

Mythical 87

Chapter 87: Courting Death

Liu Bei's recruitment edict offered Gan Ning a glimmer of hope, so he gathered his band of water bandits, preparing to surrender and join Liu Bei. Poor Gan Ning had yet to understand that it wasn't his abilities or his background as a bandit that had kept others from recruiting him.

As for Lu Jun and his party, they were incidentally captured by Gan Ning. It couldn't be helped—a ship full of salt, worth a million coins or more in strategic resources, was too tempting. Salt was indispensable, and this ship carried refined salt.

Originally, Gan Ning had planned to give up banditry, but upon hearing about this shipment, he couldn't resist and decided to rob it.

Despite his circumstances, Gan Ning maintained a certain level of decorum. And since the Lu family had few members and raised all their males within the family, there was no room for any misbehavior. The family adhered to strict principles, and Lu Jun's exemplary behavior made Gan Ning feel almost like a nobleman rather than a bandit. As long as no one was killed, Gan Ning felt he could make any demand he wanted.

"This ship of salt is mine!" Gan Ning declared to Lu Jun after boarding the ship by cleaving a small boat in half with a single stroke of his half-moon blade.

"As long as you don't harm us, we'll help you transport the salt wherever you want," Lu Jun responded, not with a plea for mercy but with a negotiation: take the goods, spare our lives.

Even if this ship of salt had cost money, Lu Jun would still have given it up. His family had few male heirs, and they couldn't afford to lose even one. Money could be earned again; lost lives couldn't be replaced.

Lu Kang's teachings had paid off. When faced with bandits, the Lu family would surrender immediately, offering whatever was demanded, so long as lives were spared. They would even offer to buy their freedom later if needed.

This soft approach had actually kept them safe from most robbers. Water bandit leaders like Zhou Tai and Jiang Qin would even escort their ships sometimes. They valued the regular tribute more than the sporadic windfall from robbery, and over time, they found it easier to let the Lu family's ships pass in peace.

This unspoken rule had been established: a Lu family ship could yield a hundred thousand coins. Among the notorious water bandits of the Yangtze River, each major leader would get two thousand coins, while smaller groups would get one thousand coins. Spreading twenty thousand coins ensured safe passage, and if a Lu family ship hit a reef, the bandits would even help rescue it.

This symbiotic relationship meant the Lu family could safely navigate the Yangtze. Other merchant families weren't so lucky; bandits would attack them, but they'd leave the Lu family alone, collecting their tribute and ensuring safe passage.

Lu Jun's plan was to take a shipload of salt to Jingzhou, distributing some to the water bandits along the way. With the world's current instability, he wanted to maintain good relations with them. After all, they might be needed in the future. He figured it was better to use this shipload of salt, which cost them nothing, to secure the goodwill of the bandits.

This strategy proved to be a lifesaver for the Lu family. Three years later, when Sun Ce overran Lujiang and sought to exterminate the Lu family, twelve-year-old Lu Xun and his young brother Lu Ji managed to escape to their ancestral home in Jiangdong, thanks to the water bandits who remembered the family's kindness.

On hearing that Lu Jun's ship had vanished, Zhou Tai and Jiang Qin quickly began searching the Yangtze. Normally, by this time, the Lu family ship would have reached Zhou Tai's territory. When it didn't, he sent his men to look for it, fearing it had wrecked.

Their initial search turned up nothing, so they intensified their efforts. After all, the Lu family ships were their lifeline, ensuring steady income. Losing them meant a return to the unpredictable, dangerous life of constant raiding.

This search involved nearly all the water bandits on the Yangtze, causing panic in Jingzhou's governor Cai Mao. Seeing the bandits mobilize, he feared an uprising. Jingzhou's navy, although formidable, wasn't guaranteed to defeat these seasoned river fighters.

Reporting this to higher authorities, the news spread quickly: the disappearance of a Lu family heir had mobilized the entire Yangtze's banditry. The Lu family's seemingly harmless facade now appeared far more intimidating.

Meanwhile, Gan Ning, unaware of the turmoil he'd caused by robbing the Lu family, leaned against a wall to avoid the rain. He didn't realize that every water bandit on the Yangtze now wanted to kill him for disrupting their system.

The Lu family's soft approach had earned them protection and respect. Messing with their ships was akin to committing suicide; Gan Ning had unknowingly antagonized the entire river's underworld.