red-seal ships shifted formation simultaneously, swinging their broadsides toward the approaching Gao Family Village fleet.

At the prow of the Wanli Sunshine, Li Daoxuan watched the maneuver with interest.

"Oh? A battle line formation."

He folded his arms, clearly amused.

"A T-crossing setup too. Not bad. It is only the early seventeenth century, yet pirates already understand the most efficient naval cannon tactics. Humanity truly never stops inventing ways to kill one another."

He paused briefly, then shook his head.

"Still, formations only matter when firepower is equal. If one side holds overwhelming range and strength, tactics alone cannot save them."

The Gao Family Village fleet fired first.

They did not even bother waiting for the enemy to enter traditional cannon range.

Each ship carried a forward-mounted cannon.

Forty-one ships meant forty-one cannons.

Kurushima's fleet possessed only two cannons per broadside per vessel. Their total firepower did not even match the opening volley.

The sea exploded with thunder.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Yokuhisa blinked in disbelief.

"They fired from that distance? Impossible. No cannon can reach that far."

His doubt lasted less than a heartbeat.

Wood shattered. The hull beneath his feet trembled violently. The impact threw sailors off balance as splinters flew through the air. Screams followed.

Iron cannonballs smashed through multiple layers of planking as if punching through paper.

Yokuhisa roared in fury.

"Impossible. You incompetent fools."

Another wave of cannonballs rained down across the fleet. Most splashed harmlessly into the sea. Some flew wide. A few disappeared into the horizon.

But the small number that struck their targets was enough to destroy morale.

Then the explosive shells began to land.

One burst across a deck, turning a cluster of pirates into a storm of smoke, fire, and torn bodies.

The Kurushima pirates froze.

"Return fire!"

"What are the gunners doing? Fire back!"

"Kurushima-sama, it is still too far. Our cannons cannot reach them!"

"Then why can theirs reach us?"

"No one knows!"

"And their ships are too fast!"

"What kind of cursed speed is that?"

Panic began spreading across the decks.

They quickly realized something worse.

Running would not help.

The enemy ships moved at least twice as fast. Any retreat would turn into a slaughter during pursuit.

Yokuhisa forced himself to stay calm.

"Maintain fire while closing distance!"

The red-seal ships adjusted course diagonally, slowly tightening the range while keeping their broadsides angled for firing.

It was refined seamanship. Years of pirate warfare had taught them exactly how to dance with cannon arcs.

Unfortunately, the Gao Family Village sailors had not mastered this style yet. Several ships continued charging straight forward without maneuvering.

Shi Lang suddenly shouted from the command deck.

"Do not sail directly toward them. You will take unnecessary hits. Turn the helm. Match their course and run parallel."

The helmsman stared blankly, clearly lost.

Shi Lang cursed, rushed forward, shoved the man aside, and grabbed the rudder himself.

The Wanli Sunshine swung sharply across the waves. The bow that had been facing the enemy rotated until its broadside lined up perfectly.

The gunners did not need further instruction.

Ten cannons on one flank fired together.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

White smoke burst outward as ten cannonballs tore toward the red-seal ships.

At nearly the same moment, the Kurushima fleet fired back with their own broadsides.

Cannonballs screamed past one another midair.

One of the enemy shots struck the Wanli Sunshine with a heavy crash.

The sailors standing behind that section instinctively ducked. Several even prepared their final prayers.

Then something strange happened.

The cannonball struck the hull... and bounced.

It skipped off the ship's side, splashed into the sea, and disappeared beneath the waves.

The hull showed only a dent.

The composite pressure plating of the Wanli Sunshine, two hundred times thicker than standard wooden hull boards, absorbed the impact with a slight elastic rebound. The material combined strength with flexibility.

Against such construction, the Japanese Ōzutsu cannons simply lacked the penetrating power.

The sailors stared at the dented hull.

Then one of them muttered in disbelief.

"It bounced..."

Chapter 980: Boarding Action!

Behind the thunder of the broadside volley, the sailors of Gao Family Village froze for a heartbeat, as if their minds had lagged behind their eyes. Then realization struck. The entire deck exploded with laughter and cheers.

"Hahaha! We're sailing a divine vessel!"

"Bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself! Their cannons cannot even scratch us!"

"What were we scared of earlier?"

"Speak for yourself! I almost wet my pants!"

"Shut up. You're just a grunt."

"Grunt? I am studying liberal arts so I can apply for officer training!"

"Ha! You cannot even write your own name properly!"

"Enough talking! Load and fire!"

Their morale surged like a rising tide. Fear vanished as if it had never existed.

Across the waves, the Kurushima Pirates stared in mute horror.

They had clearly watched their cannonballs smash into the enemy ship's broadside, only to bounce away like pebbles thrown against a stone wall. The scene was so absurd that their thoughts simply stopped working.

Their shock resembled a modern man launching his most prized weapon, an atomic bomb, at an enemy warship, only to watch it rebound harmlessly after the explosion. Anyone would lose their mind witnessing such a thing.

Kurushima Yokuhisa shrieked, his voice cracking.

"What was that just now? Tell me I saw it wrong! The cannonball bounced. I saw it bounce!"

His men exchanged blank stares before one answered cautiously.

"My lord... you did not see wrong."

"Idiot!" Yokuhisa roared, veins bulging across his neck. "There must be some trick! Charge! Prepare boarding action! Once we grapple their ships, they will not dare fire their cannons!"

The Kurushima fleet surged forward through the storm of artillery.

Meanwhile, the cannons of Gao Family Village continued their relentless rhythm, alternating between solid shot and explosive shells in a chaotic but deadly barrage.

Solid iron balls smashed through hulls and decks, punching cavernous holes through the Red Seal ships. Explosive shells burst across crowded pirate decks, scattering iron fragments and bodies in all directions.

Even so, artillery of this era had limits. Explosive shells relied mostly on shrapnel. They could slaughter crews but rarely shattered an entire ship with one blast the way later cannons could.

The Kurushima Pirates endured the punishment. Their ships bled splinters and smoke, yet they continued forward, staggering across the sea like wounded beasts refusing to fall.

"They are trying to board us!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "Do not let them close in! Japanese samurai are monsters in close combat!"

The order passed quickly across the fleet.

Unfortunately, the helmsmen of Gao Family Village were painfully inexperienced. River navigation was one thing. Maneuvering during a spinning naval duel required an entirely different skill set.

Despite having nearly double the speed, they somehow allowed their formations to be intercepted head on.

Shi Lang nearly exploded with rage.

"Aiya! Are you steering with your feet? A fourteen-year-old like me could do better! Once we return, every one of you will train under me!"

He fumed loudly, but Li Daoxuan remained calm.

Such mistakes were expected. Naval warfare could not be mastered overnight. Besides, Gao Family Village did not truly fear close range combat.

As long as the enemy approached within the correct distance, matters would become... very interesting.

Sure enough, once the gap narrowed, the firearms of Gao Family Village erupted.

Dense volleys rang out in rapid succession. Bullets poured down like steel rain upon the approaching Kurushima Pirates.

The boarding teams collapsed in rows before they could even throw grappling hooks.

The Kurushima Pirates also possessed firearms. They raised their prized Japanese Tanegashima arquebuses and fired back. The exchange instantly revealed the difference between the two sides.

Gao Family Village used rifled guns. Their weapons reached farther and struck with frightening precision. Pirates fell long before they could retaliate, while the Tanegashima arquebuses struggled to reach effective distance.

The pirates could only endure the slaughter as they pushed forward.

After absorbing brutal losses, they finally crept close enough for their arquebuses to fire. Yet their shots lacked accuracy. Most bullets vanished into the sea or sky. The few that struck the composite hulls of Gao Family Village vessels left nothing more than shallow dents.

The range that allowed smoothbore muskets to fire was also the perfect distance for throwing hand grenades.

Gao Family Village sailors casually tossed black iron grenades across the waves. The explosives landed on Red Seal ships and erupted into violent bursts, shaking decks and scattering terrified pirates once again.

The Kurushima men simply could not understand.

Cannons exploded. Grenades followed. Every direction roared with blasts. Standing on deck became nearly impossible.

If they could not stand, boarding was out of the question.

By the time their ships drifted alongside Gao Family Village vessels, the Red Seal ships resembled haunted hulks. Not a single pirate dared remain on deck. Everyone hid inside the cabins like frightened turtles.

The concept of boarding collapsed completely.

Seeing this, Gao Family Village soldiers gradually lowered their weapons. They stared at the drifting pirate ships beside them, unsure how the battle had reached such a strange stalemate.

"Our guns cannot reach them anymore. They are hiding inside."

"Should we toss grenades into the cabins?"

"They sealed the hatches. They are hiding like turtles."

"Then... should we board them instead?"

An awkward silence spread across the deck.

None of them had real experience with boarding combat.

Li Daoxuan frowned slightly. He had no desire to send his tiny followers into cramped cabin fighting. Once combat moved into tight corridors, firearms and grenades would lose their advantage, and casualties would become unavoidable.

Casualties were something he despised above all else.

He briefly considered stepping in personally.

Just as that thought surfaced, a strange roaring noise rose from behind the fleet. More than a dozen battered pirate boats charged forward. These were the Zhoushan pirate guides Gao Family Village had previously captured.

Their ships were slow. They had rowed with desperate determination, chasing the main fleet across the sea. By the time they finally caught up, the decisive naval exchange had already ended.

These former pirates were desperate to prove their loyalty. They wanted redemption, survival, and recognition from their new masters. The moment they arrived, they hurled themselves into battle without hesitation.

They could not understand Gao Family Village's signal flags. Orders meant nothing to them. Their thinking was simple.

Charge forward. Kill the enemy. Prove your worth.

Watching them rush in, Li Daoxuan abandoned the idea of intervening.

Fine. Let them finish this.

The Gao Family Village sailors stepped back and watched as a brutal boarding battle finally unfolded.

The Zhoushan pirates swarmed onto the Red Seal ships. Encouraged by this, the Kurushima pirates hiding in their cabins crawled out and rejoined the fight.

Steel clashed against steel.

Japanese katanas flashed against Ming broadswords.

In pure martial skill, the Japanese warriors held the advantage. However, they had just suffered catastrophic losses under Gao Family Village's overwhelming firepower. Their morale shattered like frightened birds scattering from a storm.

The Zhoushan pirates, on the other hand, fought under the protection of a terrifying new patron. Their confidence soared.

Under such conditions, the outcome required no prophecy.

