

Great Ming 1121

Chapter 1121 Do You Remember the Route?

"Have you heard? Tang goods are worth a fortune these days."

The Lai Island pirates were gathered on a small island, whispering among themselves.

"The Nabeshima clan is buying up Tang goods in huge quantities."

"And the Kuroda clan, the Kashima clan... they're all clamoring for Tang goods."

"I heard this batch of Tang goods is really fresh and new. The daimyo are willing to pay top prices."

"Even empty soy sauce bottles are fetching high prices. Some unscrupulous merchants are filling empty Ming dynasty soy sauce bottles with our local brew and selling them specifically to poor samurai who want to put on airs with fake goods. They're making a killing!"

As the Lai Island pirates chatted, their excitement grew.

"Money this easy to make? We can't be left behind, brothers! Let's get to it. We're going to raid the Ming merchant ships!"

The pirates swarmed out like a nest of bees, piloting their small boats to ambush along the inevitable route from Ming territory to Nagasaki Port, awaiting their destined victims.

It wasn't long before a Ming dynasty fleet appeared on the horizon.

The Lai Island pirates rejoiced.

"Charge! Let's grab those Tang goods!"

This Ming fleet belonged to the merchant Yao Xingjuan.

Nagasaki Port was just ahead. Seeing that they were almost at a proper port, Yao Xingjuan had already stowed away the weapons on board, changed into merchant attire, and donned a square turban. He was dressed impeccably, ready to fool the wealthy Japanese.

To his surprise, no sooner had he finished dressing and stepped onto the deck than the lookout on the mast shouted:

"Pirates! The Lai Island pirates are here!"

Yao Xingjuan flew into a rage.

"Damn it all! I just finished my transformation, and they show up? Forcing me to change back, huh? Just you wait!"

With a swift rip, Yao Xingjuan tore off his merchant clothes, revealing a set of robust martial artist attire underneath. He snatched an eye patch and slapped it on, then swept off his square turban, letting his hair fall wildly around his face. In his left hand he gripped a flintlock pistol, and in his right he raised a blade.

Instantly, he transformed into Demon Star Yao, the pirate.

"Damn you all! My transformation is complete! You cursed Lai Island pirates, come on! Let's see who's robbing whom now!"

With a thunderous crash, the two fleets collided.

A Japanese ronin wielding his katana aggressively leaped onto the deck. He raised both hands high, performing a grand overhead strike, ready to cleave down.

Demon Star Yao raised his left hand, and the Western pistol roared.

Boom.

It struck the samurai squarely in the chest, sending him flipping backward into the sea.

Two more Japanese pirates sprang forward.

The pistol was out of ammunition, so Demon Star Yao casually tucked it into his waistband. With his right hand he swung his blade, and with two swift cuts, puff, puff, he chopped the pirates into the sea.

All over the ship, brutal clashes erupted.

In the world of pirates, justice and righteousness existed only where strength decreed it.

Just as the two fleets were locked in fierce battle, another fleet appeared on the distant sea.

A vibrant, multicolored banner flew from the mast of the leading flagship.

It was the Five Color Dao Xuan Tianzun Banner.

On the deck beneath the banner, two adolescent boys were fiddling with a marine chronometer and consulting a globe, arguing about something.

The older boy was Shi Lang.

"We haven't veered off course, have we?"

The younger boy was Zheng Sen.

"I don't think we have. I was young when I sailed from Japan to the Ming, but I still vaguely remember some things."

Shi Lang was overjoyed.

"You remember the route?"

Zheng Sen replied, "I remember a seagull pooped on my face."

Shi Lang was speechless.

That was incredibly frustrating.

He continued adjusting the chronometer.

"This thing has a five li margin of error. We could be five li off our target right now. Who knows where Nagasaki Port might be... oh dear..."

Just then the lookout shouted:

"Someone's fighting ahead! There's a battle going on!"

Everyone's spirits lifted.

"Telescope! Quick, the telescope!" Shi Lang shouted.

Zheng Sen also reached for his telescope.

"It's our Ming countrymen fighting Japanese pirates!"

From their attire, both boys quickly understood what was happening.

"Move closer! Help our people!" Shi Lang ordered without hesitation.

Zheng Sen was still a guest onboard and could not issue commands, so he simply drew a flintlock pistol.

The Gao Family Village fleet instantly went into battle ready status.

The two fleets ahead were already engaged in boarding combat. Cannons were useless in such close quarters, and even flintlock pistols risked friendly fire. The sailors put aside their firearms and drew their blades in synchronized motion.

The difference in skill among the crew quickly became apparent.

The native Gao Family Village sailors, more accustomed to firearms, seemed hesitant in close quarters melee combat. They lacked experience and appeared slightly timid.

The reformed pirate laborers, however, were completely different. They brandished their blades with excitement blazing across their faces. Far from fearing battle, they relished it.

Someone shouted:

"Now's our chance to earn merit!"

"Take down a few enemies and save a Ming life. They'll cut at least a year off my sentence, right?"

"A year? Are you crazy? Dao Xuan Tianzun said saving lives is paramount, more important than any military achievement. If I save even one or two lives, I'm guaranteed release and promotion to regular sailor status!"

"Saving lives is better than cutting people down? Then I'm definitely going for that merit!"

The reformed pirates waved their gleaming blades.

"Here we come!"

The native sailors were impressed.

"You're not afraid of close combat?" they wondered. "A white blade going in and a red blade coming out... that's bloody. Shooting from a hundred meters away with a flintlock is much more comfortable."

The Gao Family Village ships shifted from cruising speed to battle speed.

They surged to over twenty knots, electric motors humming wildly, leaving frothy white wakes behind them.

In a flash, they cut straight into the heart of the battle.

Their ships were massive, swift, and utterly imposing. Their mere arrival dealt a crippling blow to the Lai Island pirates.

Their morale plummeted.

The reformed pirate laborers charged forward, howling wildly, eyes red with battle lust.

"We need to earn merit!"

"We need to clear our names!"

"We want full release!"

Bellowing strange slogans incomprehensible to the enemy, they swung across on ropes from the massive ship.

Demon Star Yao's spirits soared.

"I don't know where these reinforcements came from, but I'm overjoyed they're here! Brothers, cut them down!"

Just as he shouted triumphantly, a native Gao Family Village sailor tried to mimic the reformed pirates. He grabbed a rope and swung across clumsily. When he landed, he went face first into the deck with a humiliating thud.

Everyone stared.

Then the battle cries resumed.

The two sides joined forces and launched a furious assault.

The Lai Island pirates were instantly cut down, bodies strewn across the decks.

Chapter 1122 Pi Island in Peril

Luoyang City, Market Square.

"Now for international news," Gao Yiye announced as her image appeared on the screen. Smiling at the viewers watching the television, she continued, "In December of the ninth year of Chongzhen's reign, across the Pacific Ocean, a National Guard was established. This militia force was formed by Western colonists to protect the settlements they founded in North America."

This small piece of news failed to capture much attention.

After all, the other side of the Pacific was unimaginably far away.

Li Daoxuan knew that few people would care, but he still included it in the Gao Family Village broadcast.

Because this so called National Guard, which would later evolve into the Beautiful Army, was quite similar in nature to the Militia Li Daoxuan had established.

Gao Family Village was just beginning. America was also just beginning.

Who would lead the future?

Li Daoxuan sighed softly. "I hope that in this plane of existence, my little people can surpass America. A few hundred years from now, perhaps we can be the ones launching a trade war and suppressing their technology."

Gao Yiye continued.

"Next is our second international news item. Also in December of the ninth year of Chongzhen's reign, Huang Taiji personally led one hundred thousand troops to conquer Joseon. After crossing the river, the Qing army leveraged its superiority in open field warfare, bypassed fortified cities, and pressed south relentlessly, reaching the royal capital in just twelve days."

This news stirred far greater reaction.

The citizens of Luoyang erupted in alarm.

Those with political insight turned grim.

Henan Governor Fan Shangzheng sighed heavily. "Joseon has always been a vassal of our Great Ming. Now that a vassal has fallen and we cannot send aid, what face does our Celestial Empire have left?"

Gao Jie added, "Without Joseon restraining their flank, the Manchus can attack us even more recklessly."

Cao Wenzhao frowned. "Where is Ajige? Why is he not leading the army this time? Did he offend Huang Taiji?"

Cao Bianjiao sighed. "Uncle, is that what matters right now? Should we not worry about whether Joseon can withstand this assault?"

Cao Wenzhao nodded slowly. "You are right."

On the screen, Gao Yiye sighed lightly.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has revealed a celestial secret to me. Joseon will not withstand this offensive. On January 30th, Joseon will surrender to the Qing army and declare allegiance. It will sever its ties to Great Ming and become a vassal of the Manchus. In future campaigns, Joseon will provide grain, silver, and troops to fight against our dynasty."

The crowd exploded in uproar.

No one doubted the celestial secrets revealed by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Dao Xuan Tianzun could not be wrong.

Would Joseon truly fall? Would they even send troops against Ming?

Fan Shangzheng stood abruptly. "What are we to do?"

Gao Jie exclaimed, "We already struggle against the Manchus. If Joseon joins them, will our situation not grow even worse?"

Cao Wenzhao muttered grimly, "This is terrible. Pi Island is in peril."

Cao Bianjiao nodded. "Yes. Once Joseon surrenders, Pi Island will certainly come under attack."

Before their words settled, a Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun emerged from the crowd and stood before them, smiling.

"General Cao, you truly are experienced in Liaodong affairs. The moment you heard of Joseon's surrender, you understood that Pi Island would be endangered."

Cao Wenzhao bowed slightly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, you see past and future. What will happen to Pi Island?"

Li Daoxuan answered calmly. "Within two months, Pi Island will fall to the Qing."

Shock spread across their faces.

Pi Island was the administrative seat of the Dongjiang Command.

Founded by General Mao Wenlong, the Dongjiang Command was a crucial element of Ming's Liaodong defense. In theory, it governed the fallen lands east of the Liao River. In practice, it controlled Bohai islands, Lushun Fort, Kuandian Fort, and strongholds inside Joseon such as Tieshan and Changcheng.

If Pi Island fell, the Dongjiang Command would effectively cease to exist.

The Manchus would remove the final thorn in their side and freely concentrate their strength against Ming.

Cao Wenzhao spoke urgently. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, Pi Island must not be lost."

Cao Bianjiao added, "What method can preserve it?"

Li Daoxuan replied, "Saving Pi Island is not difficult. The question is what happens after it is saved. Can it operate as we intend?"

The two men fell silent.

Pi Island had long been an awkward entity. Though nominally under Ming authority, since Mao Wenlong's time it had often acted independently, ignoring court commands and pursuing its own interests.

Later, Mao Wenlong was executed by Yuan Chonghuan. Historians endlessly debated that decision. Some claimed Mao deserved death. Others argued Yuan was a traitor.

There was no clear verdict.

Yet Pi Island continued its internal strife and irregular conduct.

Nominally Ming.

Practically independent.

Li Daoxuan continued, "I can save Pi Island. I have the ability. But I will not see it continue disobeying orders, hoarding troops for private power, fragmenting authority, and indulging in selfish ambitions."

Cao Wenzhao slowly understood. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, do you mean we need a general experienced in Liaodong warfare to garrison Pi Island and secure it properly?"

"Precisely."

Li Daoxuan looked at him with a faint smile.

Cao Wenzhao hesitated. "Dao Xuan Tianzun... is there something on my face?"

Cao Bianjiao nearly choked. "Uncle! Dao Xuan Tianzun means you are the most suitable general to guard Pi Island!"

"Me?" Cao Wenzhao blinked.

In his youth, he had served in Liaodong under Xiong Tingbi and Sun Chengzong, earning merit in battle and rising through the ranks. He understood the terrain and the enemy.

At last, realization dawned.

Dao Xuan Tianzun intended to transfer him to Pi Island.

He hesitated. "This subordinate cannot arrange such a matter alone. The Ministry of War must approve it. His Majesty must issue the decree."

Li Daoxuan smiled calmly.

"As long as you are willing to go, this matter will not be difficult."

Chapter 1123 Pi Island Must Be Saved

Rebels in Sichuan and Henan were raging, their insurgency burning fiercely.

The Gao Family Village Militia was engaged in constant skirmishes with these rebels across both Sichuan and Henan.

In Shaanxi, to the south of Hanzhong Prefecture, a multitude of mountaintop outposts and signal towers were being erected throughout the Micang Mountains.

Meanwhile, the situation within Joseon was rapidly deteriorating.

Huang Taiji personally led an army of one hundred thousand into Joseon. The Joseon forces were utterly incapable of resisting and fell back in a string of defeats. Anyone with even a basic understanding of Liaodong warfare could already see the outcome.

Joseon was finished.

At the same time...

Pi Island

Shen Shikui, the Regional Commander of Dongjiang, listened intently as his subordinate delivered a grave report.

Shen Shikui had once been a merchant. He possessed a daughter of extraordinary beauty. In earlier years, he had presented this daughter to Mao Wenlong, thereby becoming Mao Wenlong's father in law and earning the respectful title of "Grandfather Shen."

During the successive internal upheavals on Pi Island, whenever a new leader rose to power, Shen Shikui would once again offer his daughter to the new authority. Through this calculated move, every subsequent Regional Commander of Dongjiang became his son in law and was obligated to address him as "Grandfather Shen."

In this way, Shen Shikui survived every storm and endured every bloody power struggle on Pi Island. Eventually, he supplanted all rivals and seized the position of Regional Commander of Dongjiang for himself.

It was, one might say, a twisted tale of ambition and survival.

"The Manchus are preparing to attack Ganghwa Island," the subordinate reported swiftly. "The Joseon royal family and nobility have sent their families there. If Ganghwa Island falls, the King of Joseon will undoubtedly surrender."

After hearing the report, Shen Shikui let out a long sigh.

"Once Joseon falls, Pi Island will be next."

His subordinates remained silent, their expressions grim.

Shen Shikui straightened his posture and declared, "Relay my orders. Set up additional cannons. Gather all available warships. Prepare for a resolute defense. Pi Island is an island after all, and the Manchus' weakness lies in their navy. Over the years, they have attempted to seize Pi Island multiple times, but their weak naval strength has always led to their defeat. We have no need to fear them."

No sooner had he finished speaking than a subordinate timidly raised his hand.

"However, Commander, once the Manchus conquer Joseon, Joseon will become their vassal and will undoubtedly fight alongside them. While the Manchu navy is weak, Joseon's navy is in fact quite strong."

Shen Shikui sucked in a sharp breath.

This was indeed an awkward predicament.

The Joseon navy was formidable. That was no exaggeration.

Years ago, when the Japanese invaded Joseon, their forces had been utterly crushed by the Joseon navy. Japan's much vaunted Laidao Pirates had been no match for Joseon's naval strength.

The head of the Laidao clan, Kurushima Michifusa, had been ambushed and decisively defeated by Joseon's Admiral Yi Sun sin. According to legend, Kurushima Michifusa's body had been dismembered by the Joseon forces, leaving him without a complete corpse.

If the Joseon navy joined the Manchus in attacking Pi Island, the island would indeed be in grave danger.

Shen Shikui immediately summoned a messenger.

"Hurry to the Capital and request aid from the imperial court."

The messenger departed at once, boarding a fast vessel that cut through the waves toward Tianjin. From there, Pi Island's urgent plea for reinforcement was swiftly delivered to the Imperial City.

The Capital, Imperial Garden

The Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian, sat in the Imperial Garden with a look of profound vexation as he flipped through stacks of memorials.

"The Ministry of Revenue reports on the Huai salt revenue," he read aloud. "Before the sixth year of Chongzhen, accumulated deficits amounted to over two million taels of silver. In the fifth year of Tianqi, both old and new quotas for Huai salt totaled only seven hundred thousand taels. By the third year of Chongzhen, this increased to over one million two hundred ten thousand taels. In the fourth year, over one million three hundred thousand taels. In the sixth year, over one million five hundred sixty thousand taels..."

At this point, Zhu Youjian's mood plunged as if he had just ridden a plummeting drop tower.

"Droughts plague various regions, so it is understandable that grain taxes are uncollected. But how can even the salt revenues be failing?" he fumed. "Look at this mess. Over two million taels of silver uncollected. If I had such a sum for military expenses, the Manchus would have been dealt with long ago."

Cao Huachun stammered awkwardly, "Well... about that..."

He knew exactly where the silver had gone.

The Salt Inspectors had embezzled it.

In the past, when local salt offices embezzled funds, Zhu Youjian had angrily dispatched eunuchs to supervise them. But the eunuchs simply joined in the corruption. When only one office skimmed the

funds, the losses were limited. Once multiple parties were involved, everyone sought to enrich themselves, and the imperial treasury received even less. Over the years, the deficit ballooned to more than two million taels.

Cao Huachun himself had received a considerable amount of tribute silver from those same Salt Inspectors. He could hardly speak. He could only offer an embarrassed chuckle.

The atmosphere in the garden grew stiff.

Zhu Youjian's thoughts then shifted to the fugitive Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian, which further darkened his mood.

"Have the Jinyiwei still not located the Prince of Tang?"

"There is still no news," Cao Huachun replied. "The Prince of Tang seems to have vanished without a trace."

Zhu Youjian scoffed. "Such a large, living person. How could he simply be lost? Issue orders to all regional authorities. Any individual speaking with a Nanyang accent is to be apprehended and interrogated immediately. I refuse to believe he cannot be found."

Cao Huachun bowed. "As Your Majesty commands."

At that moment, Grand Eunuch Gao Qiqian rushed in.

"Your Majesty, grave news. The Manchus are on the verge of forcing Joseon's surrender. Regional Commander Shen Shikui of Dongjiang has dispatched a messenger pleading for imperial troops to reinforce Pi Island. Otherwise, Pi Island will be lost."

Zhu Youjian sucked in another sharp breath. His mood once again dropped sharply.

Pi Island absolutely could not be lost.

Pi Island was a crucial strategic anchor. It interlocked with the coastal islands of Liaodong and the Ming forces at Lushun. From there, it overlooked the coastal cities of Liaodong and threatened the Later Jin heartland.

This small island had effectively opened a second front behind the Later Jin regime, forcing them into the disadvantageous position of fighting on two fronts. Each time the Manchus launched an invasion into Ming territory, the forces stationed on Pi Island would raid deep into Later Jin lands, tying down their troops and restraining their westward advance.

To the Manchus, Pi Island was a thorn in the flesh, a bone lodged in the throat.

Zhu Youjian slammed his hand down on the table.

"This island must not fall. Determine immediately who can be dispatched to reinforce Pi Island."

Morning Court

The following morning, the ministers gathered to deliberate.

One minister stepped forward.

"Regional Commander Chen Hongfan, who commands the coastal forces, set out several days ago to aid Joseon. If he can assist Joseon in holding out, perhaps the Manchus will not attack Pi Island."

Another minister immediately interjected.

"Although Chen Hongfan initially reported that he had set sail, he later claimed to be waiting for favorable winds and remains in Dengzhou."

A collective gasp swept through the court.

"What?"

It turned out that Chen Hongfan had not advanced at all. He remained idling in Dengzhou.

Blatant cowardice in the face of battle.

The situation became exceedingly awkward.

Zhu Youjian felt a pounding headache. He quickly issued an imperial edict.

"Urge Chen Hongfan to depart at once for Pi Island and rendezvous with Shen Shikui. They are to cooperate in a surprise maneuver, assess the situation, intercept and suppress the enemy, and thereby rescue Joseon."

Just then, a minister stepped forward with a deep sigh.

"Your Majesty, the fact that Chen Hongfan can even offer the excuse of waiting for favorable winds proves his unwillingness to engage the Manchus. To send such a man to reinforce Pi Island would be folly. He would likely abandon the island and flee at the first sign of danger. How could Pi Island possibly be defended under such circumstances?"

All eyes turned toward the speaker.

It was Yang Sichang, newly returned from his mourning period and reinstated as Minister of War.

Yang Sichang had once again stepped onto the political stage.

Chapter 1124 Don't Blame Me

Although Yang Sichang himself had not achieved anything particularly earthshaking, his father, Yang He, had once been a high ranking regional official with deep roots in the bureaucracy. He had former students everywhere. Old colleagues everywhere. Debtors of favor everywhere.

So the moment Yang Sichang opened his mouth, a cluster of old acquaintances immediately rallied behind him.

"Indeed, Your Majesty," several ministers chimed in almost at once. "This Chen Hongfan is not a man to be entrusted with such a crucial command."

Zhu Youjian frowned.

There was truth in that.

What use was it to send a man who feared battle to defend Pi Island? If he lost his nerve at sea, the entire island would fall without a fight.

Reluctantly, the emperor asked, "Then whom do my lords recommend?"

The civil officials exchanged glances. For a moment, there was hesitation.

Yang Sichang, however, had come prepared.

He had already received a private letter from Chen Yuanbo, the prefect of Daizhou. At the same time, Tie Niaofei, an Imperial Merchant who maintained excellent relations with him, had also written urging support for a certain candidate.

With calm confidence, Yang Sichang stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, I recommend Cao Wenzhao. If he is sent to reinforce Pi Island, the results will surely be extraordinary."

At that exact moment, another minister discreetly touched the letter hidden in his sleeve. He was a close friend of Fan Shangzheng, Governor of Henan, and had received a similar request days earlier asking him to recommend Cao Wenzhao, commander of the Henan relief forces.

Seeing Yang Sichang speak first, he immediately stepped forward.

"I also believe Cao Wenzhao is capable."

Zhu Youjian blinked. "Oh? Is Lord Cao truly so competent? That would indeed be fortunate."

Though the emperor was famously tight fisted and prone to forgetting minor officials, the name Cao Wenzhao was not unfamiliar to him. Over the past few years, during repeated campaigns suppressing bandits in the Central Plains, Cao Wenzhao's name had appeared again and again in memorials reporting battlefield victories.

It would have been difficult not to remember him.

Another minister stepped forward. He belonged to the Donglin faction and was an old acquaintance of Liang Shixian, the magistrate of Chengcheng County. He too had received a letter requesting support for Cao Wenzhao.

"Cao Wenzhao is a renowned general of our time," he declared. "He has rendered distinguished service in Liaodong and fought many engagements against the Jiannu. He is dependable."

No sooner had he spoken than another Donglin minister followed.

"Cao Wenzhao is the foremost fierce general of our dynasty. He is thoroughly familiar with Liaodong warfare. Assigning him to bandit suppression in the Central Plains is a waste of talent."

An old associate of Wu Shen stepped forward.

"I also recommend Cao Wenzhao."

A friend of Shi Kefa added immediately, "I second the motion."

An associate of Lian Guoshi chimed in, "I agree."

Before anyone fully realized what had happened, a large bloc of ministers had formed a rare consensus.

The network that Gao Family Village had quietly cultivated for years within officialdom was finally beginning to reveal its reach.

Zhu Youjian was accustomed to factional quarrels. The court normally resembled a marketplace at full volume. To witness such unified agreement left him momentarily stunned.

So they are not fighting each other this time?

Strange.

But perhaps this was a good sign.

If everyone agreed on Cao Wenzhao, then Cao Wenzhao it would be.

The emperor slapped the table decisively.

"Issue an urgent order. Cao Wenzhao is to proceed at once to Dengzhou and board Chen Hongfan's fleet for Pi Island."

The matter was settled.

January 30th, Tenth Year of Chongzhen

Li Zong fled to Nanhansan Fortress. After more than forty days of siege, he emerged in surrender.

At Samjeondo, on the southern bank of the Han River, he performed the ritual of three kneelings and nine prostrations before Huang Taiji.

From that day forward, Joseon severed its tributary ties with the Great Ming and became a vassal of the Qing.

February 2nd

Outside Hanseong, the capital of Joseon, Huang Taiji summoned his senior commanders.

"Beizi Shuo Tuo. Prince Gongshen Kong Youde. Prince Huaishun Geng Zhongming. Prince Zhishun Shang Kexi."

Each man stepped forward the instant his name was called.

A faint smile curved on Huang Taiji's lips.

"You are to take sixteen Hongyi cannons and assault Pi Island."

"Sixteen?" Shuo Tuo could not hide his surprise. "So many?"

Huang Taiji nodded.

"The Ming have fortified Pi Island for years. They possess artillery of their own. I assign sixteen cannons because I value this campaign. Do not disappoint me."

Shuo Tuo bowed deeply. "We will surely take the island."

Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi exchanged glances.

Then Geng Zhongming stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, artillery alone is insufficient. Pi Island lies isolated at sea. The Ming navy stationed there is formidable. We require a strong fleet."

Huang Taiji laughed softly.

"The fleet? I have already found the solution. In the Romance of the Three Kingdoms."

The generals stared.

"A novel?"

Huang Taiji continued calmly.

"In the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao feared an alliance between Liu Bei and Lu Bu. He also suspected Lu Bu might align with Yuan Shu. So Cao Cao, wielding the emperor's authority, ordered Liu Bei to attack Yuan Shu. In doing so, he used Liu Bei to eliminate Yuan Shu while simultaneously driving a wedge between Liu Bei and Lu Bu. This is the strategy of driving a tiger to swallow a wolf."

He lifted his hand and pointed toward Hanseong.

"The King of Joseon has sworn submission. I will command him to send the Joseon navy against Pi Island. He cannot refuse. In this way, we sever Joseon's bond with the Ming and capture the island in one stroke."

The generals bowed in unison.

"Your Majesty is wise."

Huang Taiji declared, "This campaign shall be named Operation Drive Tiger, Swallow Wolf. Begin preparations immediately."

The order soon reached King Li Zong.

In truth, his heart leaned toward the Great Ming. He had always admired them. He had never wished to raise arms against them.

But Ganghwa Island had fallen. The families of Joseon's royal house and nobility were now in Qing hands.

If he disobeyed, his wife and sons would die.

He had no choice.

An imperial decree was issued.

Liu Lin, Commander of the Peaceful Province Army, and Lin Qingye, Prefect of Uiju, were to lead five thousand troops. Fifty warships would accompany the Qing assault on Pi Island.

After issuing the order, Li Zong sat alone in the empty palace hall.

He felt like a puppet with cut strings.

Several ministers slipped quietly inside and knelt beside him.

"Your Majesty," one whispered, "should we not secretly inform the Ming forces on Pi Island? If we at least pass them intelligence, then the Great Ming cannot later accuse us."

Li Zong's eyes brightened.

"Yes. We could secretly send word. Perhaps they could prepare."

Another minister sighed heavily.

"If word of it leaks, Huang Taiji will slaughter our wives and children. That would be courting disaster."

Silence fell.

King and ministers looked at one another.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly.

At last, Li Zong exhaled slowly.

"Then we shall not send word. All we can do is pray that this battle never happens. Pray that both nations may return to their own affairs."

The ministers lowered their heads.

"There is nothing else we can do. You cannot blame us."

Li Zong turned westward, toward the Central Plains.

Tears streamed down his face as he bowed deeply.

"Great Ming," he whispered, voice breaking, "I do not wish to do this. Please do not blame me."

His ministers knelt and prostrated themselves beside him.

And far across the sea, Pi Island waited.

Chapter 1125 All Forces Attack

In Zhoushan Dinghai Harbor, bells began clanging wildly.

The moment the alarm sounded, sailors dropped whatever they were holding. Some were repairing sails. Some were polishing gun barrels. Some were gambling in corners where they thought no officer would notice. All of them ran.

They rushed back to their barracks, pulled on uniforms at record speed, grabbed weapons and equipment, and stuffed a few personal treasures into their packs. A red thread charm from a fiancée. A pair of hand stitched insoles from a mother. A small wooden talisman engraved with Dao Xuan Tianzun's name.

Then they sprinted toward the grand parade ground.

Within an astonishingly short time, a massive formation had taken shape.

Gao Family Village sailors stood shoulder to shoulder with reformed pirates. Newly conscripted fishermen from coastal villages filled out the ranks. Five to six thousand men packed the square so tightly that from above it would have looked like a steel-gray sea.

The newest recruits had the weakest discipline.

Even after forming up, a few of them were still whispering.

"What happened?"

"Why such a huge mobilization?"

From the ranks of the reformed pirates, someone barked sharply.

"Greenhorns, shut your mouths! You think this is a fish market? If the officers hear you, that's fifty laps around the field."

The recruits immediately stiffened and fell silent.

A moment later, Jiang Cheng stepped onto the platform.

His voice rang out across the square.

"The Manchus are preparing to attack Pi Island. Pi Island is our dynasty's most critical base for harassing the Manchu heartland and checking Joseon. Pi Island must not fall."

He finished the sentence, but in his own heart he felt the weight of it.

He was not a legendary commander. Not some battlefield genius whose name made enemies tremble. He managed fleets competently, but he always felt that something was missing. Some spark.

If only Shi Lang and Zheng Sen would grow up faster, he thought. Those two boys carried something different in their bones.

Just then, a hand gently patted his shoulder.

Jiang Cheng turned.

Li Daoxuan had arrived.

Overjoyed, Jiang Cheng immediately stepped aside and yielded the platform.

Li Daoxuan faced the thousands of sailors.

"Gentlemen," he began calmly, "you are not ignorant foot soldiers. From the day you enlisted, our instructors taught you more than how to fire a cannon. You learned to read. To understand maps. To analyze politics. To comprehend the world."

The formation stood utterly still.

"You know what Pi Island means. If it falls, Joseon will become fully bound to the Qing. The Manchus will be freed from a strategic thorn in their side. They will attack our Great Ming with greater ease."

He paused briefly.

"For various reasons, we cannot yet engage the Manchus directly on land."

A ripple moved through the ranks.

"But at sea," Li Daoxuan continued, voice steady and firm, "we will not allow them even the slightest advantage."

The soldiers' spirits surged.

"We do not fear the Manchus!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun protect us!"

Li Daoxuan raised his hand.

"All forces. Attack. Our destination is Pi Island. Strike the Manchu navy hard. Ensure Pi Island remains firmly in the hands of the Great Ming."

The roar that answered him seemed to shake the harbor itself.

"All forces, attack!"

The entire Zhoushan Dinghai Harbor exploded into motion.

Men ran toward assigned ships. Officers shouted. Ropes were cast off. Cannons were secured. Supply crates were hauled aboard.

Jiang Cheng sprinted toward the flagship Wanli Sunshine.

After only a few steps, Wang Zheng rushed up beside him and shoved something into his arms.

"Take this."

It was a marine chronometer.

Jiang Cheng nodded, cradled it carefully, and continued running.

Nearby, from a dry dock, a steam powered paddle wheeler rolled forward.

It was the Little White Two.

Built with all his strength and stubborn pride by Bai Gongzi.

Bai Gongzi stood at the bow, waving enthusiastically.

"Instructor Jiang! Take my ship too!"

Jiang Cheng blinked. "Is the Little White Two battle ready?"

Bai Gongzi scratched his head. "I honestly don't know. That's why you should take it. Let it see real combat."

Jiang Cheng hesitated for only a second. "Fine."

Bai Gongzi jumped ashore, leaving behind a crew of test sailors.

The sailors looked conflicted. They had hoped to serve aboard celestial vessels directly blessed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Instead, they were assigned to a mortal built steam contraption that still rattled when turning.

They grumbled quietly.

Then they saw Li Daoxuan walking along the dock.

Without warning, he leaped into the sea.

He cut through the water like a silver arrow, reached the Little White Two in moments, and sprang from the surface in a clean arc, landing on deck with a splash of spray.

The sailors froze in shock, then snapped into salute.

"Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"This Little White Two is impressive. I will ride this ship to Pi Island."

The sailors stared in disbelief.

There were clearly celestial ships nearby, yet Tianzun chose this vessel?

Why?

No one dared question divine reasoning.

In an instant, their earlier disappointment vanished. Their chests swelled with pride.

The fleet began to move.

One ship after another left harbor.

Sails unfurled. Steam paddles churned. The great formation turned northward.

The sea route to Pi Island would soon burn with war.

Nagasaki Harbor

Meanwhile, at Nagasaki Harbor in Japan, Shi Lang, Zheng Sen, and Yao Xingjuan had just docked.

Not long before, Shi Lang and Zheng Sen had reinforced Yao Xingjuan. Together they annihilated the Laidao Pirates, cleared the battlefield, and seized the pirate treasure.

Now they had sailed to Nagasaki.

The moment their boots touched the dock, merchants swarmed them.

Some shouted in Chinese. Others in Japanese.

"Are you sea merchants from the Great Ming?"

"Have you brought the newest Tang goods?"

Shi Lang looked slightly lost. It was his first time in Japan.

Zheng Sen stepped forward and replied in fluent Japanese.

"Yes. We are from the Great Ming. What goods do you seek?"

"Chocolate!" one merchant shouted excitedly. "Do you have chocolate?"

Yao Xingjuan laughed. "I have chocolate."

The crowd surged toward him immediately.

The scramble was chaotic.

Within moments, Yao Xingjuan's limited stock was completely sold out.

Shi Lang frowned. "Is something strange here? Are they really this desperate?"

Zheng Sen spoke briefly with a local merchant, then returned laughing.

"I understand now. Not long ago, my second uncle came here with many novel Tang goods. The Nagasaki Magistrate, Nabeshima Katsushige, admired them greatly and praised them in public."

Shi Lang nodded slowly.

When powerful men show preference, the masses follow.

A trend was born from the top.

Zheng Sen grinned.

"Second Uncle opened the market for us. We just need to unload everything while prices are high. Once the novelty fades, the price will drop."

Shi Lang raised an eyebrow.

"You're three years younger than me, yet you're already better at business."

Zheng Sen waved casually.

"Family tradition."

At that moment, the embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun on Shi Lang's chest suddenly opened its eyes.

"Shi Lang. Zheng Sen. Sell your remaining goods quickly. Then leave Nagasaki Harbor and sail for Pi Island. Rendezvous with the main fleet off its coast."

Both boys straightened instantly.

"As you command."

War was coming.

Chapter 1126 The Renowned General Cao Wenzhao

Cao Wenzhao led two thousand five hundred Guanning Iron Cavalry as they boarded the large sea vessels.

Coastal Regional Commander Chen Hongfan had been waiting in Dengzhou under direct orders from Zhu Youjian. The moment Cao Wenzhao arrived, he stepped aboard Chen Hongfan's flagship, and the fleet immediately put to sea.

Chen Hongfan commanded eight thousand soldiers.

Cao Wenzhao brought two thousand five hundred elite Guanning Iron Cavalry.

Together, they numbered ten thousand.

On paper, it was an impressive force.

In reality, their fleet was pitiful.

Chen Hongfan possessed no truly seaworthy warships. His vessels were aged, poorly maintained, and riddled with problems. As for naval cannons, there were barely any worth mentioning. Even if a few iron tubes could be found bolted to decks, there was insufficient gunpowder and a shortage of proper cannonballs.

The cause was simple.

Money.

Throughout the Great Ming, military funds were stretched thin. Without silver, there were no repairs. Without repairs, there were no reliable ships. Without reliable ships, talk of naval superiority was empty wind.

After leaving Dengzhou, the battered fleet headed north. They passed through the Bohai Strait. On the opposite shore, Jinzhou was clearly visible.

Jinzhou had long fallen into Qing hands. Banner troops stood atop its walls.

Cao Wenzhao stood at the prow, staring at the city.

"Alas," he murmured quietly. "Jinzhou is clearly Great Ming territory. If only I could disembark right now, storm ashore, and reclaim it."

Chen Hongfan quickly cautioned him. "General Cao, landing directly from ships to assault a fortified coastal city is no different from seeking death."

Cao Wenzhao nodded. "I am not reckless."

Chen Hongfan sighed. "Even holding Pi Island will not be easy."

Cao Wenzhao chuckled. "This general is confident."

Chen Hongfan frowned. "The key to defending Pi Island lies at sea. Once the Qing coerce the Joseon navy into action, the island will face grave danger."

Cao Wenzhao replied calmly, "Precisely because naval warfare is decisive, I am confident."

Chen Hongfan stared at him in disbelief.

With these decrepit ships? Against Joseon's navy? Joseon might be small, but its navy was no joke.

Was this renowned general truly reliable?

Testing the waters, Chen Hongfan asked carefully, "General Cao, upon what do you base such confidence?"

"Upon what?" Cao Wenzhao grinned. "I came from Henan."

Chen Hongfan blinked. "No, I mean, what is the basis for victory?"

"Justice will defeat evil," Cao Wenzhao declared solemnly. "The films shown in Luoyang have made this very clear."

Chen Hongfan nearly choked.

He is insane.

He decided silently that if the battle turned unfavorable, he would flee immediately with his own ships.

What he did not notice was Cao Wenzhao's nephew, Cao Bianjiao, leaning in to whisper urgently.

"Uncle, General Chen is asking about our real advantage. Why are you speaking nonsense? Can you not answer properly?"

Cao Wenzhao lowered his voice and gave a conspiratorial laugh.

"We cannot casually reveal Dao Xuan Tianzun's navy. We do not yet know whether Chen Hongfan is trustworthy. What if he learns about the immortal ships and secretly informs the Qing to prepare countermeasures? Better to appear foolish than expose our trump card."

Cao Bianjiao inhaled sharply. "Uncle. You mean you sometimes pretend to miss the point?"

Cao Wenzhao snorted softly. "In other matters, perhaps. In warfare, never."

Not long after, the fleet reached Pi Island.

Shen Shikui had been waiting anxiously. He personally came to the beach to receive them.

Upon seeing Cao Wenzhao, Shen Shikui's face brightened.

"General Cao! With a renowned commander like you reinforcing us, my heart is greatly relieved."

"You flatter me," Cao Wenzhao replied, clasping his fists. "I bring only two thousand five hundred cavalry. On land, we can do little alone. The true crux lies with the navy."

At the word navy, Shen Shikui's expression twisted into a tight knot of anxiety.

"From the northern shore," he explained, "my men observe daily the opposite coast at Tieshan Commandery. The Qing are gathering there in great numbers. Tens of thousands. Five thousand Joseon soldiers as well. Their fleet is assembling. Over a dozen large turtle ships have already arrived. More vessels continue to gather."

At the mention of turtle ships, Chen Hongfan visibly shuddered.

Joseon turtle ships were infamous.

During the Japanese invasions, the armored vessels led by Kurushima Michifusa had been utterly routed by the Joseon navy. Turtle ships were clad in iron plating, their decks covered like a shell. Enemy soldiers attempting to board would suddenly find long spears thrusting upward through hidden openings.

Boarding such ships was a nightmare.

The Japanese warriors of old had paid dearly for underestimating them.

Chen Hongfan felt his heart sink further.

Cao Wenzhao, however, showed no fear.

Instead, he laughed.

"Good. Let them gather thoroughly. Once they are all assembled, we will round them up in one sweep. That saves us the trouble of chasing scattered remnants later."

Chen Hongfan said nothing.

Shen Shikui shook his head weakly. "Rounding them up? If we can merely hold Pi Island, that will already be a miracle."

Cao Wenzhao strode inland confidently.

On paper, Pi Island housed twelve thousand defenders. In reality, many were family members, craftsmen, or laborers. Shen Shikui could count on perhaps seven thousand actual fighting men.

Chen Hongfan's eight thousand were unreliable.

Cao Wenzhao calculated quickly.

With his two thousand five hundred Guanning Iron Cavalry added, fewer than ten thousand dependable troops could hold the beaches.

That was sufficient.

They only needed to prevent enemy landings that slipped past naval defenses.

As for the sea battle itself, that would be left entirely to Dao Xuan Tianzun's fleet.

"General Shen," Cao Wenzhao said, "please accompany me along the shoreline. I wish to inspect the terrain and determine optimal defensive placements."

Shen Shikui nodded. "This way."

They had walked only a short distance when Cao Wenzhao suddenly lunged forward.

"Turtle!"

Shen Shikui stiffened. "Enemy turtle ships already?"

To everyone's astonishment, Cao Wenzhao flopped down into the sand and lifted a large sea turtle with both hands.

He grinned broadly.

"Bianjiao, take this back. I wonder if Dao Xuan Tianzun would enjoy eating it."

The surrounding officers burst into laughter.

"Put that thing down. Sea turtle meat tastes terrible."

"Besides, they are intelligent creatures. Eating one invites bad karma."

Shen Shikui and Chen Hongfan exchanged looks.

It is over.

This so called renowned General Cao Wenzhao.

Renowned only in name.

Chapter 1127 The Netizen's Verdict: Execution by Firing Squad

Tieshan County, Joseon.

The shoreline was thick with banners.

Vast numbers of Eight Banners troops gathered in layered formations, their armor glinting coldly beneath the pale light. Alongside them stood Joseon soldiers, their ranks tense, their spears upright like a forest of iron thorns.

Across the sea lay Pi Island.

On this shore stood Prince Ajige, Beizi Shuo Tuo, Prince Gongshun Kong Youde, Prince Huaishun Geng Zhongming, Prince Zhishun Shang Kexi, and a crowd of Qing generals. They gazed over the waters toward the island, silent, calculating.

Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi were known as the Three Surrendered Kings. Once upon a time, they had been prominent generals under Mao Wenlong. Once upon a time, they had stood on Pi Island as defenders of the Ming.

Now they stood here as invaders.

The sea wind brushed their sleeves.

Memories did not ask permission before resurfacing.

The outline of Pi Island in the distance stirred something heavy inside them. This island had once been their base, their pride, their battlefield. It carried familiarity, shame, and complicated nostalgia all at once.

Ajige frowned.

He was famous for his ferocity, a man who preferred breaking enemies head on. Yet even he did not underestimate what lay ahead.

"Pi Island is surrounded by sea on all sides," he said slowly. "Our cavalry cannot unleash its strength there. Horses cannot gallop across waves."

He narrowed his eyes at the distant shoreline.

"We must attack by ship. During the crossing, our vessels will be exposed. The Ming defenders can use the terrain to their advantage and fire cannons freely at our wooden hulls. Our boats will be slow. The sea offers no cover."

He paused.

"Even if some ships reach the shore, the Ming garrison can counterattack from the beaches. They will use numbers to drive us back into the sea. Once trapped between shore and waves, retreat becomes chaos."

Beizi Shuo Tuo nodded gravely.

"The Ming troops on that island have no retreat," he said. "Behind them is the vast sea. Their warships are few. They cannot escape. A cornered army fights with desperate courage. This battle will not be easy."

Both generals wore troubled expressions.

Ajige turned his gaze toward the Three Surrendered Kings.

"You three once garrisoned Pi Island," he said. "Do you have any clever strategies?"

Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi had been lost in memory. Mao Wenlong's figure lingered faintly in their thoughts, as if the sea mist itself carried his shadow.

Ajige's question pulled them back abruptly.

They barely hesitated before shaking their heads in unison.

"No."

Ajige's brows twitched slightly.

The answer felt perfunctory.

But after a moment, he dismissed the thought. Whether their hearts were complicated or not, this assault could not depend on them. It would depend on his own command.

He immediately dispatched small scouting boats to circle Pi Island at a distance, observing terrain and probing Ming troop deployments.

After careful consideration, he rejected a direct frontal assault.

Instead, he devised a two-pronged sneak attack.

One force would assemble openly at the front. Eight Banners cavalry. Han Banner soldiers, the Wuzhen Chaoaha. The troops of the Three Surrendered Kings, known as the Heavenly Blessed and Heavenly Aided Soldiers. Alongside them, Joseon troops.

They would create a grand spectacle of military might, banners raised high, drums beating, forming a massive distraction to draw the Ming army's focus.

The second force would consist of Eight Banners infantry.

Under cover of distraction, they would quietly cross the sea in small boats, attempting a stealth landing.

Once both prongs engaged, Pi Island would be struck from two angles.

With the plan complete, Ajige did not rush into battle.

Instead, he wrote a letter.

The letter was tied to an arrow.

A small boat approached within range and shot the arrow onto Pi Island.

First, attack their morale.

Then, attack the island.

The tenth year of Chongzhen. April 6th.

That evening.

On Pi Island, Shen Shikui, Cao Wenzhao, and Chen Hongfan led officers of all ranks on coastal patrol.

They inspected fortifications carefully, checking artillery placements, scanning for weaknesses. Every stone and trench was examined.

A sentry stationed by the sea ran toward them at full speed, holding a letter in both hands.

"Report!" he shouted. "Qing army boats approached earlier and fired this arrow-letter from a distance. Please, General, examine it."

Shen Shikui took the letter and unfolded it.

His expression darkened immediately.

Cao Wenzhao and Chen Hongfan leaned in to read.

It was a letter of surrender.

It boasted that one hundred thousand Qing troops had assembled across the sea, ready to invade at any moment. Five thousand Joseon soldiers. Fifty massive turtle ships. Hundreds of smaller vessels.

The letter asked mockingly whether the Ming garrison was afraid.

If they surrendered at once, their lives would be spared. Shen Shikui would even be granted a princely title.

Shen Shikui finished reading.

Then he burst into laughter.

He clenched his fists and tore the letter into shreds.

"I, Shen, may not be a hero," he said firmly, "but I will never surrender and betray my country. This trash does not deserve a reply."

"Well said!" Cao Wenzhao laughed loudly.

They had barely finished laughing when they noticed something strange.

Chen Hongfan was gone.

"Huh? Where is General Chen?"

"Wasn't he just standing here?"

"He is not exactly small. How does a man that size disappear in an instant?"

A soldier rushed forward breathlessly.

"Report! Coastal Regional Commander Chen Hongfan has boarded a ship with his naval contingent and fled!"

"Damn him!" Shen Shikui cursed.

"The scoundrel!" Cao Wenzhao spat.

Just as they were about to unleash a stream of curses, another general rushed over.

It was Jin Riguan, Vice Commander of Laizhou, a subordinate of Chen Hongfan.

His face burned with anger.

"Generals!" he shouted. "That dog-cursed Chen Hongfan has fled! I tried to persuade him to stay, but he insisted on escaping. I refuse to be a deserter. I have remained. Please allow me to fight alongside you!"

Cao Wenzhao let out a low chuckle.

"General Jin, you are a true hero. You chose righteousness over cowardice. After this battle, promotion and reward will be yours."

Shen Shikui spoke gravely.

"The Qing will attack soon. That letter was clearly meant to shake the resolve of men like Chen Hongfan."

"If they want to come, let them come!" Cao Wenzhao declared. "Who among us fears them? Issue the order. Prepare for battle!"

"Prepare for battle!"

The soldiers on Pi Island roared as one. Banners waved. Armor clashed. Determination rose like flame.

They would fight to the death.

Meanwhile.

Chen Hongfan frantically directed his men.

Their dilapidated boats moved southwest, paddles splashing desperately.

Those willing to shed blood for their country had remained on Pi Island with Jin Riguan.

Those fleeing with Chen Hongfan were cowards.

A rabble of panic and disorder.

They spared their lives in battle, yet now risked everything in flight.

They rowed furiously, sweating, hearts pounding.

As they gained distance from Pi Island, relief flooded them.

They congratulated themselves secretly.

The Qing assault had not yet begun. They had escaped early.

Their lives were saved.

A profitable decision indeed.

Then the horizon shifted.

A large flotilla appeared.

Strange ships.

They bore no sails.

Their propulsion was unclear.

Yet they moved with astonishing speed, cutting across the sea like blades.

Each vessel left a long, churning wake.

At the forefront sailed an enormous and bizarre flagship.

At its bow stood a young man in chivalrous robes.

His bearing was calm yet commanding, ethereal yet dignified.

Li Daoxuan.

He raised his hand and pointed toward Chen Hongfan's fleeing fleet.

His voice carried clearly across the wind.

"Everyone," he said, "the fleet ahead consists of cowardly deserters. I ask you. Using your pure and straightforward hearts, what fate awaits a soldier who flees before battle?"

The Gao Family Village Navy roared as one.

"Execution by firing squad! Execution by firing squad!"

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"Always the same. The netizens' verdict begins with execution by firing squad."

He looked ahead calmly.

"But desertion in wartime deserves nothing less. This time, you judged correctly."

He swept his hand forward.

"Execute them."

The Gao Family Village Navy accelerated at full combat speed.

They surged toward Chen Hongfan's fleeing fleet like a storm descending upon rotten wood.

Chapter 1128 Aobai Arrives

Chen Hongfan had not even figured out who the approaching fleet belonged to when he saw their formation suddenly tighten.

Then they accelerated.

The lead ship surged forward like a beast scenting blood. The colorful banners of Dao Xuan Tianzun unfurled high above its mast, snapping loudly in the wind.

The sight alone was enough to drain the color from Chen Hongfan's face.

There was no mistaking it.

This fleet was not passing by.

This fleet had chosen him.

"This is bad! That strange fleet is charging straight at us!" Chen Hongfan shouted, his voice cracking.
"Signal them! Quickly! Tell them we are the Great Ming Navy! The Great Ming Navy!"

His crew were already half dead from fear.

They scrambled to wave flags in chaotic motions, trying desperately to identify themselves. The gestures were disorganized, frantic, almost pathetic.

It did not matter.

The sailors of Gao Family Village had already received a clear command from Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Execute all deserters.

A divine mandate left no room for negotiation.

The Wanli Sunshine replied with a short and blunt flag signal.

"Damn you all."

"They're signaling back!" Chen Hongfan cried. "What does it say?"

"I... I cannot read it clearly, sir," a subordinate stammered, sweat dripping down his temple. "But I am certain they are cursing us!"

"They're almost upon us!" Chen Hongfan shrieked. "Loose arrows! Now!"

The Wanli Sunshine, a monstrous warship nearly sixty meters long, bore down upon Chen Hongfan's twenty meter Cangshan class vessel.

The size difference alone was crushing.

The crew of the smaller ship screamed as one. Their hands trembled so violently that drawing bows became impossible.

Then came the impact.

Crash.

The reinforced bow of the Wanli Sunshine smashed into the smaller ship. Wood splintered. The hull cracked with a long, tortured groan.

Chen Hongfan's vessel split cleanly into two halves.

The broken remains bobbed briefly like two grotesque fish heads before slowly sinking beneath the waves.

Chen Hongfan and several survivors plunged into the icy sea, flailing desperately for floating debris.

From the gunwale of the Wanli Sunshine, a Gao Family Village militiaman calmly leaned out with a flintlock rifle.

He aimed at Chen Hongfan, who was still thrashing in panic.

He pulled the trigger.

An execution was an execution.

Simply ramming the ship was not quite proper enough to qualify as execution by firing squad.

Meanwhile, the main Qing forces had begun their assault on Pi Island.

The vanguard, however, was merely a feint.

Eight Banners cavalymen, utterly unaccustomed to naval combat, sat awkwardly in their boats. They pretended to prepare for a frontal landing, creating noise and confusion to distract the Ming defenders.

Behind them followed the Han forces under Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi.

These three were masters of half hearted enthusiasm.

They led their troops, together with five thousand Joseon soldiers, aboard large ships arranged in impressive formation. From a distance, the fleet looked overwhelming, like a full scale invasion force bearing down upon Pi Island's main harbor.

"Fire! Fire!"

The coastal batteries roared.

Heavy cannons belched flame. Solid iron shot thundered across the sea.

Water erupted around the Qing ships in towering geysers.

Amphibious assaults had always been cruel affairs. Even staged theatrics could not avoid casualties.

Cannonballs tore through hulls. Splintered wood flew. Soldiers were flung screaming into the sea.

Many Qing soldiers were inexperienced sailors. Every violent pitch of their ships sent more men tumbling overboard.

In the rear, the Han forces reluctantly fished survivors out of the water.

Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi maintained their performance carefully. Their shouts were loud. Their flags were bold. Their ships, however, remained suspiciously far from the fiercest cannon fire.

The Qing vanguard absorbed the brunt of the bombardment.

Casualties mounted quickly.

On Pi Island, morale soared.

"Ha! These Manchu barbarians are not so terrifying after all!" a Ming soldier shouted.

"Hold the line! We can win this!"

The soldiers cheered.

The generals did not.

Shen Shikui frowned deeply.

"The Manchu fighting spirit is not this weak," he murmured. "The pressure on our main harbor is too light."

Jin Riguan asked quietly, "You believe they may attempt a landing elsewhere?"

Shen Shikui nodded.

"I suspect they have dispatched small vessels to circle to our rear. We must guard against that. General Cao, what do you think?"

Cao Wenzhao shrugged casually.

"No need for concern. Secure the main harbor and all will be well."

Shen Shikui stared at him.

Jin Riguan blinked.

Where did such confidence come from?

Night fell.

It was the first watch.

The sun had just slipped below the horizon. The world was wrapped in dim twilight. Shapes blurred. Details faded.

On the northeastern coast of Pi Island, Aobai and Zhun Ta led a small commando force of elite Manchu warriors.

They rowed quietly.

Their objective was simple. Create chaos. Draw attention. Break morale.

Both men were prepared to die.

At this moment in history, Aobai was still a vigorous young general, fierce and fearless. He did not know that one day he would become a powerful regent challenging the Kangxi Emperor. He did not know he would eventually fall from power. He certainly did not know that centuries later he would be turned into a meme version of Santa Claus forced to dance every winter on future networks.

Right now, he was simply a warrior.

"Row faster," Aobai whispered. "Quietly. No sound."

He licked the edge of his blade.

"Soon," he muttered, "this blade will drink."

Then a voice rang out across the dark sea.

"Manchu barbarians ahead. You are surrounded."

It was young.

Shockingly young.

Aobai jolted upright.

"What nonsense is this?"

Lights suddenly flared around them.

Not one or two.

Many.

A hidden fleet had been waiting.

At the bow of the lead vessel stood two teenage boys, gazes steady and calm.

Shi Lang spoke.

"You may now choose your preferred method of death. Options include being blown apart by cannon fire, riddled with musket rounds, or drowning in the sea after jumping overboard. You have ten seconds to decide."

He paused.

"One. Two."

He waved his hand impatiently.

"Forget it. Brothers, charge!"

The fleet surged forward.

Aobai stared in disbelief. The enemy ships were enormous and astonishingly fast.

His small stealth boats were toys in comparison.

Retreat.

That was the only choice.

He shouted for his men to turn around.

Then another fleet emerged behind them, blocking their escape.

At its helm stood a one eyed pirate wearing a distinctive eye patch.

He laughed loudly.

"Such excitement! I arrived at just the right time!"

He laughed again before lowering his voice into something cold and thunderous.

"The Great Pirate, Demon Star, is here! Manchu barbarians, not one of you will escape today!"

Aobai cursed inwardly.

Pirates?

The Ming had allied with pirates?

A heavy foreboding settled in his chest.

With a tremendous crash, a Gao Family Village warship smashed into the Qing boats.

Manchu soldiers were thrown into the dark sea, their cries swallowed by the waves.

Chapter 1129 Valiant General Aobai

From the very beginning, the outcome of the battle was already clear.

The Manchu force that appeared was nothing more than a small flanking unit. Their purpose was to distract and harass, not to win outright. Worse still, they were riding small boats. Against the massive electric-powered warships of Gao Family Village, they stood no real chance.

They could not even overpower Yaoxingjuan's pirate fleet.

The moment the ships collided, the Manchu boats were smashed apart like fragile toys. Wood splintered. Hulls cracked. Men were thrown into the sea.

Then the gunfire began.

The sharp roar of firearms shattered the air, and Aobai's soldiers cried out as they fell one after another.

Zhun Ta, the valiant general, let out a savage roar. He clamped his steel saber between his teeth and leaped forward, grabbing the gunwale of a Gao Family Village ship with both hands. He intended to board it by force.

Before he could pull himself up, a piercing pain shot through his left hand.

A marine had spotted the hand gripping the edge of the ship. Without hesitation, he drove the bayonet fixed to his flintlock straight down.

The blade punched clean through Zhun Ta's hand.

Zhun Ta screamed in agony, but he did not let go.

Instead, with terrifying strength, he hauled himself upward. In one fluid motion, he caught the saber from his mouth with his right hand and swung it in a vicious arc at the marine.

The sheer ferocity of the attack shocked the man.

The marine almost lost his head. At the last instant, relying on his training and physical conditioning, he bent backward with a desperate arch, barely avoiding the slash. He then rolled across the deck, scrambling to widen the distance between them.

Zhun Ta roared and charged after him.

Then he suddenly sensed something wrong.

He lifted his eyes.

All around him stood Gao Family Village marines. Every single one of them had raised a flintlock rifle. Every barrel was aimed directly at him.

Zhun Ta bellowed wildly, "Awoo! Awoo! Awoo!"

The riflemen shouted in unison, "Fire!"

Gunshots erupted.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Bullets tore into Zhun Ta's body from every direction.

He screamed once more, staggered backward, and fell over the side of the ship, splashing into the sea below.

Aobai witnessed everything.

In that instant, he understood. That strange ship was a death trap. Boarding it meant certain death.

His gaze shifted.

He locked onto another vessel nearby.

Yaoxingjuan's ship.

That one looked easier.

Without hesitation, Aobai bit down on his saber just as Zhun Ta had done. As Yaoxingjuan's ship rammed against theirs, he seized the chance. He leaped across and grabbed the gunwale.

Unlike the disciplined marines, the pirates were in chaos. They were busy fighting the Manchu soldiers still on the other side. No one noticed the two powerful hands gripping the edge of their ship.

With a low, beast-like roar, Aobai flipped himself aboard and landed heavily on the deck of Yaoxingjuan's flagship.

The pirates froze for a split second.

Then someone shouted, "A Manchu general has boarded!"

Another yelled, "Kill him! Whoever takes his head earns great merit!"

Two pirates rushed forward, blades raised high.

They did not last a heartbeat.

A flash of steel.

Both men collapsed at the same time, blood spraying across the deck.

Aobai did not slow down. He swung his great saber and charged forward. His eyes were fixed on only one target.

Yaoxingjuan.

More pirates swarmed him from all sides.

But Aobai was no ordinary warrior. Alone, with a single saber, he fought through them like a storm tearing through reeds.

Steel clashed.

"Clang! Clang!"

He parried two blades at once. A shoulder slam. A savage kick. Two pirates were sent flying overboard into the sea.

In moments, he had carved a path straight to Yaoxingjuan.

Yaoxingjuan's face went pale.

With trembling speed, he pulled out a short firearm with his left hand and fired.

"Bang!"

But Aobai was faster.

He ducked low and rolled aside. The shot missed completely.

Yaomingjuan stared in disbelief.

Before he could react, Aobai lunged forward like a tiger pouncing on prey. Their sabers clashed in a brief, brutal exchange.

Three moves.

That was all it took.

Yaomingjuan's saber flew from his hand.

Aobai's blade came to rest against his throat.

The entire ship fell silent.

No one dared to move.

Aobai finally had a moment to look around.

Zhun Ta was dead.

Nearly all his men had been wiped out, their bodies floating in the sea. Across the battlefield, not a single Manchu soldier remained standing except him.

He drew in a sharp breath.

"My entire force... elite troops. Fearless warriors. And in such a short time, they're all gone."

That could only mean one thing.

The enemy was even more terrifying than he had imagined.

Breathing heavily, Aobai tightened his grip and shouted, "Let me leave, or I'll kill him!"

The surrounding marines and pirates hesitated.

Then, unexpectedly, it was Yaoxingjuan himself who shouted, "Don't worry about me! Let him kill me! He won't escape anyway. A worthless pirate like me in exchange for a Manchu general? That's a bargain!"

Shi Lang and Zheng Sen exchanged uncertain glances.

At that moment, the Heavenly Lord embroidered on Shi Lang's chest suddenly spoke.

"Engage him in awkward banter."

Shi Lang blinked. "The Heavenly Lord has descended! But... how exactly does one engage in awkward banter?"

The embroidered Heavenly Lord replied calmly, "Figure it out yourself. I'm busy."

And then it fell silent.

Shi Lang swallowed and steadied himself.

"Fine. Awkward banter it is. This is the Heavenly Lord's command. Even if it's embarrassing, I have to do it."

He looked at Aobai and cleared his throat.

"You look quite formidable, brother. May I ask your name?"

Aobai lifted his chin proudly.

"I am Aobai, the foremost warrior of the Manchu."

Chapter 1130 There's a Water Monster

Shi Lang frowned and asked very seriously, "Then who's second?"

Aobai's face darkened instantly. His brows bristled like a furious tiger's whiskers. "Are you playing games with me? Enough nonsense. Are we making this exchange or not? Say one more useless word and I'll kill him first. After that, I'll fight you to the death."

Shi Lang was completely stuck.

The divine instruction from Dao Xuan Tianzun had been clear. Engage in awkward banter.

But now the other side was threatening to kill the hostage if he said another frivolous sentence. What kind of situation was this? He wanted awkward banter. The enemy wanted efficient murder.

Shi Lang felt sweat gathering at his temples. He had never been good with words. Sword, cannon, formation tactics, yes. Flowery speech and clever talk? That was not his battlefield.

At this critical moment, his lack of scholarly refinement betrayed him cruelly.

"Of course we'll exchange," Zheng Sen suddenly said.

His voice was calm, steady, even polite.

"The life of any subject of our Great Ming, whether general, soldier, commoner, or even pirate, is precious beyond measure. A one for one exchange is not a loss. It is an absolute triumph."

He spoke as if discussing tea prices.

"Naturally we will trade. However, the method and the process deserve careful thought. We cannot simply shout 'exchange' and expect you to obediently release him. You would worry we might break our word, would you not?"

Shi Lang's eyes immediately shone.

"Little Sen, you truly are clever! Now we can continue our awkward banter."

Even Aobai hesitated.

The reasoning was sound.

After a moment of thought, he said, "Prepare a small boat. I will row to shore. Once I reach land safely, I will release him."

Zheng Sen immediately replied, "And after that? Once you release him and scramble ashore, what prevents us from firing a cannon at your back?"

Aobai froze.

Indeed.

What prevented them?

This was becoming extremely awkward.

At that exact moment, high above on the rigging of the mast, a small figure had already climbed into position.

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He grabbed a rope.

And slid down.

Zheng Sen continued speaking smoothly, "We are not like you barbaric tribes who go back on your word. Our Celestial Empire values propriety. Words once spoken are like water poured onto the ground. They cannot be taken back. Perhaps you might try trusting us and release the man first?"

Aobai was listening intently.

Suddenly, a shadow dropped from above.

A puppet figure slid down upside down, stopping directly in front of Aobai's face. Head first. Eyes wide. Mouth stretched into an exaggerated grin that was both ridiculous and horrifying.

Then it began laughing.

"Wah ha ha ha ha ha! Yee hee hee hee hee hee!"

Aobai screamed.

"Ahh!"

It was the dead of night. He had been fully focused on negotiation. His nerves were already tight. And suddenly something descended from the sky, upside down, grinning and cackling like a ghost from hell.

Even the bravest warrior could have his soul shaken loose by that.

His grip slackened.

The hostage reacted instantly.

He ducked, rolled backward across the deck, and scrambled away like a startled rabbit.

Gunshots exploded.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Flintlock rifles roared in unison.

Aobai's massive body jerked as bullets tore through him. One hole, then another, then several more. He did not even have time to scream properly before his enormous frame toppled backward and slammed onto the deck with a heavy crash.

Silence.

The hostage staggered to his feet. He stared at the dangling puppet in disbelief.

Then he shrieked, "A monster!"

Thump.

Shi Lang boarded the ship and kicked him flat.

"What monster? Mind your words. That is Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The hostage scrambled up again, trembling. "Forgive me. It was my incompetence that allowed the Manchu general to capture me and disrupt your plan."

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled.

"You did very well. You cut off the Qing army's retreat. You were brave and rendered great merit. When you return to Zhoushan Island, a great reward awaits you."

The hostage stared in horror.

"The monster is talking again!"

Thump. Thump.

Shi Lang and Zheng Sen kicked him down simultaneously.

"We told you. It is Dao Xuan Tianzun. If you keep calling him a monster, are you courting death?"

While Aobai and Zhun Ta's forces were being encircled and eliminated, another storm was gathering elsewhere.

On the waters near Pi Island, the true elite forces of the Qing army had begun their advance.

Gūsan Ejen Samushika personally led the Eight Banners elite infantry. They moved stealthily toward Jianggao Bay at the northwest corner of the island.

This was no small raiding party like Aobai's unit.

This was a massive fleet.

Hundreds of strange transport boats cut across the dark sea. More than ten thousand soldiers filled them. And unlike previous battles, there were no Ming defectors or half hearted Joseon auxiliaries here.

Every single one was Manchu.

There was an old saying.

If the Jurchen do not number ten thousand, they are not worth fearing.

If they do number ten thousand, none can oppose them.

Samushika believed this deeply.

His ten thousand elites were unstoppable.

Unless.

Unless the opponent was not human.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, a subordinate whispered, "General, something strange swam past beneath the water just now."

Samushika replied impatiently, "This is the sea. Are fish not allowed to swim?"

The subordinate shook his head. "It did not look like a fish. It looked like a person. It shot past with a whoosh."

Samushika scoffed. "How could a person swim that fast? It must have been a fish."

No sooner had he spoken than the lead transport boat suddenly began rocking violently.

The soldiers aboard panicked.

"What is happening?"

"Why is the boat shaking?"

A soldier lost his footing and splashed into the sea.

Nearby boats extended paddles to help him grab on. They pulled desperately.

Suddenly the man screamed.

"Something is attacking me in the water! Ah... ah... ahhh!"

The men on deck hauled him up with a final heave.

He collapsed onto the planks.

There was a massive gash across his lower abdomen. Blood poured out freely.

"What attacked you?"

"What was it?"

"I... I don't know," he gasped. "A knife... I... mm..."

His head fell to the side.

Dead.

The boat fell silent in terror.

"How can there be a knife underwater?"

"Are these Ming water demons?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Water demons are used in river battles. Who uses them in the open sea?"

"I saw it!" someone shouted, pointing into the darkness.

They all stared into the black water.

The night was thick. The sea was ink. Their eyes could not pierce the depths.

But they saw it.

A black shadow. Human sized. Moving impossibly fast beneath the surface.

Then gone.

"It looked like a person."

"No person can swim that fast. Nor stay underwater that long."

"Then what is it?"

The shadow darted beneath another transport boat.

That boat immediately began rocking violently as well.

The soldiers aboard turned pale.

Everyone understood one thing clearly.

If you fell into the water, you died.

They clung to the sides desperately.

But fate always chooses someone.

One man slipped.

Splash.

He plunged into the sea.

Paddles extended again in panic.

But it was too late.

The man surged upward, half his body breaking the surface as he tried to climb back aboard.

Then he let out a scream that tore through the night.

"Ah!"

The sound froze the blood in every soldier's veins.

Something was in the water.

And it was hunting them.