

A New Anhai

Giacomo held the delicate cup in his hand, admiring the swirling patterns of leaves and lines, like ornamental veins on translucent skin. He returned the cup to its porcelain stand, filled it with tea. Scents of jasmine and osmanthus arose from the green liquid and infused the air.

Daifu, your tea.

Zheng He remained by the window, gazing at the edges of a Liguria Sea sprinkled with the hardware of maritime trade and power. In the distance, on the land to his left, he surveyed the construction of his greatest gift to the Genoese – the temple for Mazu, the goddess who protects men of the sea, such as they all were.

He watched the sunbeams dance on Zheng He's face, some seemingly absorbed into the dark crevices of skin that marked time and worry. Lambent light glided across the embroidered silk robe, making him appear as if descended from the same heavenly bodies that guided his ships.

Giacomo still remembered that day, the one that first brought his mentor to this port. On this earth for barely 12 years, he had stood mesmerised by the great size of the treasure ships of the Celestials, wondering why such large things had not sunk into the depths of the Mediterranean.

It was a moment that had marked the meeting of middles. The Middle Land and the Middle Kingdom.

He lost his parents in the ensuing war, but Zheng He had taken him in. Treated Giacomo better than he as a young captive of the Ming had once been; like the son it was impossible for him to have. A simple Genoese boy, son of a builder of *cochafor* merchants, had learned about Confucius and Mencius, memorised the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, taken the rigorous scholarly exams. Mastered Nankinese and the eight-legged essay. Emerged as a *loutea*, a scholar-bureaucrat, travelled to places beyond his imagination. Made his way well in this world remade.

Zheng He finally moved towards the table, sipped the lukewarm tea.

I am old and weary, Gia, and must soon return to Nanjing. He raised a hand, blocking the words trying to emerge from Giacomo's heart. *We have accomplished much, you and me, in building Xinanhai. Old Genoa. Almost twenty years together. It is now your time to rise, dear Gia.*

The admiral of the great Celestial fleet finished his tea, shuffled back to the view of his greatest love.

I nearly didn't make it here, Gia, to think we almost never met. Have I told you that story? I was in the port of Mombasa when I received word that the great Ming emperor, Yongle, had left this earthly domain. Zhu Gaozhi became the Emperor Hongxi, but he lacked his father's great vision and courage. He was fearful that my journeys would contaminate our great kingdom, so recalled my fleet, abandoned all diplomatic missions. But by the time I had returned, Zhu Gaozhi was dead.

Zheng He paused, shivering briefly at the memory.

It was rumoured he was poisoned. His brother, Zhu Gaoxu, took his place, our Tianzi. A fierce warrior, who not only restored the voyages but urged us to expand our influence, to explore and ever wonder at the world. And so we are where we are, Gia.

The man of true greatness never loses his child's heart, daifu.

Zheng He turned towards his protégé, and smiled. Gia, I swear the qi in your blood is more purely celestial than one born in the centre of Zhongguo itself.

The shadows of the Palazzo San Giorgio attempted to conceal Giacomo as he turned into the narrow alleyway. He acknowledged the cloth merchant in the street level stall before climbing the staircase that led to his humble rooms.

The wooden door was unlatched, and Giacomo wondered at who should not be there.

He pushed open the door, entered light of foot. Peered around the corner, into the bedchamber.

The voices seemed unconcerned by his return. Two men, seated on the bed covered with brocco and chestnut checked cloth, laughed heartily. The larger one looked up towards the archway, abruptly stood, smoothing down his woollen tunic and hose.

Momo! You have returned!

Giacomo tilted his head in greeting, stepped in closer. *Domenego. Bertino.*

Do you know why we visit, brother?

I have already given my answer.

The acidic words furrowed Domenego's face. He leaned over, spat. *Have you forgotten your roots, Momo?*

Bertino now arose, diplomatically placing himself between the two men. *We should discuss it more, that is all.*

Discuss? It is action that is required, not more meaningless words. Look at you Momo, in your silk and barbarian headwear. What would your father say? He was only a simple shipbuilder, but he knew the essence of this place lies in merchants like us. Your Celestials have even tried to destroy the legacy of the great Marco Polo!

Dom, you know merchants seek only personal gain. They cannot see beyond their own desires. You are wealthy, be content with that. Leave politics to those who have studied for it.

This is a Christian land, not Confucian! Open your eyes to your true heritage. We were a great trading empire, run by true Genoese, and we will be again. Domenego attempted to rein in his anger, his desperation. You are so close to him, Momo, help us to reclaim our home.

Giacomo turned, walked back towards the door. *It is late. You are right, Dom. More words are meaningless.*

He was surprised that the blade slid through so easily, as if his body was made of nothing more than New Year's *niangao* or warm rosemary bread. Giacomo looked down, saw crimson patterns forming on golden fabric, dancing around the silver metal tip.

He closed his eyes. Searched for eloquence amongst the panic.

If I hear the way of truth in the morning, I am content even to die in the evening.

He fell to his knees. The air seemed to no longer exist.

I am already home, daifu.

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