

Ice Age 841

Chapter 841: Conflict

The crew member saw Zhu Yunque's resolute expression and had no choice but to open the cabin door. The lower deck wasn't small in terms of space, but as it served as storage, each room was relatively large, typically housing dozens of people together. The lighting wasn't great - lights were turned on at night, while during the day only faint light came through the high windows.

As soon as the cabin door opened, the noise immediately drew everyone's attention. Since the last disturbance on the lower deck, Old Tian had strengthened management here. Normally the door wouldn't open except during meal times, so its opening immediately made people peek out from all rooms.

Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi walked down the stairs, calling out as they went: "Don't be afraid, we're here to bring you food. Anyone who hasn't eaten today, come quickly!" Their faces wore gentle smiles, looking like the Virgin Mary herself.

But the moment they finished speaking, a crowd rushed out from various rooms, desperately grabbing at the food in their hands. There were too many people. Even if they didn't mean to push, the limited portions made the lower deck residents fight fiercely over the mere two servings, causing Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi to be knocked to the ground.

Others ignored the two women because any delay meant possibly getting no food at all! More people crowded in, trampling over Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi who screamed in pain under numerous feet. Fortunately, the crew member who opened the door hadn't left yet.

Seeing this scene, he roared: "Stop right the fuck now or I'll shoot you all!" The familiar sound of him cocking his rifle worked like winding everyone up, making them freeze immediately with hands raised. However, several children took advantage of their small size to squeeze through the crowd, scrambling on the floor to scoop fallen rice grains into their mouths.

"You damn bastards trying to rebel? Get the hell back!" The fierce crew member came down with his gun and quickly helped Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi up. "I told you it's dangerous here! They're so hungry they'd eat people alive! You ladies are important people - better not come to places like this often!" He wore a mocking grin.

Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi were pale from shock. In just those brief seconds, countless feet had trampled them. A little longer and they might have been crushed to death. Without any more polite words, they fled the lower deck in panic.

The crew member turned back with a fierce expression, pointing his gun: "Ungrateful bastards! People bring you food and this is how you act? You deserve to starve!" The cabin residents didn't dare respond, lowering their heads in fear. With a cold snort, the crew member left up the stairs and locked the heavy chain on the cabin door. The moment it closed, fighting and cursing erupted again inside.

Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi made an undignified retreat, not daring to look around for fear of being seen in their disheveled state. They hurried back to Zhu Yunque's room. Once inside, Su Nuanxi burst into tears uncontrollably. Only when the room's warmth reactivated her skin's sensitivity did Zhu Yunque realize how badly she hurt - bruises everywhere and shoe prints all over her clothes.

"How could they do this?" Zhu Yunque gasped in pain, her voice full of grief and indignation.

Su Nuanxi wept profusely: "They're so pitiful. Back on the island they were decent people. Now for just a little food they've become like wild animals. If there were enough supplies, they wouldn't act this way."

Zhu Yunque shot her an angry look, annoyed that after nearly being trampled to death, Su Nuanxi still cared about them. But upon reflection, Su Nuanxi's logic made some sense. "What, was food plentiful on the island?" Zhu Yunque asked breathlessly.

Su Nuanxi nodded slowly: "Usually the men would find food. We women didn't go out. And there was also..." Her voice suddenly cut off, her face turning extremely pale. Clearly she'd thought of Yamada Masami.

"But what should we do now? That's the real problem," Zhu Yunque said as she sat on the bed, finding painkillers and bandages in the medical kit. While tending to her wounds, she worried about solving the lower deck's food problem. Su Nuanxi hemmed and hawed without offering any solution - she had none.

Just then, Tommy woke up crying loudly from their noise. The two women sighed in frustration as Su Nuanxi hurried to comfort the baby. "Recently Tommy keeps crying for no reason and wakes up constantly. Maybe all babies are like this?" Their attention shifted fully to caring for Tommy, consuming nearly all their energy. The lower deck passengers' food problem was temporarily forgotten.

In Zhu Yunque's subconscious, she felt nothing too bad would happen if they ignored it temporarily - people wouldn't actually starve from missing a few meals...

Meanwhile, back on the lower deck, those two food boxes had sparked intense fighting. What began as accidental bumps during grabbing escalated into full-blown brawls. Many were left bruised and bleeding, but when they asked the crew for help, they were ignored. Why should Doctor Zhou treat self-inflicted injuries? Let them suffer the consequences.

Dejected, everyone returned to their rooms to lick their wounds. But many eyes unconsciously turned toward the innermost room - where the last group to board, the stowaways, lived. Initially unaware of stowaways, they'd blamed their hunger on Zhang Yi and the crew's stinginess. Now knowing the truth - that their food had been stolen by parasites in their midst - their resentment burned fiercely, especially at mealtimes. This wasn't their first fight today - they'd brawled at both breakfast and lunch already.

Chapter 842: United Front

In the lower deck cabins, restless emotions were slowly spreading.

When everyone was starving, yet happened to discover the parasites who stole their food nearby, the only emotion to describe it was hatred.

"It's all that damn group of stowaways' fault!"

"If it weren't for them, we could have lived much better."

"Why would it be like this now? Starving and still getting beaten up?"

"I wish they had never boarded the ship."

"Come to think of it, it seemed like that woman surnamed Zhu deliberately let them on."

“Damn, she’s a despicable woman too! It’s all her fault we’ve suffered so much!”

“Shh, keep your voice down. After all, we still have to eat under their watch. If they hear us, they might throw us overboard to feed the sharks!”

Although anger burned inside everyone, no one dared to take further action.

After all, Zhang Yi and the armed forces were still controlling things above.

If they dared to start a large-scale brawl, they might really be thrown overboard to feed the sharks.

But was patience the only choice?

They felt stifled and helpless.

In the fishermen’s corner, Lu Dahai, Rong Lei, and Yu Gang sat together in the shadows.

Lu Dahai’s fierce eyes flashed sharply like knives in the dark.

After the apocalypse began, they had already killed people; their ferocious aura kept ordinary people at a distance.

Lu Dahai stared grimly toward the stowaways’ rooms.

“We have to find a way to get rid of those damn dogs. Otherwise, we’ll never get the food we deserve!”

Lu Dahai said coldly.

Rong Lei and Yu Gang looked at him. “Big brother, this isn’t easy! We’re on a ship; if we act recklessly, we might get punished by those above.”

Lu Dahai took a deep breath, pounding the wooden bedboard in anger.

“I know that! No need to remind me!”

His frustration was overflowing.

If he could, he truly wanted to have a brutal fight with that group.

But achieving that goal was extremely difficult.

The other passengers on the ship had mediocre relationships.

Meanwhile, the stowaways seemed to sense their precarious position and had banded together, becoming the strongest force in the lower deck cabins.

They were like tuskless male elephants—seemingly harmless but with the strongest aggression!

Discontent spread throughout the lower deck cabins.

But no one blamed Zhang Yi or the crew.

They had found a better target: the stowaways.

At that moment, inside the stowaways' locked room, the cabin door was firmly secured and barricaded from the inside with miscellaneous items.

Among this group were people from multiple countries, but most spoke fluent British English, and some were proficient in Mandarin.

There were twenty-two people in total. The atmosphere inside was extremely tense as everyone gathered near a bed in the middle.

At the center were three men.

From their positions, it was clear the leader was sitting on the bed: a man in his fifties with graying long hair.

He was from Malai, a real estate tycoon who had started from gang roots, named Zagu.

Beside him were two others.

One had a buzz cut, dark skin, stood over 1.9 meters tall, and was a sanda athlete named Ailuo De.

The other was about 1.7 meters tall, with wild, untamed hair and brown skin; he was a Muay Thai fighter named Yamate.

These three men were now the leaders of the stowaway gang.

Since their initial boarding, they had quietly formed this force.

Their goal was to have a resistance force should anyone discover them one day.

The room was dimly lit, and Zagu had a blade of grass from a mat in his mouth.

He was heavily addicted to smoking, but before boarding, everyone was strictly inspected; weapons, communication devices, and even tobacco were confiscated.

He could only satisfy his craving this way.

“Mr. Zagu, the atmosphere on this ship is very tense. I see those swine want to start a fight with us. What should we do?”

Ailuo De frowned with worry, asking Zagu.

There were over a hundred people in the lower deck cabins, but they were less than a fifth of that number.

Now that their identity as stowaways was exposed, others definitely resented them for stealing what belonged to them.

If that anger exploded and a fight broke out, they would be heavily outnumbered.

Other stowaways in the cabin also showed worried expressions, fearing they would suffer the same fate as those few Neon Pirates.

Unexpectedly, after hearing this, Zagu raised an eyebrow at Ailuo De and chuckled.

“Why, are you scared?”

Zagu asked with a smile, his face calm and confident.

As a well-known gang leader from Malai, he had seen every big scene imaginable.

Before, he kept a low profile to avoid Zhang Yi and others’ attention.

But now that their identity was exposed, and Zhang Yi had made it clear he didn’t want to manage the cabins below,

he was no longer going to hold back.

Seeing this, Ailuo De hurriedly flattered him, “Mr. Zagu, what’s your plan? We’re all listening to you!”

A group of fence-sitters had no ideas of their own and had to follow Zagu’s lead.

“Yes, Mr. Zagu, please tell us what to do!”

“As long as we survive, we’ll obey you!”

Zagu squinted, “Alright, from today on, I’ll make them know who’s the real king of this deck cabin!”

When evening came and it was mealtime, Xie Changming carried the food buckets as usual.

Although the lower deck cabins had the worst living conditions, Zhang Yi did not treat them like animals.

Food was still distributed strictly according to the number of people.

Each room’s food was separated strictly based on their count, more or less.

Xie Changming came down, placing the food buckets one by one, then shouted, “Meal time!”

At this moment, people responsible for collecting food in each room came forward to pick up their respective meals.

But then, everyone heard footsteps from the very back of the cabin.

“Clatter-clatter—”

Everyone in the corridor instinctively looked over.

They saw a dark, dense crowd moving quickly toward them.

Zagu walked at the front with his hands in his pockets, expressionless.

On his sides, Ailuo De and Yamate wore fierce expressions, flanking him.

At this moment, the stowaways completely dropped their disguise, especially Zagu, whose terrifying gang aura made many people shrink back in fear.

Lu Dahai was responsible for collecting food for their room. Seeing Zagu and the others, he felt a bad premonition.

“Why do so many of you come to pick up food?” he asked cautiously.

Chapter 843: Caged Beasts

Lu Dahai had only asked a simple question.

Yet what he received in response was a vicious knee strike from the Muay Thai fighter Yamate.

Though Lu Dahai was physically strong, taking such a brutal hit from a professional fighter instantly bent him over like a shrimp, collapsing to the ground with agonized moans.

Zagu walked over, casually grabbing a stack of metal trays before smashing them down hard on Lu Dahai's head!

"BANG! CLANG!"

The impact split Lu Dahai's scalp open. Stars exploded before his eyes, his ears rang violently, and he nearly lost consciousness.

Zagu didn't stop, continuing to hammer down on his head with the trays!

There was no restraint in his actions - this was clearly attempted murder!

The sheer brutality of the assault left every onlooker too terrified to speak.

Hearing the commotion, Rong Lei and Yu Gang rushed out. Seeing Lu Dahai being beaten, they cursed loudly and charged forward.

But Ailuo De and Yamate intercepted them, immediately engaging in a fight.

Though the fishermen were physically capable, they were no match for professional fighters.

Especially when the stowaways' other allies joined in, fists and kicks raining down like a storm.

Soon all three brothers lay battered on the ground like beaten dogs, covered in injuries.

"Stop... stop this fighting!"

Someone finally gathered the courage to intervene.

"If this continues, you'll alert the upper decks!"

Only then did Zagu pause his assault.

He casually tossed the bloodied trays aside and spat on Lu Dahai's head.

Then, hands on hips, he arrogantly declared to the entire room:

"From today onward, new rules govern this deck."

"I'm in charge now. When food arrives, we eat first."

"Remember this - it's the law!"

Everyone had been thoroughly intimidated by the stowaways' violence.

Though furious inside, no one dared speak up against them now.

Zagu signaled to his men, who greedily seized two buckets of the best food.

One onlooker, intoxicated by this display of power, felt excitement bubbling within him - as if he too could now dominate everyone here.

He stepped forward to take more food for himself.

But Zagu shot him a cold warning glance, making him retreat sheepishly.

Still, they'd already seized twice their usual food share - enough for a full meal at last!

Zagu stepped over Lu Dahai's prone form and swaggered back to their room.

Not one of the hundred-plus people from surrounding cabins dared utter a word.

Only after the stowaways disappeared down the hallway did eyes turn to the remaining food.

Already scarce provisions had been further depleted by the stowaways' theft - there wouldn't be enough to go around now!

Previously, an unspoken agreement had prevented food hoarding.

But the rules had changed today - it was every man for himself now.

No one knew who moved first, but suddenly everyone surged toward the remaining food.

Roars, wails and violence flooded the corridor.

Lu Dahai and his brothers lay half-conscious until fellow fishermen risked their lives dragging them from the stampede.

Too afraid to challenge Zagu's gang, the refugees instead turned on each other in a vicious food brawl.

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The Stowaway Gang.

None had expected today's operation to go so smoothly.

Twenty-some men had cowed over a hundred people!

They'd taken the best food, beaten resisters, and faced zero opposition!

Zagu sat on his bunk, eating heartily while his men enjoyed their first full meal in ages.

Their trust in Zagu deepened, solidifying their loyalty.

Ailuo De approached with his bowl, fawning: "Mr. Zagu, you were magnificent! Just your presence paralyzed them with fear."

Zagu smirked arrogantly:

"They're sheep! Show enough cruelty and they'll never resist."

He raised a fist. "In this world, survival depends on ferocity and brains! Even the largest sheep herd flees from a single lion."

"Then they graze happily after, just grateful it wasn't them getting eaten today."

The men nodded sagely.

The logic was simple, but how many could actually implement it?

The underling who'd tried taking extra food earlier asked:

"If we've already intimidated them, why leave any food behind?"

Zagu studied his men. Some seemed to understand, but most still clutched their stomachs - one meal couldn't erase months of starvation.

Hunger demanded more.

Zagu explained: "Never corner your prey completely. Even gangs leave escape routes."

"Because even sheep become unpredictable when desperate."

Then his expression turned cunning: "But leave them just enough hope... and they'll never dare challenge us!"

The men's faces lit up with realization.

"Mr. Zagu, you're a genius!"

"With you leading, we'll never go hungry again!"

"How fortunate we have such a wise leader!"

Zagu sat cross-legged, basking in their praise.

"But we can't get careless yet," he cautioned, gaze drifting upward as if seeing through the ceiling.

"The armed forces above remain beyond our reach for now."

"Avoid unnecessary deaths and major incidents."

"That way we'll survive until reaching our destination!"

Everything he did was a gamble.

Betting that Zhang Yi wouldn't interfere with minor lower-deck conflicts.

And Zagu was an excellent judge of character.

Zhang Yi had always maintained an indifferent attitude toward the ship's refugees.

Unless things escalated enough to annoy him, he clearly didn't care about lower-deck lives.

"Our fate lies in destiny's hands. For now, we must appear ruthless enough to command fear!"

Chapter 844: A New Way to Live

Lu Dahai, Rong Lei, and Yu Gang were beaten bloody and left barely breathing.

Some crew members took pity on them and wanted to call for medical help from the ship's doctor.

But they were quickly stopped by others.

"Are you insane? If the higher-ups find out about this mess down here, who'll take responsibility?"

"But those stowaways threw the first punch! We're in the right here!"

"In the right? Hah! You think those people care whether we live or die?"

"From the start, Captain Zhang knew we were short on supplies and never planned to help. We're lucky they're giving us passage at all. Don't cause trouble."

"What if we anger them and they throw us all overboard?"

Adopting a "less trouble is better" attitude, the passengers firmly refused to get medical help for the three fishermen. Most aboard besides the stowaways were Huaxu Kingdom citizens and expatriates.

Deep in their bones flowed five thousand years of fine Huaxu tradition—avoid matters that don't concern you, better others die than yourself. After these persuasions, even the fishermen who initially wanted to help hesitated.

They knew the doctor was Captain Zhang's woman. How could such an esteemed person come to this filthy place to treat mere fishermen?

"Brothers, it's not that we won't help. We've got our own problems. May fortune favor you," said fisherman Huang Dacheng with a helpless sigh.

Some in their quarters knew basic first aid and bandaged their wounds with cloth scraps. The rest was up to fate.

Perhaps heaven took pity, or perhaps the three were just tough—by next morning, they showed signs of recovery. Not from luck though.

Zagu had measured his strikes carefully. Veteran gangsters know how to appear lethally violent while avoiding vital spots. He just wanted to assert dominance, not cause real trouble.

Still, Lu Dahai suffered a mild concussion and couldn't rise from bed. Rong Lei and Yu Gang fared slightly better but ached everywhere.

Seeing them alive, people offered brief concern before moving on. Everyone was too hungry and preoccupied to care much about others.

But in Lu Dahai's heart, vengeful flames now raged uncontrollably.

"Don't even know how long I'll live, yet I'm letting these bastards walk all over me?"

Watching the arrogant stowaway gang strut through the lower decks, a dark fury rose in him—not just toward them, but also the cowardly passengers who refused to unite.

"Fuck! I stick my neck out for you lot, and you turtles hide in your shells!"

"Goddamn it, I'll make you pay!"

But he couldn't act yet. His injuries needed healing, and starvation demanded food first. So he pretended fear, avoiding further conflict with Zagu.

Late that night, waves crashed loudly against the hull, drowning out the cabin's snoring. Lu Dahai quietly woke his brothers.

"Come. We need to talk."

Having sailed together for years, Rong Lei and Yu Gang understood his murderous gaze instantly. The three sneaked to the toilet.

"Spit it out, boss! We taking out those stowaway scum?" growled Rong Lei, a bald man with wild stubble and fierce eyes.

Having killed on Rockflow Island, their courage ran deep. The stowaways' beating still burned in them.

Lu Dahai's voice turned icy. "Those motherfuckers starve us, then shit on our heads. I'm done tolerating them—they die."

Rong Lei nearly shouted in excitement: "Hell yes! Been itching to gut them! Won't rest till that fire inside's quenched!"

"I've decided—we're changing how we live."

Yu Gang hesitated. "How? They outnumber us ten to one. Can't count on those spineless passengers."

Lu Dahai's eyes turned viper-cold. "Them? They'll back whoever wins. Useless."

"Then what?" they asked.

His hatred extended beyond Zagu's gang to the very passengers he'd defended then abandoned him.

"I've got a plan. Listen close."

As he whispered his scheme, their faces paled.

"Will... will that work? Go that far?"

"Isn't it too risky?"

Lu Dahai snorted. "No mercy, no footing! They forced this. When we got beaten, those cowards stayed silent. Why spare them now?"

Being no saints themselves, the other two quickly resolved: Fuck it, let's do it! Better die well than live poorly!

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Next noon during meal distribution, the upper decks dined peacefully on quality rations while Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi, busy with childcare, forgot the lower decks entirely.

Only when baby Tommy kept crying did they realize he might be sick, forcing them to seek Zhou Ke'er's help.

One glance at Tommy's hygiene told Zhou Ke'er everything.

"Diapers need frequent changing and washing. Baby skin is delicate—bacteria infections happen easily."

Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi exchanged weary looks. After ten days of childcare, their initial enthusiasm had worn dangerously thin.

Only those who've raised children understand the torment—constant holding, feeding, changing, inconsolable crying at all hours, sleep deprivation from midnight wakings. Taking shifts left both women with dark circles.

Exhausted, they longed to abandon everything. But since Zhu Yunque brought this trouble aboard, she had to endure it until landfall over a month later.

Chapter 845: Competing for Valor and Ferocity

Meal time had arrived.

This time, the people from the stowaway gang came out a little later than usual.

However, none of the others dared to make a move; instead, they quietly observed the end of the corridor.

After a while, Zagu strolled over slowly, with a coat draped over his shoulder and a grass root held between his teeth.

Behind him, as usual, followed a large group of stowaway gang members.

Seeing everyone's submissive demeanor, Zagu was very satisfied.

His men, just like before, stepped forward and took the two best portions of food.

The others didn't even have the courage to approach them and waited until they left before scrambling for the largest bucket of food.

By now, the distribution system had completely turned into a free-for-all scramble.

Once someone broke the order first, everyone else lost their collective morality.

This was the broken window effect.

Once someone could profit by breaking the rules, those rules only restrained the weak and the incompetent.

The weak followed the rules, while the strong made new ones.

After Zagu and his gang left, Lu Dahai exchanged a look with his two brothers.

They pulled out slender objects from their pockets.

They were daggers made by sharpening the tips of their toothbrushes.

Toothbrushes, as cleaning tools, had not been strictly inspected before.

After all, if someone really wanted to kill, even a sock could be used as a weapon.

Lu Dahai had spent time in a prison cell before, so he knew well how powerful such makeshift weapons could be.

The three of them took the lead and headed towards the remaining buckets of food.

Seeing this, others around rushed over to snatch food from them.

Lu Dahai grabbed a man in his mid-thirties by the arm and, turning his hand around, stabbed the toothbrush into the man's cheek!

"Pfft!"

The sharp tip of the toothbrush pierced into his mouth. Although sharp, it was no match for a knife, so Lu Dahai had to exert more force.

The middle-aged man suffered greater injury.

He screamed loudly in pain.

But Lu Dahai's face was filled with murderous intent. He grabbed the man's neck and punched his throat twice with great force!

The man's neck turned red instantly, and he collapsed onto the ground.

The others nearby were stunned.

Because in the past, Lu Dahai and these fishermen had gotten along fairly well with them.

They even seemed like very loyal and righteous big guys.

When everyone had previously decided to seek justice from Zhang Yi, it was led by Lu Dahai.

But now, this very man suddenly became vicious and attacked others, catching everyone completely off guard.

"Lu Dahai, what are you doing? Are you crazy?"

A merchant in the same room angrily reprimanded him.

Lu Dahai turned his head. The toothbrush in his hand was dripping wet with blood, and blood splattered all over his arm and cheek, making him look especially ferocious.

“From now on, once those people take food, I will be in charge of all this food!”

Lu Dahai slowly swept the blood-dripping toothbrush over everyone.

His two brothers, Rong Lei and Yu Gang, also clenched toothbrushes. Though the tips were not very sharp, no one doubted that if stabbed into a neck, it could still take a life.

“Lu Dahai, what are you doing? We are all compatriots here. What you’re doing is no different from those stowaways.”

A man shouted in distress.

Lu Dahai cursed roughly, “Cut the crap! You bastards are all cheap scum who deserve a beating! When I was getting beaten, you just stood there watching. Now I see clearly—you’re not even human to me anymore!”

“If anyone doesn’t obey, I’ll be the first to kill them!”

The tips of their toothbrushes aggressively pointed at one angry person after another.

But these guys had no courage to resist Zagu and his gang when Lu Dahai first stood up.

Where would they find the guts to fight Lu Dahai and his two brothers now?

Everyone instinctively stepped back.

They secretly looked at Xi Zhou, desperately hoping a hero would stand up and help them take down Lu Dahai and his group.

But not a single person stood up to be the hero; all chose to hide like scared turtles.

These people had certain status.

There were experts in scientific fields, big company bosses, university professors, and even minor royalty.

Their status was lofty, and they valued their lives more than ordinary people.

They were very smart and never volunteered to be the one to stand out.

But when a group like this gathers, the end result is that everyone suffers in silence.

At that time, the only ones who could stand up and lead them were three fishermen with little education but full of passionate spirit.

Lu Dahai laughed loudly at how cowardly these bastards were.

“See that? These damn dogs are all cowards!”

“Hmph, then you better listen to me obediently. From now on, I get to pick food first!”

Inside the stowaway gang’s room, Zagu was eating and heard the commotion outside.

He only sneered mockingly, “They’re already fighting among themselves so soon? Well, that’s good. Even better if they kill a few more.”

After all, Zhang Yi didn’t care who among them lived or died.

He only provided the set amount of food.

The more people died, the easier it would be to manage food supplies.

Seeing these cowards unwilling to resist at all, Lu Dahai felt extremely proud, but also a deep sadness.

There were only three of them, and if everyone rushed at once, they could kill at most two people before dying themselves.

But these people were too smart, so no one was willing to take the risk.

This allowed Lu Dahai and his brothers to dominate them completely, with no resistance, choosing instead to be silent lambs.

Lu Dahai sneered and then walked over, lifting the two largest remaining buckets of food.

He had planned to leave like this, but still felt unsatisfied.

So he turned back and spat heavily into the other buckets of food.

This action made everyone's skin crawl, their faces turning green.

If they ate that food, wouldn't it be like eating Lu Dahai's filthy spit?

Lu Dahai didn't care what they thought. Carrying the two large buckets, he and his brothers proudly returned to their cabin.

But now, the food in the entire lower deck was completely insufficient.

There were originally eight cabins; now half the food was gone in one swoop.

And about a hundred people still hadn't eaten.

The worst part was that Lu Dahai deliberately spat into the remaining buckets to retaliate.

Hesitation would lead to defeat.

Some people were still hesitating whether to eat food with Lu Dahai's dirty spit, while others decisively rushed forward to grab the food.

What did spit matter? It was still food!

People had to eat to survive, or they would starve to death.

Between survival and cleanliness, they decisively chose the former.

Chapter 846: Recruiting Followers

The lower deck erupted into chaos once again.

Lu Dahai and his two brothers, however, returned to their cabin with cheerful expressions, carrying two large buckets of food before settling back into their bunks.

Several others were already inside the cabin.

Watching the trio hoard so much food, some snorted in disdain, despising them as bandits.

Others swallowed hard, their hunger driving them to the brink of rushing over to snatch even a single bite.

But the brothers' sharpened toothbrushes—weapons honed to a deadly edge—lay plainly in view. The blood still dripping from Lu Dahai's toothbrush forced the onlookers to reconsider.

Taking food from them would be no easy feat.

No one else had the courage to try.

Lu Dahai scanned the crowd, well aware of what they were thinking.

He responded with a cold sneer.

Just yesterday, he'd stood up for others and been beaten half to death.

Not a single one of these temporary neighbors had lifted a finger to help him then.

Now, he certainly wouldn't share his food with them.

Lu Dahai picked up his toothbrush and ran his tongue along its edge, the coppery tang of blood spreading across his taste buds before dripping from the tip.

The grotesque, bloodthirsty display sent chills down everyone's spines.

"Old Huang! Come eat with us!"

Lu Dahai called out to Huang Dacheng, a fellow fisherman nearby.

After Lu Dahai and his brothers had been beaten by Zagu's gang the previous day, it was Huang Dacheng who had dragged them back to the cabin.

Huang Dacheng hurried over without hesitation. "Then I won't stand on ceremony."

Lu Dahai shoved a steamed bun into Huang Dacheng's hands, and the man perched on the edge of a bunk, devouring it ravenously.

Though the meal consisted only of plain buns, watery porridge, and stir-fried potatoes with green peppers, they ate as if it were a feast of abalone and lobster.

Gradually, the others in the cabin began to clutch their growling stomachs.

They hadn't eaten well yesterday, and today was worse—their rations had been halved.

Many in the cabin had failed to secure any food at all, leaving them in agony.

Two fishermen, friends of Huang Dacheng who were also acquainted with Lu Dahai's group, exchanged glances before making their decision. They approached Lu Dahai together.

"Brother Lu, could you spare us some food?"

"We'll follow you from now on!"

Lu Dahai looked up at their ingratiating smiles.

Without a word, he pulled four steaming buns from the bucket and shoved two into each of their hands.

"Then we're brothers now. Come, eat with us!"

Overjoyed, the two men thanked him profusely before crowding around the bucket to wolf down their meal.

Emboldened by their example, others in the cabin began gathering around.

"Lu Dahai, could you share some with us too?"

A white-haired businessman in his sixties ventured.

"Hah!"

Lu Dahai's lips twisted into a sneer. "What the hell are you? You think you deserve my food? What use are you? Could you even throw a punch? When I was getting beaten, you just stood there and watched. Now you want to eat? Dream on!"

The old businessman trembled but hesitated to argue further when he met Lu Dahai's murderous glare.

He shrank back in fear.

But some were bolder.

A few quick-witted young men observed how Huang Dacheng's friends had succeeded and approached Lu Dahai.

"Brother Lu, we want to follow you too!"

Having spent time together, they were familiar faces.

Lu Dahai eyed them. "You willing to fight?"

"Absolutely!" they declared without hesitation.

"Tch."

Lu Dahai scoffed.

These two were spoiled rich kids—all talk, no action. Who knew if they'd actually back their words when it mattered?

Still, he tossed them each a bun and let them join the meal.

Bit by bit, nearly eight grown men in the cabin rallied around Lu Dahai, swelling his ranks.

This was exactly the life he wanted.

If others could play the bandit, seizing food by force, so could he.

Most in the cabin were useless sheep, after all.

Why be a sheepdog when he could be the wolf?

Soon, Lu Dahai's faction grew rapidly.

Over time, the lower deck split into two major factions:

Zagu's stowaway gang and Lu Dahai's fishermen alliance.

"Gangs" was a grandiose term—they were just desperate refugees scheming for their next meal.

Those who didn't join either group were left scavenging scraps or going hungry entirely.

Did those above decks know about this?

Of course they did.

And they couldn't care less.

Zhang Yi had simply told Old Tian to "cleanse the area with firepower" if the lower deck caused trouble.

"So, what counts as 'trouble'?" Old Tian had asked.

Zhang Yi chuckled. "If they wake me up, that's trouble!"

Old Tian understood.

The comment was a joke, but it underscored Zhang Yi's indifference to the lower deck's survival.

Old Tian had full discretion—whether those people lived or died meant nothing to Zhang Yi.

As for Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi, those compassionate noblewomen, those angelic figures rivaling the Virgin Mary—what were they doing?

They were being thoroughly tormented by baby Tommy.

Their negligence had left the child feverish and suffering from a skin infection.

With Zhang Yi's approval, Zhou Ke'er administered medicine.

But the only real solution was for Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi to be more careful—no more mistakes.

After Zhou Ke'er's stern lecture, the two women were guilt-ridden.

Yet, they also grew weary.

Children were such troublesome creatures!

Both silently vowed never to have kids of their own.

But since they'd chosen this burden, they couldn't abandon it now.

As for the lower deck's turmoil?

They no longer had time to care.

Unbeknownst to them, their neglect would lead to countless casualties—a horrific tragedy in the making.

Three days passed in a blink.

On the open sea, such a short span meant little. Zhang Yi spent his days patrolling the ship for signs of sea beasts.

The rest of the time, he holed up in his room with Zhou Ke'er, practicing calligraphy.

But for those in the lower deck?

Every minute, every second, was a life-or-death struggle.

Chapter 847: Don't Act Rashly

The formation of factions rapidly deteriorated the living conditions in the lower deck. Initially, there was just a slight food shortage where everyone couldn't eat their fill, but at least survival was manageable. Later, when all pretense was abandoned, people stopped restraining themselves and began using force to seize food. This naturally led to survival of the fittest.

The elderly, physically weaker women, and young children became the first casualties of this brutal system. Some even went three straight days without securing a single bite to eat. The stowaway gang and fishermen alliance controlled most of the food supplies. However, a clear dividing line still existed between the two groups.

The stowaway gang distrusted outsiders, keeping tightly to their own circle. But Lu Dahai actively recruited new members. Anyone he deemed strong enough to be useful in fights was welcomed into his group. Gradually, his faction grew larger than the stowaway gang.

This development made Zagu increasingly uneasy. What he feared most was unity among the Huaxu Kingdom natives in the lower deck. So he changed tactics, deciding to confront Lu Dahai's group directly.

On the fourth day, during the scheduled food distribution, Zagu only sent a few underlings to collect the rations. The leader was Yamate, the Muay Thai fighter, followed by two young men. People from other cabins watched them through door cracks. Some who hadn't eaten for days looked gaunt, with sallowness and even a greenish glint in their eyes. They stared intently at the trio with a mix of fear and something else stirring within.

But when the group reached the food, they didn't take the two best barrels as usual. Yamate spoke in broken Britannian, ordering his two subordinates to guard the food and prevent anyone from approaching. Then he headed straight for the fishermen alliance's cabin.

Members of the fishermen alliance blocked the doorway, eyeing him with hostility. Yamate shouted, "Call your leader out! Mr. Zagu wants to see him!"

Inside, Lu Dahai's lips curled into a cold smile upon hearing this. Rong Lei reacted angrily, "Since when do we jump when he says jump?" Lu Dahai stopped him, "Ah Rong, don't always be so impulsive." Sitting on his bunk, he suddenly smiled at Yamate and said, "Tell Mr. Zagu I'll be there shortly."

"Hurry up then," Yamate replied before leaving, though his two men remained guarding the food. This immediately caused unrest among the hungry onlookers.

"What's the meaning of this? They're denying us food?"

"They're flexing their power! Are they really trying to push everyone to the brink?"

Even the meekest person would feel rage when facing starvation. Lu Dahai retrieved the sharpened toothbrush from beneath his bunk and concealed it in his sleeve. His followers gathered around him anxiously:

"Big Brother Dahai, Zagu definitely has bad intentions! You shouldn't go!"

"Yeah, we should just fight them if it comes to that!"

Lu Dahai remained silent. He knew exactly how capable his people were - all bluster but likely to beg for mercy when actual fighting broke out. Zagu was a genuine gang leader with several skilled fighters under him. In a direct confrontation, their small group stood no chance.

"It's fine. I'll go talk to him and see what he wants," Lu Dahai said as he pushed through the crowd. The others naturally followed. With Lu Dahai around, they could stay united and eat properly. If anything happened to him, they'd return to starvation. So they trailed behind, unwilling to let him face danger alone.

The large group arrived at the stowaway gang's cabin entrance, where guards immediately blocked the way. "Mr. Zagu said only Lu Dahai may enter!"

Rong Lei and others grew agitated at this. Going in alone meant Lu Dahai would face over twenty gang members by himself - they could kill him instantly. RaNóǎĚs

"This is unacceptable! What are you plotting?" Rong Lei shouted accusingly.

Lu Dahai raised a calming hand. "It's fine. If Mr. Zagu wants to see me, I'll go alone. Don't worry, they won't harm me." Dark currents swirled deep in Lu Dahai's eyes.

With Lu Dahai insisting, the others reluctantly stepped back. The guard opened the door just enough for Lu Dahai to enter before slamming it shut behind him with a loud "clack."

Before Lu Dahai could even assess the interior, someone brutally kicked the back of his knees, forcing him to collapse onto the floor with a heavy thud. Two large hands grabbed his hair and twisted his arms behind his back, pinning him face-down. Blood trickled from his nose from the impact.

Struggling, he shouted, "You can't kill me! You can't! Mr. Zagu, if this escalates, you'll suffer too! Aren't you afraid of those above? Remember you're stowaways while he's Huaxu Kingdom like us! If you kill us and this blows up, guess whose side he'll take!"

Inside the cabin, Zagu sat on a stool surrounded by his men, coldly observing the sun-darkened fisherman like a lion eyeing prey. He stood up, removed his belt, and approached Lu Dahai, looping the belt around his neck and tightening it into a noose. He then dragged Lu Dahai across the floor by the makeshift garrote.

Lu Dahai quickly turned red-faced from strangulation, his expression turning grotesque from oxygen deprivation. "N-no... stop..." he gasped.

Zagu ignored his pleas, dragging him back and forth until Lu Dahai was nearly unconscious before finally releasing him. Lu Dahai collapsed, coughing violently with bloodshot eyes.

Zagu stared down coldly. "You've been making quite a name for yourself lately. Gathering so many followers - planning to oppose me?" His smile didn't reach his eyes, which burned with murderous intent. Only Lu Dahai's mention of Zhang Yi and others stopped Zagu from finishing him then and there to eliminate this potential threat to his gang's dominance.

"Cough... cough..." Lu Dahai gasped. "We... we just want to survive! Mr. Zagu, there's enough food for both our groups. I'm getting enough to eat now - no reason to oppose you. Maintaining the status quo benefits everyone. Killing me won't stop others from rising up. But keeping me alive to cooperate with you... that's your best advantage."

Chapter 848: Heartfire

Zagu squinted his eyes, hesitating over whether or not to kill Lu Dahai.

But just as Lu Dahai had said, they were already the bosses of this lower deck. Food was sufficient.

There was simply no need to take unnecessary risks.

However, if a real fight broke out and attracted the attention above, even if Captain Zhang didn't care about the lives of the people on the lower deck, in the end, he was closer to these Huaxu Kingdom people.

If conflict erupted between the two groups and the stowaway gang killed the Huaxu Kingdom people, then even from a purely human perspective, it was almost certain who Captain Zhang would side with.

When people had nothing, they could act recklessly.

But once they were full, risking their lives was no longer so easy.

Zagu stared at Lu Dahai. "Cooperate? Interesting. Come on, tell me, how exactly do you plan to cooperate?"

Lu Dahai took several deep, difficult breaths before calming himself.

"From now on, in this lower deck, our two groups will be in charge, unifying food distribution. You take priority, we follow!"

"As long as we unite, no one else can cause trouble. Then everyone can eat well and live well. Isn't that better than constantly being suspicious of each other now?"

To dispel Zagu's doubts, Lu Dahai continued, "We're all just fighting for a bite to eat. Who really wants to risk their lives?"

Zagu stared hard into Lu Dahai's eyes.

Silence.

He gave no response to Lu Dahai's proposal.

That silence was suffocatingly oppressive.

Lu Dahai's heart pounded loudly.

But this hurdle had to be overcome.

...

After a while, the cabin door opened, and Lu Dahai walked out calmly.

Rong Lei, Yu Gang, and the others quickly gathered around. Seeing the injuries on Lu Dahai's face, they anxiously asked if he was alright.

"I'm fine. This hurdle is passed. Everyone, let's go back!"

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, those watching the commotion in other cabins felt extreme disappointment.

They all wished that Lu Dahai's group and the stowaways would fight to the death, preferably wiping each other out.

That way, the bullies would be gone and there would be enough food to eat.

As Lu Dahai passed by other cabins, he naturally saw the expressions on their faces.

He could guess what they were thinking, and a cold, mocking smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Back in their cabin, Lu Dahai said to Rong Lei and Yu Gang, "I knew those people wouldn't dare touch me. They aren't lacking food or drink now. What they fear most is dying."

"I've seen through Captain Zhang. He has his principles. As long as no one causes trouble, he won't bother us. But anyone who crosses his bottom line and causes him trouble, he'll kill us like killing chickens."

"Zagu doesn't have the guts to kill people here."

One man happily said, "That's great! As long as we get along peacefully with those stowaways from now on, we won't worry about food and drink!"

Lu Dahai glanced coldly at him, saying nothing.

The three of them—Lu Dahai, Rong Lei, and Yu Gang—had an unusual look in their eyes.

Keeping the peace was not their style.

The day Zagu and the others beat them up nearly to death, they had not forgotten that grudge.

Having fished all their lives at sea, their hearts were colder than the knives that caught fish!

In the following two days, the relationship between the stowaways and the fishermen's alliance was, as agreed, very peaceful.

The stowaways got to pick food first, while the fishermen's alliance took two portions afterward.

However, this made the already starving passengers in other cabins face even greater food shortages.

God only knew how they survived those two days; some went three days without a single grain of rice.

Struggling and despair made some unable to endure any longer.

Some, suppressing their fear, came to find Lu Dahai, begging for food.

"Boss Lu, we didn't help you before because we had no conscience. We know we were wrong. Please show mercy and spare us a chance to live!"

A group gathered outside Lu Dahai's cabin, kneeling and pleading bitterly.

Lu Dahai sneered and asked, "Why don't you go beg the stowaways instead of begging me?"

A few glanced at each other and said, "We're compatriots, but they're outsiders!"

Lu Dahai laughed coldly, "So compatriots are easier to bully, huh?"

Suddenly pointing at them, his face changed. "You're all cowards who pick fights at home!"

"You don't have the guts to challenge them, but you kneel here to beg me for pity."

"But it's too late. I don't sympathize with you at all. All of you get out now!"

At Lu Dahai's command, a group of henchmen immediately went to chase them away.

Those people cried and screamed, beaten harshly for being hungry, blood flowing everywhere.

People in other cabins saw this and were furious.

They hated Lu Dahai intensely.

By contrast, the instigators like Zagu weren't as hated.

Because outsiders bullied them, they felt it was only natural.

But Lu Dahai was the same as them—both Huaxu Kingdom people—so they thought Lu Dahai was scum, a beast.

Those people probably forgot that the scum they encountered in their own country were mostly their own compatriots.

And most of the wealth in their hands was gained by exploiting and cheating their own people.

Now thinking about blood ties was simply ridiculous.

At the stowaway cabin, Zagu saw Lu Dahai brutally beating his own compatriots and showed a mocking smile.

"They just like to fight among themselves. Let them fight, let them fight!"

The deeper the conflict between Lu Dahai and the other cabins grew, the more secure Zagu felt.

This greatly reduced the threat from the fishermen's alliance.

...

That night, Lu Dahai's cabin was pitch black.

Through the porthole, faint light filtered in, barely making out figures.

Shadows gathered in the cabin.

In the middle of several beds, seven or eight people sat on the floor.

They were representatives sent from various cabins.

The three Lu brothers also sat in the center.

Lu Dahai's eyes scanned the indistinct faces, a pair of ruthless eyes radiating intimidating killing intent.

"How are things in your cabins now?"

Lu Dahai's voice was extremely low.

After he asked, the others could no longer hold back and began to complain all at once.

"Brother Lu, people in our cabin are starving to death! Several women are just one step from the underworld!"

"If this continues, at least half the people in that cabin will die!"

"We really can't hold on anymore, or we wouldn't have come to ask you. We also know we acted badly at first. Please give us a chance to live!"

...

After hearing them out, Lu Dahai coldly said, "The ones who won't give you a chance to live aren't me. Have you forgotten who's responsible for us not having enough to eat?"

Chapter 849: On the Edge of Death

Lu Dahai's words reminded everyone.

At first, Zhang Yi provided them with enough food.

It was because Zhu Yunque secretly smuggled in more than twenty stowaways that everyone couldn't get enough to eat.

It was also Zagu's group who first used violence to occupy a large portion of the food.

Although Lu Dahai was hated by many, he was not the main culprit.

"You mean those people? But they're so fierce, we... don't dare provoke them!"

A bald man sighed helplessly.

Lu Dahai sneered, "If you can't mess with them, then just wait to starve to death."

A young man nearby angrily lowered his voice, "People can barely survive, and you're still scared of them?"

"If they hadn't taken our food, we all could have lived fine."

Some spoke timidly, "But if things get out of hand, people will die. Plus, there are people in charge above. I'm afraid something bad will happen."

"Better to be cautious. Less trouble is better."

Someone else cursed, "How can we keep enduring? If we keep enduring, we won't have lives left!"

Lu Dahai said nothing and just watched them talk among themselves.

Finally, someone thought of Lu Dahai.

“Brother Lu, can you help us decide?”

“You’re the most capable. As long as it lets us survive, we’ll follow whatever you say.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll listen to Brother Lu!”

...

This was exactly what Lu Dahai had been waiting to hear.

He glanced at the crowd and slowly said, “This can’t be solved peacefully. Everyone knows in their heart, when there’s more people than porridge, someone will starve.”

“If you want to live, you have to make sure they can’t survive.”

He leaned forward slightly to better see the expressions on everyone’s faces.

“At least we’re compatriots, bound by brotherly feelings. But those people won’t show you any mercy.”

“Just like now, I can still negotiate with you. Do you dare to go find Zagu?”

They exchanged uneasy glances. None had that courage.

A bold man said darkly, “You mean, deal with them all...”

He made a slicing motion across his neck.

Everyone's hearts raced faster.

Killing!

They were no strangers to this. Many had blood on their hands; on Rockflow Island, this was a daily occurrence.

But now they were on the Golden Edge, and many hesitated.

"If things escalate, the people above won't let us live."

Lu Dahai raised the corners of his mouth, "There's a saying: the law does not punish the many. If it's one or two people, they'll throw us into the sea. But if we unite and act together?"

"Even if the higher-ups want to intervene, they'll hesitate."

Lu Dahai said this only to reassure them and drag them into action.

He was brave; he had to avenge the grudge Zagu had against him!

So even if it meant risking Zhang Yi killing him, he was determined to do this!

"Decide, are we doing this or not!"

Lu Dahai crossed his arms and waited for their replies.

He acted calm, as if he didn't care.

Even if they chickened out, he still controlled the food supplies and the power that came with it.

The people in other cabins were already starving; they couldn't wait.

They looked at each other until someone finally spoke up first.

"Damn it!"

A man slapped his thigh and said fiercely, "I don't want to live like this scared every single day!"

"The way back is still long. We can't keep being scared turtles."

"The more we endure, the hungrier we get. They have food and drink every day; the longer this drags on, the more we lose out."

"Are we really going to let them control our lives?"

His words awakened many.

Right now, Zagu and the others still feared some consequences, so they only took two barrels of food.

But if this continued, they would take more and more.

They all understood human greed better than anyone; they were smart people here.

Of course, when considering this, everyone instinctively looked at Lu Dahai.

Zagu was that kind of person, and Lu Dahai was no different.

But so far, Zagu was the one they had the best chance to fight.

Because they could recruit Lu Dahai to oppose Zagu.

But due to their positions, they couldn't recruit Zagu to oppose Lu Dahai.

"Then let's do it! Dragging this on is just death anyway!"

The group found their courage and decided to fight desperately against the stowaway gang!

"Brother Lu, when do we strike?"

The main force was naturally the fishermen's alliance led by Lu Dahai.

Lu Dahai raised his eyelids, "Tomorrow is Sunday, the day for meat. Zagu will definitely bring people to protect the food."

"You go back and prepare whatever weapons you have."

"When I give the signal, everyone attack together!"

At this, Lu Dahai's gaze suddenly turned fierce and cruel.

"If anyone dares to leak information and become a traitor, or plays tricks and doesn't fight properly, hehe! I, Lu Dahai, will stab him to death before I die!"

Lu Dahai raised the toothbrush he had been sharpening daily. It still had black blood stains, making it terrifying.

“No way, we’re not that kind of people!”

“If you don’t fight, you’re the grandson!”

“Right, if anyone dares to be a traitor or hides to pick fruit, I’ll be the first to go after him!”

The meeting ended quietly; everyone sneaked back to their cabins.

In the darkness of night, they woke people in their cabins one by one and informed them of tomorrow’s plan.

“Quietly, don’t make a sound.”

“Fighting? But how? There isn’t even a stick here.”

“Wrap your hands with clothes, twist socks into ropes. When the time comes, hit hard. Use any means that can kill!”

...

That night, inside each cabin, in the thick darkness, they began using their imagination to make whatever weapons they could for killing.

Lu Dahai leaned against the wall, gripping his toothbrush, eyes wide open, completely sleepless.

He curled up in the corner, a very safe spot; even if a fight broke out suddenly, he could avoid being ambushed from behind.

He had fought many times and killed for food on Rockflow Island.

But fundamentally, he didn't think of himself as a bad person.

He just wanted to survive, and that wasn't wrong.

In his heart, if life were peaceful, he'd be willing to help others stand up for themselves. This was the innate chivalry of people from the east of Lu.

Hating evil and delighting in justice, he even felt the passion and emotions of his predecessors.

The night was as deep and black as ink. He was like a quiet bat, silently waiting in the darkness.

Chapter 850: A Bet [Bonus 1]

The night passed and daylight arrived. The morning light on the sea was faint, barely illuminating anything, leaving the lower deck still dim though visible enough to see. Zhang Yi and Zhou Ke'er finished breakfast and took a walk on the deck.

Over ten days had passed since departure, with everything calm and peaceful. Yet Zhang Yi's intuition told him the Fin Dragon was definitely out there. The calm always comes before the storm. That terrifying, massive deep-sea creature was intelligent - it wouldn't attack recklessly. Perhaps it was waiting for the perfect opportunity, like when a blizzard hit. This posed a slight inconvenience for Zhang Yi.

However, he had full confidence in his abilities. In a direct confrontation, the Fin Dragon stood no chance against him. Otherwise, how could he be considered one of the top experts in the Jiangnan Region?

Old Tian approached with his men and greeted Zhang Yi. "Mr. Zhang, morning!"

Zhang Yi glanced at him with a smile. "How's everything on board recently? Any unusual activity?"

Old Tian thought for a moment before shaking his head. "They've been behaving, though those foreigners from the Rockflow Group keep complaining occasionally."

"Doesn't matter. Once we dock, we'll send them to your base to pedal generators," Zhang Yi said indifferently.

Old Tian nodded with a smile. "Understood."

"Oh, one more thing. Have the mops ready - we'll need to thoroughly clean the cabins today."

Old Tian looked puzzled. "We clean daily, and the cabins aren't dirty!"

A meaningful smile played on Zhang Yi's lips as he leaned against the railing, gazing at the distant horizon. "They'll come in handy."

Though unsure of Zhang Yi's intentions, Old Tian obediently followed instructions. After walking around the ship with Zhou Ke'er, Zhang Yi prepared to return.

"By the way, how's that baby Zhu Yunque's been taking care of recently?" Zhang Yi asked casually.

Zhou Ke'er burst out laughing at the question, shaking her head helplessly. "Those two are absolutely regretting their lives now. Spoiled young ladies from official families, accustomed to being waited on hand and foot - when have they ever needed to care for others?"

"Even ordinary people would find caring for a one-year-old headache-inducing. Last time I went to check on that baby Tommy, their care was atrocious. Su Nuanxi washed his diapers while crying the whole time."

A pleased expression crossed Zhang Yi's face. Though a man, he occasionally enjoyed such gossip - it was genuinely amusing. "Respect others' choices, abandon savior complexes. Let's see - we've got at least six more weeks. How long do you think they'll last?"

Zhou Ke'er understood Zhang Yi wouldn't lift a finger to help them, nor allow others to assist. After some thought, she sighed. "At most two more weeks before they break down."

Zhang Yi smiled. "Won't take that long. I bet one week tops before they crack!"

Zhou Ke'er widened her eyes. "No way! They don't seem that bad yet."

Zhang Yi narrowed his eyes. "You'll see." Turning to Zhou Ke'er, he said playfully, "How about a bet? See who's right."

Zhou Ke'er's lively eyes sparkled with confidence. "I stand by my prediction! What are we betting?"

Zhang Yi grinned mischievously. "If I win, you'll..." He whispered in her ear.

Zhou Ke'er's eyes nearly popped out. "That's... impossible!"

"Everything's worth trying. Believe in your potential."

After some mental calculation, Zhou Ke'er felt she had better odds. "Deal! But if I win, you have to..."

The exact terms of their wager shall remain undisclosed. In any case, the bet was set.

On their way back, they encountered the haggard-looking Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi. The two no longer maintained their former refinement. During the initial voyage, regardless of cold weather, Zhu Yunque insisted on light makeup daily to preserve her image and grace. But recently, with sleepless nights caring for the child, they constantly looked exhausted. Forget makeup - they probably hadn't changed underwear in ages. Though... Fatty Xu would likely find this exciting.

"Morning, Miss Zhu, Miss Su," Zhou Ke'er greeted cheerfully.

They responded politely to Zhou Ke'er but eyed Zhang Yi with displeasure. As captain, Zhang Yi could easily solve all their problems with minimal effort. Yet he seemed to enjoy their suffering, deliberately refusing help - how could the young ladies possibly look kindly upon him?

Zhang Yi didn't care. Watching them collect meals to eat in their room, he suddenly asked, "By the way, have you visited the lower deck recently?"

Zhu Yunque and Su Nuanxi froze slightly, their eyes showing confusion. Since when did Zhang Yi care about others' affairs?

Zhu Yunque frowned, suddenly remembering that matter. Last time they'd kindly brought food, they'd been terrified by the desperate starving refugees. Since then, they'd never dared repeat their charity. With Tommy's illness, they'd had no time to spare. But surely those people wouldn't starve - it couldn't be serious.

"Haven't been down in days. Why? Is something wrong?" Zhu Yunque asked curiously.

Zhang Yi shrugged. "Nothing much. Honestly, it's not my concern - they're your responsibility after all. Seeing you so relaxed, I assume you've solved their food situation. Forget I mentioned it!"

Zhu Yunque shot Zhang Yi a glare. "Instead of helping, you just make sarcastic remarks. Mr. Zhang, can't you be more magnanimous?"

Zhang Yi raised his hands in surrender, smiling. "Alright, alright, my bad for asking." He left with Zhou Ke'er.

Watching his retreating figure, Zhu Yunque felt an inexplicable unease. "Could something have happened?"

She inquired with a crew member about conditions below. The crewman shrugged. "What could happen? Just fighting over scraps of food."

"Any deaths?" Zhu Yunque pressed.

"Shouldn't be any deaths," the crewman answered offhandedly. "In that confined space, you couldn't hide a corpse." The smell would be unmistakable.

Relieved, Zhu Yunque said, "Good, that's good then."