

## PROLOGUE

1818

### The South China Sea



THE WILD STORM SEEMS TO HAVE NO END, THE HEAVENS above unleashing a relentless torrent as the sea rises and falls in response. The wind howls, screeching as it cuts through the torrential rain, snapping at every item that had the misfortune to be left loose. The small fishing vessel is not built for this type of onslaught at all, and it tumbles in the rising waves like a child's toy.

A shrieking gale knocks open a loose hatch and sends a deluge of rain below deck. The storm's rough waves send all the empty hammocks swinging. A chubby hand reaches for the edge of one of the two hammocks whose owners should be sleeping, and her eyes blink wide awake.

The girl is but eight years old, grinning wide enough to rival yesterday's shining crescent moon. A particularly ferocious wave crashes against the hull, knocking her grip loose

and sending the hammock swinging. She tumbles to the rough-hewn floor in a heap, but rights herself quickly, her bare feet plopping against the wet planks.

She climbs above deck, and immediately her hair whips behind her with the sheer force of the wind. The crew is shouting, barely audible over the roar of the wind and the rain. She can hear her mother barking orders, something about avoiding the shoals and more complicated directions lost in the wind.

The ship heels perilously to one side, and she laughs when she almost falls, skidding to the right to keep her balance. It's like a dance—the moon trying to peek out behind the clouds, the rains making all the surfaces as slick as if they've been coated with oil, the ship's deck approaching vertical as crew members desperately hang onto something, anything, to avoid being thrown into the sea.

“Anh! Get back below deck! This storm is no joke!”

“I can help, Mẹ!” Anh calls out to her mother.

“The halyard line is twisted! It won't pass through the eye!” Bác Tu shouts. A particularly fierce gust wrenches the line out of his hands, and the wind whips it up into the air before he seizes it again.

“I'll get it, Bác Tu! Don't worry!” Anh races forward, her hands trailing along the rail as she makes her way to the mast. Anh delights in the challenge, her hands and feet finding their place on the swaying lacings. She climbs the drenched, slippery mast, ignoring the commotion below.

Her uncle shouts at her something incomprehensible, but

Anh gets the gist of it; he wants her back down on deck immediately. But she is almost there, and no one else would have done it—or could, she guesses, as she’s smaller and faster than anyone, except maybe Auntie Ling, who outraced her across the deck the other day.

Anh concentrates on holding tight, using the lacings for balance as she makes it to the top. She finds the tangle and shakes it loose, and immediately the line pulls taut with the force of the wind, passing through the eye easily.

Anh slides back down to the deck from the mast, and for a second it feels like she’s flying, a small act of defiance against the storm as she falls toward the deck. The surface rises up to meet her sooner than she anticipates. Her cheek smarts from where her face smacks against the wet wooden planks of the deck; she curls up into a ball and rolls just as an errant wave sends the ship toppling in the other direction.

“Anh!” Mệ shouts out in horror.

“I’m fine!” Anh declares, getting up. She races over to where her mother is pulling her line and joins her, her arms straining with effort as they pull. Together they manage to furl the sail in a few moments. Anh barely has time to be proud before her mother has picked her up and started carrying her below deck.

“Hey!” Anh struggles, wiggling playfully.

“Do not ever do that again,” Mệ says.

“But I helped,” Anh insists.

“It’s too dangerous in a storm. The mast is no place to climb,” Mệ says, setting her down. “Go back to sleep.”

“But I want to be up top!”

“Stop acting like a wet fish!” Mẹ snaps, holding her still.

Anh frowns; usually her mother joins her in the game, teasing and tickling her.

“It’s safer down here. You can help above deck another time, when the sea can’t take you away from me.”

Anh nods and makes her way back toward her hammock. She listens to the footsteps on the deck above, the crew’s shouts.

A shrill cry rises up from the hammock next to hers. Her little brother is awake.

Anh peers over the edge of the swaying fabric, looking down at his little face scrunched up and covered in tears. He cries even harder, reaching for comfort.

“It’s just a storm, Thanh, it’ll pass,” she says. She reaches out, and he takes her hand, his stubby fingers closing around her own, but he only bawls louder.

Her mother climbs down the ladder and wrings out her shirtsleeves, dripping water onto the floor as she approaches them.

“Hush, hush, it’s fine, it’ll be over soon,” Mẹ says, coming up to Thanh’s hammock. She picks up Thanh, and he presses his face against her neck.

“When?” he sobs.

“That is not for us to know or decide. All we must do is endure it. And all you can do right now, little one, is to go back to sleep.”

Anh settles into her hammock and watches her mother

sit down, gently holding Thanh and making soothing noises. With her foot, she reaches out and steadies Anh's hammock as well. Anh smiles, listening to the waves crash against the ship and the storm rage on.

Thanh fusses, continuing to cry.

"What about a story?" Mẹ asks with a soft smile.

Thanh snuffles and nods, wiping at his face. "Yes!"

Voices shout from above deck. "Captain! Should we try to make for the lee of the island to weather the storm?"

"I'll be there in a moment! Go ahead!" Mẹ calls out. "All right, little ones. A story."

"One with treasure!" Thanh gurgles, breaking into a smile.

"Zheng Yi Sao," Anh presses. One of her favorites. She knows the story of this formidable woman by heart, but she loves the way her mother tells it.

"Yes, yes," Thanh mumbles. "Tell me about the treasure again."

Her mother snorts and smiles. "Again? Well. Let me see if I remember."

"The thousands and thousands of ships!" Anh chirps. "The great Dragon Fleet!"

Her mother smiles at Anh, stroking Thanh's hair as her voice slips into a familiar cadence. "Many years ago, before you both were born, these seas were ruled by pirates. Seeing another sail on the horizon would be worse than seeing a storm on the rise. You didn't know what you were chancing when you set out for a haul; it could be your ship, your

entire livelihood, your life itself. Most fishers went upriver instead, going inland instead of facing the pirates.”

“But you and Ba didn’t, Mẹ!” Thanh gurgles excitedly.

“Yes, well, many called us fools. But we took our chances, and we caught fish and crabs and prawns and continued to make our living. See, the pirates hardly bothered with us. In fact, the few times a ship would come alongside they would perhaps intimidate us a bit, but mostly it was to convince us to join their fleet. Join their fleet. The pirates were so bold, they set out for only the most desirable of prizes—traders from distant lands, kings’ galleons filled with precious spices, lumber and oil, gold and jade, riches you could only dream of.”

Anh sighs as she settles into the familiar story, thinking of the daring feats of the pirates. She’s heard so many stories of their sieges, how they fought against the Qing emperor’s navy when no one else dared to. The sounds of the storm fade away as she listens to her mother’s story.

“The waters were soon impassable without the seal of protection from the great Red Banner Fleet, a massive confederation of pirates who sailed under the command of one woman, a fierce and ruthless leader who commanded thousands and thousands of ships. For years they controlled all the travel in these waters, the entire coast of Việt Nam and the south of China, and were so fearsome that the Qing even enlisted help from the British and the Portuguese. But their massive ships could not maneuver the narrow channels and bays, especially in the archipelago of Hạ Long Bay.”

Anh nods sleepily, thinking of the small floating fishing villages adrift on makeshift docks, and the scores of tiny places tucked inside the coves. She's never seen a large imperial warship like the ones in Mệ's stories, but she can imagine how silly it might look, trying to wedge between the tall narrow passages of cliffs rising up in the bay, the shallow rivers that led inland toward hidden coves and clusters of villages.

"Zheng Yi Sao had a colossal ship, and all her lieutenants had these beasts that were practically like floating cities. The Dragon Fleet was a massive organization—many squadrons sailed under their banner with thousands of ships, including the Red, Yellow, Blue and the Black Banner Squadrons, only united under Zheng Yi Sao's command. Cheung Po Tsai, the lieutenant of the Red Banner Squadron, had a temple constructed on his, but the majority of the vessels that made up the bulk of the ships were small junks, flat-bottomed ships—"

"Like ours!" Anh says, excited.

Mệ smiles. "Do you want to tell the story, or should I?"

Anh ducks her head sheepishly and waits for her mother to continue.

"Yes, ships like ours could easily sail upriver without any trouble. See, there were many fishing vessels that joined the fleets, local fishing folk looking to try their luck at something more." Mệ shrugs and smiles, lost in a distant memory. "And then as more ships did the same, and the stories of Zheng Yi Sao and the Red Banner Fleet grew and spread,

the Qing emperor grew tired of the pirates challenging him and humiliating his navy, but try as he could he could not best their cunning. She and her pirates would lay waste to his ships, ruthlessly seizing any goods he tried to distribute or those of foreigners hoping to do trade with his empire. A whole ship laden with gold and jade and jewels headed for the kingdom of Siam fell to her once, and her sights grew even higher.

“Zheng Yi Sao had done what no other pirate in the South China Sea had before—she had united multiple squadrons into an army, amassing enough wealth and power to draw the attention of multiple empires . . . at least until the Jiaqing Emperor could take no more.”

“What happened?” Thanh asks sleepily.

“At first, he attempted to eradicate the pirates. The Liangguang governor-general of the Guangdong province and the Qing navy however were helpless against the might of the fleet. The Chinese, the Portuguese, the British, even in their attempts to work together to fight the Red Banner Fleet, could not defeat Zheng Yi Sao and her pirate army. They attempted to corner her, but she held the entire port of Canton under siege, her Red Squadron blocking all trade until the Liangguang governor-general surrendered to her terms. They issued pardons to all the pirates, and many of the skilled lieutenants and captains were recruited into the navy, and given official positions of their own. The rest of the pirates, pardoned but with nowhere to go, went back to their lives—fishers and merchants, struggling to get along.”



Thanh is asleep now, and Mệ rises up slowly from his hammock, giving him a soft smile.

“And Zheng Yi Sao? What happened to her?” Anh asks, gripping the edge of her hammock.

The wind howls, and above them, the crew is still frantically trying to set the ship to rights as the rain pounds down upon the deck with a constant rhythm. Mệ smiles, lowering her voice. “No one knows. She disappeared. Some say she took a position in the navy, or that she died in that battle. And some say she still commands a ship to this day, and you can see the shadow of it on nights like these, riding a wild storm.”

“And the treasure?”

“Lost forever. The loot of thousands of ships, plunder from different kingdoms, collected over her reign when she commanded these waters. Some say it was hidden so cleverly that she must have summoned dark magic to help hide the island where it was buried. That the island itself is only visible on the night of a full moon, and that no one could sail there without the blessing of the sea gods, or the ghost of Zheng Yi Sao herself guiding the way.”

Anh gapes. “What kind of treasure?”

“Everything you can think of. Imagine crates filled with precious jewels and jade, so lustrous and green, polished and perfect. Gold and silver cash from the Qing imperials who thought they were above their people. Barrels of expensive spices and rich lumber harvested from deep inland. Luxuries from faraway lands, silks . . .”

“Enough wealth you would need to use multiple lifetimes to spend it all,” Mệ says.

“Do you think it’s still out there?” Anh wonders out loud, her eyelids starting to droop. “It’s real, right? It’s not just a story?”

“Of course it’s real, little one. Here, take this.”

Mệ hands her something cold and worn, something that almost looks like a cash coin with the square hole in the center—except instead of being engraved with the emperor’s seal, it has a long dragon coiling around the center, with clouds swirling around it. The dragon’s long whiskers hook around its face, and the eyes look right up at the beholder, as if issuing a challenge.

Anh closes her eyes and clutches the coin tight, falling asleep with a dream in her hand.

CHAPTER ONE

# THE ARRIVAL

1826

Guangdong province, the empire of China



THE HORIZON GLITTERS AS IT DISAPPEARS INTO THAT UNIMAGINABLE place where sea meets the sky. I have been watching this ship for over an hour, ever since it left its port. From here, Canton is just a suggestion of buildings, a smudge of shadows barely visible on the gleaming delta. Through my spyglass I can barely see the movement of ships. I can only imagine what it must be like: sailors laughing boisterously as they approach land, singing songs, departing crews shouting as they heave the sails and set out into the world beyond.

This particular junk I've been watching must be massive. But now with the ship drifting out to sea, it is but a pinprick between my fingers as it touches that strange place where the sparkling blue of the ocean is near indistinguishable from the hazy edge of the sky.

The ship disappears over the glittering horizon, off to lands I can only dream of.

Soft puffs of clouds are scattered across that bright blue expanse above, drifting along the playful spring wind. The breeze kisses my face, and I take a deep breath, wondering if this same wind is the one that lifted someone's lucky sails.

I close my book, whispering the words of the poem I've committed to memory, each verse filled with a longing I've never truly understood. "Once you've experienced ocean, nothing else is considered water," I say to myself.

Yuan Zhen's words have always spoken to me; this particular poem filled with longing is no exception. There's something about describing a feeling that is so magnificent it may never come again, a love that is irreplaceable, that captures my imagination. I sigh, wondering what that would feel like.

I readjust my position in the tree, stretching before settling back into the forked crook of the trunk, a spot perfect for curling up in, the bark worn from many lazy afternoons in this favorite spot. It would be easy to miss me, just a slight youth hidden in the trees—and indeed that is my intention, as I have been shirking my duties.

I trekked all morning to get to this particular spot on the peak of the cragged mountain, where the cliff directly faces south toward the delta of the Pearl River, offering a glimpse of one of the ports of Canton and the ships leaving it.

I am sixteen, and I have never left the village. I've never even been to the bustling metropolis of Canton, despite my

family owning another teahouse there—even more successful and busy than the one in the village. Mother has always said the city is no place for a young girl.

I sigh, dreaming of the stories that the travelers there must tell, the distant places they've been, music and foods from other lands. I can only imagine the taste of honeyed dates, the feel of finely spun silks from Siam, the taste of those famed spicy noodles from the Sichuan province, juicy tropical fruits from faraway lands.

I've only glimpsed these other worlds beyond my small riverside village in my scrolls and books, precious rare luxuries, stories and poems collected from Master Feng's collection or gifts from Mother's travels. These works are my only window into worlds beyond this quiet village and this lonely mountain.

Down in the valley, I can see the sloped tiles of the village's roofs surrounded by sparkling streams as they cross the delta in delicate threads before they meet the Pearl. The great river sparkles, deceptively calm in this afternoon light as it reflects the green hills above. I lose sight of it past the fields of terraced rice paddies and catch it again beyond the rising green cliffs in the distance as it twists and turns like its namesake's dragon tail.

Approaching footsteps pull me out of my daydreams. I climb a bit higher, hidden in the leafy canopy. The path up to the top of this peak isn't well known, and there's nothing of interest up here other than the view. There are far better trails on the other side of the river, yielding fruit-bearing

trees, tall stalks of bamboo, and better hunting. The rising rocks on this particular steep slope make it too precarious for a casual walk.

An amused voice huffs. "Xiang! I see you, you know."

I laugh, tucking myself farther into the tree, taking another steady step on the branch above me. I can hardly believe Master Feng trekked all the way up here, but sure enough, I can see the edge of my tutor's familiar robes coming around the last switchback. His hair has slipped out of its usual careful topknot and is loose around his face, sweat lining his brow. He winces as he stretches, arching his back as he reaches for the sky.

"And how was the walk, old man?"

Master Feng scoffs at me, standing up taller. "The disrespect!" he scolds, but the tone holds no heat and his eyes are dancing with amusement.

Despite his preference for boring texts and badgering me about proper calligraphy and stodginess with forming characters, the tutor has always listened patiently to my rambles and indulged me in stories of his former travels when he was a scholar.

I laugh again. "Are you not forty years?"

He gingerly walks over to me, picking his way toward the ledge where the tree is clinging to the edge of the mountain-top, and follows my gaze. He sighs. "Sometimes I feel much older, as if I have lived many lifetimes."

I can barely imagine Master Feng as the way the elderly villagers describe him as a young boy growing up here. Old

Man Lo always would say, “That Feng Zhanli, so smart, makes us all so proud.” He scored high enough in the imperial examinations to study at the university in Beijing, and then traveled extensively before returning—finding his fortunes in Canton, traveling the sweeping hills of Siam, visiting ancient temples in Cambodia, and making friends in every port. Everyone is always talking about how it’s a shame he never married, but he’s the darling of the village, an eccentric academic regarded with fondness.

I never tire of his stories, especially those from when he worked as an accountant on several merchant ships, helping merchants keep their ledgers and run their businesses. Master Feng has traveled to so many kingdoms in his work, and even more when he started working for my parents. Now that I’m thinking about it, I want to ask more about what they were like back then—especially my father—but I know it’ll just put him in an unnecessarily despondent mood.

His eyes turn from the horizon and then back up to the tree. “Have you been here all day? Watching ships again?”

“No,” I lie, and with a glance below me I realize it’s too late to hide the pile of discarded banana leaves carelessly strewn on the ground, sticky rice residue still clinging to the shiny wrappers from my meal earlier. There are even a few strips dangling from the branch below me. I wince. Orange peels are scattered exactly where I dropped them, seeds shining with juice in little trails on the ground, and to my horror, there’s even one on the scroll sticking out of my bag.

Master Feng's mouth falls open in shock when he sees it. He huffs toward me, plucking the peel off. He unwinds the scroll to inspect it before winding it back up and securing it tightly. "I thought I said not to take these out of the library," he chides. He wipes the outer edge carefully with the sleeve of his robe, apparently appeased the contents haven't been damaged.

"I am expanding my mind, as you directed me this morning. Continuing my studies. You never said where."

Master Feng makes a noise of disapproval. "These texts would be impossible to replace."

"I was careful, I promise!"

His expression softens as his fingers linger over the bound cover of my favorite title. "Stories again?"

"I'm done with all my lessons," I say.

It is true. I spent all morning copying prayers for the new shrine for the Xuan family at Master Feng's request and even redoing them when he complained that I was being too hasty, forming the characters incorrectly. My fingers are stained with ink from the practice. I hate calligraphy, and I can't see any point in making the words pretty as long as the reader understands what I have to say. In any case, Mother is not here to criticize my work. The past two weeks I have savored this time to myself, easily slipping away from everyone who is supposed to be minding me in favor of spending time drifting down the rivers in my sampan boat and climbing up here to watch the distant port.

Master Feng humphs, but I can tell he's amused. "I



thought you might want to know she returns home today. I set out looking for you as soon as her messenger arrived.”

I sit up so quickly my woven hat tumbles to the ground, along with the rest of the ripe oranges I’d collected for my afternoon watching the ships. “She said she wouldn’t return for another month!”

He points to the river, and for a second it’s just the winding green cutting through the mountains as it always has been. I follow his gesture and spot the red tinge of a sail slowly drifting into view as it rounds the bend, an impressive vessel with three sails that can traverse the river with ease.

I gasp and lose my balance as I try to get a better look, and I nearly fall out of the tree. I barely grab the branch above me in time. I hoist myself higher and pull out my spyglass again. The junk could be a merchant ship on its way upriver into the country toward the larger cities, but I can see it turning onto one of the tributaries leading directly to our village.

I scramble out of my perch in a hurry. The branches catch on my bare arms as I climb down hastily, my heart pounding with panic. It could only be Mother.

There’s no time to waste. I must be home immediately.

I jump too soon from the lowest branch, my pendant slipping out of my shirt with the movement, and the ground rises up to meet me faster than I expect. I tumble right into Master Feng and cough, spluttering dust as he helps me up to my feet, laughing.

“Thank you!” I call over my shoulder, already on my way down the path, my heart pounding with panic.

“There is no need to run!” Master Feng shouts after me. “The ship is still quite far off. Xiang! Slow down, you’re going to hurt yourself. Nightfall, I believe is what she said—”

The dirt trail is hot under my sandals as I race down the mountain, the sound of Master Feng’s voice and his steady footsteps already fading away. The steep trail is covered in rocks and roots, and I scramble quickly down the scattered rocky terrain. It took about two treacherous hours to reach the peak, and it should only take half the time to descend. I know every dip and bend of the path, every place where the rocks are loose, which branches are worn smooth by my fingers reaching for handholds at the most difficult parts of the trail.

Birds flutter and squawk as I startle them from the trees, my footsteps thundering as I jump, my blood pounding in my ears. My hair flies free from the loose braid I gathered it in this morning, and I have no time to care.

Finally, the path evens out as I meet the soft green of the fields below and the stream where my sampan boat is waiting. I gulp, wondering if I should take the time to stash it back in the rushes and cover it with branches and leaves. The sampan is technically a secret—Mother would disapprove, and I’m not supposed to have a boat. Getting this one took months of planning and hassle and stockpiling some of the silks I had to trade Elder Xuan for it. But it had been worth it for the freedom to explore downriver, to get away

from Lan Nai Nai's harsh lectures and the monotony of the teahouse.

I chance a look at the sun already dipping low behind the mountains, casting long shadows in the golden afternoon light. Behind me, the ship is prominently visible now, sailing toward the village, all red sails and polished teak amid a sea of green fields. I can come back tomorrow to fetch the sampan. Going upriver will be slower than on foot, and I will need time to get ready for Mother.

I settle into a steady pace, already exhausted from the trek down, but I have to make it before Mother gets home. My golden pendant bounces against my chest, and I tuck the small piece back under my shirt. The shape is familiar in my hands, the width and length of my smallest finger, like a tiny scroll, a comfort tucked close to my heart.

I race along the small river that flows past our village, waving at Yao the vegetable seller and her boat filled with fresh produce. More sampans are filled with fishermen checking their traps, and other vegetable sellers and rice carriers lingering together and trading gossip.

Leaving my boat behind means I still have to cross the river, and I can just imagine Lan Nai Nai's face when I arrive at the teahouse dripping water and covered in mud.

I make a quick decision and jump onto the nearest sampan boat. "Pardon me! Coming through!" A head of cabbage threatens to roll off into the water as the boat jostles, and I catch it neatly, throwing it back onto the boat.

"Always in a hurry," Old Man Lo mumbles in distaste.

He's perpetually sour, grumpy no matter the weather. "So rude!"

Dashing across the floating market, I jump from boat to boat, keeping to the edges as I traverse the small river. A few sellers laugh and shake their heads, and I call out apologies as I scramble across the sampans laden with vegetables, sacks of rice and other goods.

"That Shi Xiang is so strange and wild, always running off into the woods," Lo mutters.

"She could have been your daughter-in-law!" one of the fishermen teases. "You could be resting in that teahouse right now instead of working so hard every day."

"Ha! Madam Shi would have never approved," Lo retorts. "In any case, my boy came to his senses quickly before he could properly make a proposal. He's got a better match in the next village anyway."

Their comments sting, but I don't let them know that I can hear them and keep running. I know I am a mess, my hair loose and flying down my back, my clothes streaked in dirt.

Most of the village finds me odd and avoids me, likely because of Mother's strange city ways or because of my own lack of decorum. I used to have close friends, like Lo Qian. Perhaps that's why the vegetable seller dislikes me so much; he always thought I was a bad influence on his daughter. Qian and I used to play together as children, running in the fields and laughing and taking quiet naps in the marshes, tickling each other with the long grasses.