

## Great Ming 1151

### Chapter 1151 Taking Over the Dengzhou Navy

Pi Island.

Ship after ship loaded with grain and military supplies docked along the shores of Pi Island. The vessels came in such steady succession that it seemed as though Gao Family Village had decided to relocate its entire treasury across the sea.

Shen Shikui, the Regional Commander stationed on Pi Island, stood watching the unloading process with widening eyes. After several days of close contact, he had already figured something out. These supplies were not dispatched by the Great Ming court. They came from one man. Steward Li.

To speak politely, Steward Li was a merchant.

To speak frankly, he was not much different from a maritime overlord like Zheng Zhilong.

On the surface, he obeyed the imperial court. In reality, he operated like a powerful local strongman.

And this strongman was not sending food and weapons out of respect for Shen Shikui. The supplies were flowing here because of Cao Wenzhao.

If Cao Wenzhao were removed, the grain would stop.

Pi Island had never received stable logistical support from the Great Ming court. It certainly would not receive long term help from Joseon either. Without relying on Steward Li's resources, Pi Island would wither into isolation.

What choice did Shen Shikui have? The answer was obvious.

"General Cao, what should we do next?"

These days, Shen Shikui consulted Cao Wenzhao on nearly everything. The gesture spoke louder than words.

Cao Wenzhao replied calmly, "We have already frightened the Manchus at sea. For the next few years, they will likely hesitate before attacking Pi Island again. As for Joseon, after witnessing this battle, their attitude will shift once more. For now, we hold Pi Island as our base and harass the Manchu rear. Slowly, we build strength."

Before he could continue, a soldier rushed in.

"An imperial envoy has arrived!"

Shen Shikui let out a faint snort. Pi Island was accustomed to being forgotten. Imperial envoys rarely changed anything. Still, he said, "Let us receive him properly."

They hurried to the beach. A eunuch had just disembarked and stood stiffly in the sand, already holding an imperial decree.

Shen Shikui and Cao Wenzhao bowed. The eunuch read aloud.

The decree praised their defense of Pi Island and expressed imperial satisfaction. Then came the real announcement. Cao Wenzhao was appointed Coastal Regional Commander, tasked with assisting Pi Island and countering both Manchu and Joseon naval threats.

Furthermore, he was granted authority to recruit pirates into imperial service. All appointments below brigadier general rank were left to his discretion.

After the decree was read, Shen Shikui quietly exhaled. He had feared losing his own position if Cao Wenzhao were placed above him directly. But Coastal Regional Commander meant cooperation, not replacement. That was acceptable.

Cao Wenzhao, meanwhile, was already thinking ahead.

Recruit pirates. Appoint officers freely.

Jiang Cheng could be named brigadier general. Shi Lang could serve as a centurion. Zheng Sen, though technically a guest officer and favored by Dao Xuan Tianzun, could also be formally appointed.

With legitimate titles, Gao Family Village's navy would no longer need to disguise itself as merchant shipping. It could operate openly.

Even better, the Coastal Regional Command's base lay near Dengzhou. That offered a proper naval anchorage.

Dengzhou stood only about six hundred li from Tianjin in a straight line. From there, the fleet could reach Tianjin within a day.

The implications were enormous.

The eunuch departed for the capital. Cao Wenzhao immediately drafted a memorial listing Brigadier General Jiang Cheng, Centurion Shi Lang, and Centurion Zheng Sen for approval.

Several days later.

Dengzhou Naval Garrison.

Dengzhou had once been a proud naval outpost of the Great Ming Dynasty. In its prime, it boasted one hundred medium and large warships, along with countless smaller vessels.

But the maritime prohibition policies of the Ming had hollowed it out. By the sixteenth year of Hongzhi under Emperor Xiaozong, the garrison had been reduced to three major ships. Shipbuilding had nearly vanished.

By the tenth year of Chongzhen, 1637, the so called naval base looked more like a struggling fishing village. A tattered flag reading "Dengzhou Garrison" flapped over a decaying fort. That was the only sign of former glory.

Into this quiet harbor sailed Jiang Cheng, Shi Lang, and Zheng Sen, leading a fleet that dwarfed anything the garrison had seen in decades.

The local sailors panicked. They scrambled into battered fishing boats and rowed frantically ashore. Some ran home to fetch rusty weapons. Others stood stiffly at the shoreline, pretending to mount resistance despite clearly lacking the means.

Jiang Cheng lifted a tin megaphone.

"This general is Jiang Cheng, brigadier general under Coastal Regional Commander Cao Wenzhao. By imperial order, I have come to assume control of Dengzhou Naval Fort. There is no need for alarm."

The tension melted instantly.

"You frightened us!" one sailor shouted. "With ships that large, we thought Westerners had arrived!"

The weapons were lowered. The sailors gathered in uneven ranks.

Jiang Cheng surveyed them. Their armor was patched and faded. Their blades were speckled with rust. Their ships were little more than fishing craft.

Shi Lang muttered softly, "What a miserable army."

Zheng Sen added, "They are poorer than my family's former pirates."

Jiang Cheng addressed them directly. "Why are your weapons and armor in such condition? Where are your warships?"

An officer stepped forward awkwardly. "General, Dengzhou has been neglected for over a century. The court provides no funds. No ships. No equipment. We survive by fishing. The few boats you see were built with our own hands."

There was no defiance in his voice, only resignation.

Jiang Cheng nodded slowly. He glanced at Shi Lang and Zheng Sen. Both simply sighed.

Then Jiang Cheng cleared his throat.

"Listen carefully. I take care of my own people. Since you are now part of my command, we are family. What the court fails to provide, I will provide."

The Dengzhou soldiers stared blankly. They did not quite understand.

They understood very quickly.

Jiang Cheng waved his hand. "Distribute grain. Distribute silver. Issue new clothing."

Carts rolled forward. Bags of rice were opened. Fresh uniforms were handed out. Silver coins clinked into waiting palms.

It was Gao Family Village's classic strategy. Overwhelm them with generosity before they have time to question it.

The effect was immediate.

"General Jiang is the most conscientious commander I have ever served!" one soldier declared.

"From today onward, I swear loyalty!" another shouted.

"If you order me into fire or onto blades, I will not hesitate!" cried a third.

In less than an afternoon, the Dengzhou Naval Garrison had changed hands completely.

Not through force.

Through full stomachs and heavy purses.

Chapter 1152 The English Arrive

The Dengzhou garrison soldiers truly felt as if fate had lost its mind.

They had always been coastal paupers, surviving by fishing in cracked boats and patching their clothes until the fabric gave up entirely. Then, without warning, fortune crashed down on them like a heavenly cart overloaded with silver.

Brand new armor.

Spears tipped with first rate iron heads.

Their ragged bows replaced with freshly issued Kaiyuan bows, identical to those used by the border armies.

Each man received several taels of silver every month, paid promptly. That was only their salary. Their rations were provided separately. Jiang Cheng had arranged for sacks of rice and bundles of dried meat to be delivered directly to them.

For the first time in years, the Dengzhou soldiers carried provisions home in bulk.

Within days, the hollow eyed fishermen of yesterday were transformed into well fed, upright soldiers. Their cheeks filled out. Their backs straightened. When they spoke of Jiang Cheng, their voices carried reverence.

In their hearts, Jiang Cheng's stature had surpassed even the Emperor.

If asked who they would die for, the answer was obvious.

Yet the soldiers also noticed something important.

There remained a clear gap between themselves and Jiang Cheng's personal guards. The ordinary garrison troops still wielded bows, spears, and sabers. Jiang Cheng's guards, however, carried flintlock rifles.

That difference burned in their eyes.

Who did not wish to rise? To become one of the general's trusted guards meant stable pay, advanced weapons, and lasting security.

After some discussion, the Dengzhou soldiers selected a representative and sent him to speak with Jiang Cheng.

"General," the representative said respectfully, "we understand that we have just joined your command and have not yet earned your trust. But we are willing to prove ourselves. Please tell us what we must do to become your trusted guards."

Jiang Cheng smiled faintly. "That is not difficult."

He produced a book and handed it over.

"Heavenly Book: Military Discipline and Regulations."

"If all of you can master this book," Jiang Cheng said calmly, "and pass our background investigation, I will accept you as trusted guards and issue you flintlock rifles."

The representative accepted the book with both hands as if receiving a sacred text.

"Understood, General. We will study diligently."

For the sake of long term security, what was a little studying?

Under instructors sent by Jiang Cheng, the Dengzhou Navy began a period of intense discipline training. The once idle fishing garrison suddenly became the most hardworking unit along the coast.

While Dengzhou transformed itself through study and ambition, events far to the south were unfolding.

Outside Humen Fortress near Guangzhou.

A fleet of four large English sailing ships cruised along the coast. Their commander was John Weddell, a former officer of the Royal Navy of Kingdom of England.

Decades earlier, in 1588, the so called Invincible Armada of Spain had been shattered. Since then, England's naval power had been steadily rising.

But when English ships sailed eastward toward the riches of Asia, they found the sea lanes already dominated by Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The gates to the golden markets were tightly controlled.

Weddell had recently attempted to dock at Macau to purchase goods. The Portuguese there rejected him outright and refused him entry.

With only four ships under his command, Weddell dared not challenge the Portuguese strongmen entrenched in Macau.

So he turned his attention to the Great Ming.

"Admiral," one subordinate reported, "the light sailing ship Anne has entered the Pearl River estuary to survey the channel. We will soon have detailed nautical charts."

Another added, "The Ming navy has spotted us."

Weddell snorted. "The Ming navy? You mean those battered junks we passed along the way? Do they qualify as a navy?"

The subordinate corrected himself with a grin. "The Ming rabble, then. They have sent someone to negotiate."

"Very well," Weddell said. "Let us hear them."

A small boat from the Guangzhou naval patrol approached. A minor official from the Ministry of Rites climbed aboard the English flagship.

"My name is Kai Long," he introduced himself calmly. "I serve in the Ministry of Rites, handling foreign affairs. We have observed your smaller vessel entering the Pearl River. Such behavior is discourteous. We demand that you recall your scout ship and refrain from entering Great Ming territory without permission."

A Portuguese translator conveyed the message.

Weddell adopted a polite expression. "These are merchant vessels of England. I am here for trade. The weather is unstable, and I fear a typhoon may be forming. We wish to enter the inner river for shelter."

Kai Long replied evenly, "If a typhoon were approaching, shelter could be discussed. The Great Ming is a land of courtesy. However, such matters require approval from the court. You may not simply send scout ships to chart our waters."

Weddell felt irritation rise but forced a smile.

One subordinate whispered, "Admiral, we are not yet ready. The Anne is still surveying. We must not provoke them prematurely."

Weddell nodded slightly. "Very well. We apologize for any misunderstanding. Please allow us to formally request temporary shelter."

Kai Long looked east toward the sea. Having lived long in Guangdong, he recognized the signs of real storms. There was no typhoon brewing.

"I see no threat of severe weather," he said firmly. "Your fleet is safe. You have no need to enter the inner river. Please withdraw from Great Ming waters at once."

Weddell suppressed his anger. "We will depart soon. However, our scout ship has gone far upriver. We have no way to contact it quickly, nor do we possess a smaller craft to pursue it."

Kai Long frowned. In an age without rapid communication, the statement could not be easily disproven.

"Once your vessel returns," he said finally, "you must depart immediately."

He then descended to the waiting patrol boat and returned to shore.

Weddell watched him go. The moment Kai Long's figure shrank into the distance, the polished smile vanished from his face.

A pirate's grin replaced it.

"These small eastern officials," he muttered coldly. "Once we chart these waterways, they will learn what the Royal Navy truly is."

Far to the north, Dengzhou's newly disciplined sailors studied military regulations by lamplight, dreaming of flintlock rifles.

Far to the south, English ships quietly mapped the Pearl River.

The sea, for the moment, remained calm.

Chapter 1153 Battle of Humen

Weddell's fleet did not rush.

It waited.

Four English warships lay anchored quietly in the Pearl River Estuary, their hulls rising and falling with the tide like patient wolves resting before the hunt. Days passed. The humid southern air clung to the masts and rigging. The sailors cleaned cannon barrels, patched sails, joked loudly, drank sparingly, and watched.

They were not here by accident.

The scouting light sailboat Annie had already returned.

For several days it had slipped deep into the Pearl River Estuary, careful and calculating, reaching as far as Toudaotan, barely fifteen miles from Guangzhou itself. Its crew did not merely glance at the shoreline and sail back. They measured depths carefully with weighted lines. They charted currents. They marked hidden shoals. They noted the placement of sandbanks, the width of channels, and the tide patterns at different hours.

They observed fortifications.

They observed troop rotations.

They observed cannon placements.

They observed everything.

When the small vessel returned to Weddell's flagship, its charts were heavy with ink.

And that was when Ming officials finally began to feel something was wrong.

Kai Long had eyes. More importantly, he had experience.

As an official from the Ministry of Rites stationed at the front line of foreign affairs, he had dealt with Westerners before. He knew their smiles were rarely empty. He knew their gifts were never free. He knew their curiosity always had weight behind it.

He reported upward immediately.

"The English fleet harbors sinister motives," he said, bowing before his superior.

His superior waved a hand lazily.

"Sinister motives? There are only four ships."

"But they are surveying the waterways," Kai Long insisted.

"They are foreigners. Foreigners always look around. Let them look."

Kai Long pressed harder. "They have measured depths. They have sent boats repeatedly toward our defensive lines."

His superior sighed as if this were a complaint about the weather.

"They are probably seeking shelter from a typhoon. The Celestial Empire does not tremble because four barbarian ships float nearby. If they wish to anchor, let them anchor. If they wish to look, let them look. What harm can they do?"

That was the problem.

It was precisely because the Celestial Empire believed itself untouchable that it had grown blind.

Kai Long left that audience with a stone in his chest.

He was not a military commander. He had no troops under him. He had no cannons to order. He only had warnings, and warnings were wind when pride sealed the ears.

August arrived heavy and humid.

Then Weddell moved.

The four English warships lifted anchor and sailed toward Humen Fortress.

Humen.

The throat of Guangzhou.

The gate that guarded the Pearl River.

Kai Long received the news and rushed to the walls himself.

From the parapets he saw them clearly. Four ships. Dark hulls. Orderly movement. They did not charge recklessly. They stopped at calculated distance. Then tenders were lowered.

Small boats began moving through the waters near the fortress.

Surveying.

Openly.

Boldly.

This was no longer ambiguous curiosity. This was insult.

Kai Long's face turned pale, then dark.

"This is Humen Fortress," he said through clenched teeth. "The gateway to Guangzhou. And they are mapping our waterways as if we were already conquered."

He spun toward the artillery officer.

"Open fire. Three warning shots. Drive them away."

The artillery officer hesitated. His voice lowered.

"Master Kai... their ships carry cannons on both sides. Four ships together... the number is considerable. If we provoke them..."

Kai Long's eyes sharpened.

"Provoke them? They are already at our doorstep measuring our defenses. If we do nothing, next they will row into our barracks and count our soldiers one by one."

The officer swallowed.

"That... is true."

Kai Long spoke slowly now.

"This is not about whether we can win. This is not some cultivation tale where the weak kneel the moment they see someone stronger and beg to become their dog. We are soldiers of Great Ming. Even if we lose, we do not let them trample our face."

Silence.

Then he gave the order again.

"Three warning shots. Let them know this fortress is not a toy."

The artillery crews moved.

Cannons were angled.

Fuses were lit.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Three shells cut through humid air and fell into the waters far from the English ships, erupting in towering white plumes.

On Weddell's deck, officers paused.

Weddell himself stared, then burst into laughter.

"They fired."

He laughed harder.

"The little dwarves are angry. Excellent. If they want war, we shall give them war."

His hand cut downward.

"Open fire."

The four English ships shifted formation smoothly, spreading out to encircle Humen Fortress in a loose arc.

Then thunder answered thunder.

English cannons roared.

Ming cannons roared back.

Iron balls screamed across the sky, passing one another midair with deadly indifference.

Wood splintered.

Stone shattered.

The English ships took hits. Some rails were smashed. Some rigging torn. A few sailors fell.

But these were ocean veterans. They had fought Spain. They had tasted real war. Casualties did not freeze them.

They reloaded.

They fired again.

And again.

And again.

Soon the difference showed.

Humen Fortress possessed forty four cannons. On paper, formidable.

In reality?

Powder stores were limited.

Matching shot sizes were inconsistent.

Training was uneven.

When English cannonballs began smashing into parapets, blasting stone and dirt into the air, fear crept in.

One shell landed inside the fortress courtyard.

An artilleryman was torn apart.

Another lost an arm.

Smoke thickened.

Noise swallowed commands.

Some gunners ducked behind walls.

Some hesitated too long between shots.

Some stopped entirely.

The rhythm broke.

English broadsides continued with relentless precision.

Soon Humen's return fire thinned.

Then staggered.

Then nearly ceased.

Kai Long crouched behind a low wall, shielded by two subordinates. The fortress shook under bombardment.

A subordinate leaned close and shouted into his ear.

"Master Kai, it's useless. They have too many cannons. We cannot hold."

Kai Long looked around.

Men were no longer firing in coordinated volleys. They were hiding, scrambling, bleeding. The fortress, funded by vast imperial silver, bristling with artillery, stood like a tiger whose claws had never been sharpened.

He closed his eyes briefly.

"What is to be done?"

"Retreat, sir. We must retreat."

He did not argue.

He allowed himself to be pulled away.

One by one, artillerymen abandoned positions.

The gates emptied.

Smoke drifted over silent cannons.

Humens Fortress had fallen.

When Weddell saw Ming troops withdrawing, he raised a hand.

"Cease fire."

The guns quieted.

"Send one hundred sailors ashore. Remove every usable cannon."

English boots stepped onto Ming soil with unhurried confidence.

Inside the shattered fortress, nine cannons lay ruined beneath collapsed stone.

Thirty five remained intact.

They were hauled away.

Carried off like trophies.

Far away at Zhoushan Dinghai Port, a messenger ran as if chased by demons.

He burst onto the dock shouting, "Urgent military intelligence! Where is Instructor Jiang?"

A sailor shook his head.

"Instructor Jiang is in Dengzhou reorganizing the navy. He has not returned."

The messenger nearly collapsed.

"Then who is here? Who can fight?"

A tall youth stepped forward.

"What is the matter?"

Shi Lang.

Beside him stood Zheng Sen.

Both young. Both still students of the maritime academy. Both not yet full commanders, but already tempered by salt wind and ambition.

The messenger seized Shi Lang's sleeve.

"Four English ships bombarded Humen Fortress. They carried away thirty five cannons."

For a moment neither youth spoke.

Then blood rushed to their faces.

"The English attacked Great Ming?"

Shi Lang's jaw tightened.

Zheng Sen's fists clenched.

"Damn them."

They did not hesitate.

"Prepare ships."

"Gather men."

"Let's kill those bastards."

And in that instant, something shifted.

Not just anger.

Resolve.

Because humiliation does something strange.

To the arrogant, it produces denial.

To the complacent, it produces excuses.

But to the young?

It produces fire.

And fire, once lit, rarely dies quietly.

Chapter 1154 We Can Go

The moment the news settled in, the two young men practically exploded.

Shi Lang slapped his thigh. "Then what are we waiting for? Mobilize troops! We hold imperial posts now. We can deploy forces legitimately. Let's drive those English dogs straight back into the sea."

Zheng Sen's eyes were blazing. "Exactly. We're not pirates anymore. We're officers of Great Ming. We have the right."

They were already halfway to the docks in their minds.

Then a calm voice drifted in from behind them.

"You two are speaking nonsense."

They turned.

Bai Gongzi had just docked his paddlewheel ship, the Little White 3. He stepped off the gangplank with unhurried grace, folding his fan as he approached.

"You're excited," he continued, "which is understandable. But it's precisely because you now hold official positions that you cannot interfere freely."

The two youths froze.

"Huh?"

Shi Lang frowned. "What do you mean we can't?"

Bai Gongzi gave them a look that said, You still have much to learn.

"In the past," he said patiently, "when we were acting under looser banners, we could claim to be pirates. We could strike where we wished and disappear. No one could pin jurisdiction on us."

He tapped Shi Lang's chest lightly with his folded fan.

"Now you are registered officers of the court. That means boundaries. Regions. Authority lines. If you act outside your assigned jurisdiction, you undermine not only your own status but also the legitimacy Gao Family Village fought so hard to establish."

Zheng Sen scratched his head.

"But General Cao is Coastal Regional Commander. Doesn't that mean he commands the whole coastline?"

Bai Gongzi shook his head.

"The Suzhou and Songjiang fleet governs its own coast. The Fujian Naval Commander governs Fujian waters. The Guangdong Regional Commander governs Guangdong. General Cao's authority likely covers Tianjin and Shandong coasts. The bureaucracy is a web, not a sword. You pull one thread carelessly, and the whole thing tangles."

Shi Lang muttered, "So we just watch?"

"I did not say that," Bai Gongzi replied calmly. "I also think the English deserve a beating. I am only saying that how we beat them matters."

The two youths exchanged looks.

Their fists were ready.

Their brains were catching up.

Just then, another ship entered the harbor at speed.

It flew a familiar banner.

Zheng Zhilong's flag.

Before it had fully docked, a burly man leapt ashore.

"Young Master! Young Master!"

Zheng Sen blinked. "That's Father's trusted man."

The man rushed over, breathing hard but grinning.

"My master sent me. There is some entertainment to be had. He asks whether Young Master wishes to watch."

Shi Lang snorted. "Entertainment? Don't tell me it involves four English warships."

The messenger froze. "You already know?"

"We just heard," Zheng Sen replied. "They bombarded Humen Fortress. The fight is over. What's left to see?"

The man's grin widened.

"The Westerners angered the provincial governor and the Vice Commissioner of Maritime Affairs. Several high officials ordered Guangdong Regional Commander Chen Qian to expel them immediately. But Chen Qian lacks men. His ships are old and worn. He could not drive them off."

He paused for effect.

"So he requested assistance from my master."

Understanding dawned instantly.

Of course.

If Westerners bullied the coast, who would they think of?

Zheng Zhilong.

The most powerful maritime force in southeastern Great Ming.

The man who had broken the Dutch at Liaoluo Bay.

The sea knew his name.

Shi Lang's expression brightened like sunrise.

"Little Sen, you're going."

Zheng Sen was already nodding.

"And I am coming with you," Shi Lang continued quickly. "I will not reveal my identity. I will pretend to be one of your subordinates. No one will know."

"That is perfect," Zheng Sen said, almost laughing from excitement.

Since Zheng Zhilong was personally intervening, Gao Family Village decided not to dispatch a massive fleet. There was no need to crowd the stage.

They sent only two ships.

The Wanli Sunshine.

And the newly completed paddlewheel vessel, Little White 3.

Shi Lang changed attire, blending into Zheng Sen's retinue.

The two large ships left Zhoushan Harbor and cut southward toward Fujian waters.

After steady sailing, they reached Anhai Town in Jinjiang.

Zheng Zhilong's stronghold.

The docks were packed.

Ships of all shapes and sizes crowded the harbor like fish in spawning season.

Dominating the center was a Western galleon roughly fifty meters long. No one quite knew how Zheng Zhilong had acquired it, but it was clearly not locally built.

Behind it were about a dozen large junks around twenty meters in length.

And then smaller craft, dozens of them.

But when Wanli Sunshine and Little White 3 entered the harbor, conversation died.

The two ships exceeded sixty meters.

They dwarfed Zheng Zhilong's prized galleon.

Sailors stared openly.

"What monsters are those?"

"Are those really Ming ships?"

"Look at that hull..."

"Is that a paddlewheel?"

Whispers rolled across the docks.

Zheng Sen waved cheerfully.

"Uncle Zhang!"

"Uncle Li!"

"Uncle Zheng!"

Men who had sailed under his father's command for years laughed and waved back.

"You've grown taller!"

"Young Master looks stronger!"

Zheng Zhilong himself stood waiting on the dock.

When he saw his son step ashore, a broad smile spread across his weathered face.

"Little Sen. It has been a while. Have you learned anything studying under Mr. Li?"

Zheng Sen's chest swelled with pride.

"Father, I have learned incredible things. The Earth is a great sphere. The Sun does not circle us. The Moon affects the seas. I understand tides, monsoons, ocean currents. I have studied navigation beyond imagination. Mr. Li knows more than ten thousand scholars combined."

Zheng Zhilong laughed heartily.

"That so?"

"Oh, and I also secured an official post."

Zheng Zhilong blinked.

"You what?"

"A Centurion."

Silence.

Zheng Zhilong stared at his thirteen year old son as if seeing him anew.

"A Centurion?"

"Yes."

For a moment the great sea lord did not know whether to laugh or question the heavens.

When he had sought rank in his youth, he had endured humiliation and struggle. Advancement had been slow and uncertain.

Now his son returned from study with a formal military title already attached.

Sending him to follow Eunuch Li had been the correct decision indeed.

Zheng Zhilong felt something warm in his chest.

Perhaps one day, he thought, I will rise through my son.

"How did you obtain it?"

"That story is long," Zheng Sen said quickly. "I will explain later. For now, Father, let us deal with the English."

Zheng Zhilong's expression hardened.

"Yes. Let us."

He had already prepared most of the fleet, merely waiting for his son's arrival.

The English had only four ships.

Guangzhou was far from Fujian.

There was no need to mobilize everything.

He selected ten medium to large vessels capable of long voyages.

He himself commanded from the Western galleon.

His younger brother, Zheng Zhihu, took the vanguard aboard a twenty meter junk.

The fleet sailed.

On the journey southward, Zheng Sen recounted the Battle of Pi Island in full detail.

Zheng Zhilong listened carefully.

The scale of that conflict startled him.

So much bloodshed.

So much risk.

So much balance hanging by a thread.

Had that battle gone differently, Great Ming's northern waters might have collapsed.

He felt cold for a moment imagining it.

Then Zheng Sen continued excitedly, shifting from battle to knowledge.

He spoke of steam powered paddlewheels.

Of propulsion systems.

Of understanding wind not as superstition but as science.

When he explained that tides were influenced by the Moon's pull, Zheng Zhilong frowned deeply.

"The Moon... pulling the sea?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"Gravity."

Zheng Zhilong stared at the water for a long time.

The sea he had ruled for decades suddenly seemed deeper than ever.

Finally, he laughed softly.

"My son."

"Yes, Father?"

"In the future, your achievements will far surpass mine."

The fleet continued southward.

Ahead waited four English ships.

Behind sailed a father beginning to understand that the world was changing.

And beside him stood a son who already belonged to that new world.

Chapter 1155 The Audacious Englishmen

As Zheng Zhilong's fleet cut southward across the restless waters, a small courier boat appeared on the horizon.

It approached at speed, its oars biting urgently into the sea.

By the time it drew alongside, the men aboard were already shouting.

New intelligence.

John Weddell's four great English ships remained anchored outside Humen Fortress, near Tiger Island. They had ignored every warning issued by the Ming court. Expulsion orders meant nothing to them. Official proclamations might as well have been wind.

They stayed.

And they grew bolder.

Guangdong officials could not simply swallow such humiliation. Pride was wounded. Authority was mocked. If nothing were done, what face would remain?

So they adopted a suggestion from Commander Li Yanqing and others.

Fire attack.

Sub-commander Chen Bangji and Wu Yifeng were ordered to recruit forty Fujian soldiers skilled in fire tactics. Men like Zhang Qi. Men who understood flame not as chaos but as weapon.

Incendiary materials were prepared. Bundles of firewood were stacked. Five old warships were selected, vessels too worn to rely upon in direct combat.

They would become sacrifice.

Iron chains linked the ships together.

Under cover of darkness they drifted toward the English formation.

The current was calculated.

The wind direction studied.

As the burning vessels neared, sailors hidden aboard ignited the materials and leapt into the river.

Flames roared upward in a sudden pillar of orange fury.

For a brief, glorious moment, it seemed destiny favored Great Ming.

But the English sailors were no fools.

They reacted instantly.

Sails shifted.

Helms turned.

Orders barked with disciplined precision.

The great English ships slid aside like predators sensing a trap before it closed.

The chained fire vessels drifted past, blazing uselessly.

The river swallowed their effort.

Five ships lost.

Stores of fuel gone.

Morale shaken.

Worse still, the Guangdong navy had learned something unpleasant.

Those massive foreign ships moved with frightening agility.

After the failed fire attack, Weddell's confidence swelled.

He decided to escalate.

If intimidation was the goal, then subtlety was a waste of time.

He intercepted a Ming fleet sailing along the Pearl River. Twenty one vessels.

They offered almost no resistance.

English cannons roared.

Three Ming gunboats burned.

Two sailing warships followed.

A riverside village caught flame.

Thirty pigs were seized as if they were spoils from some colonial excursion.

The remaining sixteen ships scattered in chaos.

When this report reached Zheng Zhilong, his face darkened like gathering storm clouds.

Shi Lang exhaled slowly.

"From this alone, it is clear the Ming navy cannot match them."

Zheng Sen immediately objected.

"That is not entirely fair. We are part of the Ming navy, are we not?"

Shi Lang blinked.

Then a grin crept across his face.

"If we count ourselves, then perhaps the Ming navy still has teeth."

Zheng Sen's eyes burned.

"Then let us hurry and knock those teeth into their skulls."

Meanwhile, at Humen Fortress, insult piled upon insult.

A captured Ming warship burned on the river directly before the ruined walls.

Weddell had deliberately towed it there before setting it alight.

The message was unmistakable.

This is your gate.

This is your pride.

Watch it burn.

On deck, Weddell stood with hands clasped behind his back.

"We have established authority," he declared smugly. "Next time we come to trade, they will obey as others do. Africans. Southeast Asian tribes. All bend eventually."

His officers laughed.

Then his gaze drifted to the shattered remains of Humen Fortress.

The cannons had already been plundered.

Only broken ramparts remained.

He smirked.

"Bring powder ashore. Blow it apart completely. Let the noise echo."

Three large barrels were carried into the cracks of the walls.

Fuses were lit.

The explosions tore through stone.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Walls collapsed into rubble.

In the distance, Ming officials watched helplessly.

Kai Long trembled with rage.

"Why is our navy so weak?" he cried bitterly. "How can Great Ming suffer such humiliation?"

A messenger rushed toward him.

"Master Kai. Zheng Zhilong's fleet has arrived."

Hope flickered.

Then doubt followed.

"These red haired barbarians are unlike the Portuguese. Unlike the Dutch. Unlike the Arabs," Kai Long murmured. "I have never seen such powerful pirates. I only pray Zheng Zhilong can prevail."

At that very moment, a light English sailing ship returned to Weddell with urgent news.

"More than ten large Ming ships are approaching."

Weddell laughed.

"Large? How large could their vessels possibly be? I have yet to see one worth admiration."

The sailor swallowed.

"They are enormous, sir. Larger than ours."

"Larger than your scouting boat, perhaps."

"No, sir. Larger than your flagship."

Silence.

"That is impossible," Weddell snapped. "We sail Royal Navy warships. We defeated the Spanish Armada. Our ships are the finest afloat."

"They are truly massive," the sailor insisted. "You will see shortly."

Weddell ordered all five vessels into formation. Three great three masted galleons and two smaller light ships formed a blocking line at the Pearl River's mouth.

He wore a look of contempt.

China could not possibly surprise him.

At his side, the Portuguese translator leaned in carefully.

"Admiral, the Ming once built very large ships. Zheng He's treasure fleets. Floating fortresses."

Weddell scoffed.

"Exaggerations. Their historians invent stories."

"They did sail widely in Southeast Asia."

"Southeast Asia keeps no proper records. Anyone may claim anything."

Even as he dismissed the warning, shapes appeared on the horizon.

First came a twenty meter junk bearing Fujian naval colors.

Weddell burst into laughter.

"Is this their great fleet? That vessel carries perhaps five cannons. Nothing more."

The junk approached steadily.

It was commanded by Zheng Zhihu.

Despite his fiery temper, he adhered to principle.

Courtesy before force.

A small boat detached from his ship and rowed toward the English flagship.

The envoy climbed aboard and spoke in clear voice.

"We are the Fujian Navy of Great Ming."

The translator rendered his words.

"We order you to cease aggression immediately. Compensate for the fortress, the burned ships, and village losses. Return stolen cannons and goods. Withdraw at once. Otherwise our cannons will show no mercy."

Chapter 1156 Dawn

Weddell threw his head back and laughed, the sound sharp and brimming with contempt.

"You want me to pay reparations? And then politely withdraw?" he said, wiping at the corner of his eye as though the proposal had genuinely amused him. "Hahaha. What utter nonsense. Those are terms spoken by victors to the defeated. Tell me, can you not see with your own eyes who stands on the brink of victory?"

The man sent by Zheng Zhihu did not bother to argue.

He had been a pirate long before he wore anything resembling official colors, and in his experience, words were tools best used for deception or intimidation, not persuasion. When a blade could resolve a matter, talking only dulled the edge.

He let out a short, dismissive snort.

"If that is your answer," he said flatly, "then negotiations have failed. Prepare for war."

He turned immediately, vaulted back into his small dinghy with fluid ease, and pushed off. Within moments, the little boat was cutting across the water, carrying him away from the English flagship and back toward the Ming line.

Weddell watched him go, lips curling.

"These fellows," he scoffed, loud enough for the officers around him to hear, "lack strength in battle, yet carry themselves as if pride alone could float their ships."

Laughter rippled across the deck.

"Beyond their tattered pride," one officer added mockingly, "this decaying empire has nothing left."

They were still basking in that comfortable sense of superiority when the lookout's voice shifted in tone.

Sails.

On the horizon, behind Zheng Zhihu's junk, dark shapes began to rise one after another. At first they looked like shadows against the glare of the afternoon light. Then the silhouettes sharpened, multiplied, and resolved into masts.

One vessel.

Three.

Five.

More.

Within moments, over a dozen warships were visible, advancing in disciplined formation.

Weddell's gaze locked instinctively onto the largest among them.

The Wanli Sunshine.

It was enormous, stretching more than sixty meters from bow to stern, its hull towering above the waterline with an imposing solidity that made his own fifty meter flagship appear modest by comparison.

But what froze him was not merely the size.

There were no sails.

No banks of oars.

The masts stood bare.

Yet the vessel moved.

It advanced steadily, cutting cleanly through the current with a confidence that defied every rule of seamanship Weddell had learned since boyhood.

His face twisted in disbelief.

"Blast it all," he barked. "How is that ship moving?"

Before anyone could answer, another colossal silhouette emerged beside it.

Xiaobai No. 3.

Its hull matched the first in length and bulk, and like the Wanli Sunshine, it bore no sails and no visible oars. Instead, mounted on either flank were two massive paddlewheels, turning relentlessly, churning the river into froth.

The wheels bit into the water with mechanical rhythm, flinging white spray outward as the vessel surged forward without reliance on wind.

A chill passed through Weddell's spine.

"What in God's name is that?" he muttered. "Impossible..."

And then, as if to complete the formation, another familiar outline entered view.

Zheng Zhilong's flagship.

A captured Spanish galleon, broad beamed and heavy with guns, once flying Iberian colors, now repurposed under the Great Ming banner.

The situation rearranged itself in Weddell's mind with ruthless clarity.

He commanded three English three masted galleons and two light frigates.

Facing him were two massive unknown warships powered by unheard of means, a seasoned Spanish galleon under an experienced commander, and nine sturdy junk ships.

Numerically alone, the advantage had shifted.

"They rejected our terms!" Zheng Zhihu shouted across the narrowing water to Zheng Zhilong's flagship.  
"They say only victors dictate conditions."

Zheng Zhilong's reply carried no ornament.

"Then we fight."

He had once stood at Liaoluo Bay and faced eleven Dutch galleons.

He had broken them.

Three English galleons did not frighten him.

"Prepare for battle!"

Across his fleet, flags shifted and drums beat. Crews scrambled to stations. Powder was hauled. Wicks were trimmed. Cannon ports were thrown open.

Shi Lang, young but already sharp eyed and composed, returned to the helm of the Wanli Sunshine. The deck beneath his feet vibrated faintly with the pulse of its hidden machinery, a sensation that felt to him less like tremor and more like promise.

Zheng Sen climbed aboard Xiaobai No. 3, taking command with a boy's eagerness tempered by hard instruction. His eyes burned not with recklessness but with anticipation.

Almost simultaneously, both raised their arms.

"To battle!"

"To battle!"

Their voices rang out over the water.

Across from them, Weddell felt something tighten in his chest.

Since anchoring near Guangzhou, he had seen only scattered, aging vessels flying the Great Ming banner. He had assumed weakness. He had assumed hesitation. He had assumed he could posture his way into favorable terms.

Now he realized that by mocking negotiation, he had sealed the path ahead.

There would be no retreat into diplomacy.

Only gunfire.

"Prepare for combat!" he shouted. "Royal British sailors, stand ready. Hold until they are within range."

He never finished the sentence.

A thunderous explosion shattered the air.

The Wanli Sunshine fired.

The distance between fleets was still vast by conventional standards. Weddell's eyes widened as he watched the arc of iron streak across the sky.

A heartbeat later, a towering column of water erupted beside his flagship, drenching the deck in spray.

His jaw tightened.

"Cannons at that range?"

Another roar.

Another plume of water.

Then another.

The rifled cannons aboard the Wanli Sunshine and Xiaobai No. 3 spoke in disciplined succession. Their polished steel barrels flashed in the sunlight, recoiling smoothly with each discharge before being hauled back into position with efficient precision.

Solid iron shot screamed across the river.

At first, the aim wavered. A few rounds fell short. A few overshot. But the corrections came quickly.

Then came the crack of impact.

A cannonball slammed into the broadside of one English galleon, blasting a ragged hole through its planking. The breach sat above the waterline, but splinters tore across the deck, wounding men and shredding rigging.

Another shot smashed into a different vessel's deck, ripping apart timber and killing a sailor outright.

Weddell felt cold calculation replace disbelief.

"Close the distance," he ordered sharply. "Return fire."

The English ships adjusted formation and pressed forward.

Despite the shock of the opening barrage, British sailors did not panic. They moved with drilled discipline, hauling lines, trimming sails, compensating for damage with grim determination.

This was, after all, the early rise of Britain's maritime strength.

An ascendant power does not crumble at the first shock. Its men believe history favors them. They believe destiny carries their sails.

"We broke the Spanish Armada!" a sailor roared.

"The sea belongs to Britain!"

The cry spread, half memory, half defiance.

The five English ships surged ahead, closing the gap under relentless bombardment. Hulls splintered. Masts shuddered. Yet they advanced.

More iron struck them.

More holes opened.

Still they pushed forward until, at last, they entered the effective range of their smoothbore cannons.

"Fire!" Weddell bellowed.

Almost simultaneously, Zheng Zhilong gave the same order.

Now his fleet joined fully.

Twelve ships against five.

Broadsides thundered across the Pearl River in overlapping waves of flame and smoke.

But almost immediately, a disparity revealed itself.

The British gunners worked with clocklike discipline. Swab, load, ram, prime, fire. Their intervals were short. Their aim consistent. Even under incoming shot, their posture did not falter.

Among Zheng Zhilong's crews, courage existed in abundance, but training lagged. Some gunners hesitated when enemy iron screamed overhead. Some flinched at the impact of splinters. Reloading took longer. Shots drifted wide.

The difference in artillery doctrine was stark.

Fortunately, two vessels did not share that weakness.

Gao Family Village stood in its own rising era, fiercer even than Britain's.

If Britain was the sun at midmorning, climbing steadily, then Gao Family Village was the sun just breaking the horizon, radiant and unstoppable in its ascent.

On Wanli Sunshine and Xiaobai No. 3, commands rang out crisply.

"Adjust elevation."

"Correct two degrees port."

"Prepare next volley."

Their crews moved with relentless efficiency.

"Fire!"

More solid shot tore into English hulls, multiplying breaches, weakening structure.

Then, as the range tightened further, a new order cut through the din.

"They are close enough."

"Switch to explosive shells."

The next phase of battle was about to begin.

Chapter 1157 Let's Discuss Trade

An explosive shell tore through the deck of one British galleon with a shriek of splintering wood, smashed through the planking, and plunged deep into the hold below.

For one suspended heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the world inside that compartment turned into fire.

The detonation erupted with a thunderous roar that shook the entire hull. Flame burst outward in a violent bloom. Iron fragments, jagged shards of casing, and splinters of shattered timber scythed through the confined space with merciless efficiency.

British sailors fought with the kind of reckless courage that had carried their nation across oceans, but courage does not deflect shrapnel.

The explosion drowned out their battle cries and replaced them with screams.

Men were hurled against bulkheads. Others were cut down where they stood. In that cramped lower deck, there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. When the smoke began to thin, no one in that compartment remained standing.

Above, chaos rippled outward.

Meanwhile, cannonballs fired by John Weddell's fleet struck the hull of the Wanli Sunshine with solid force.

And then... nothing.

Instead of splintering wood or cracking beams, the iron shot merely left shallow dents upon the reinforced surface before ricocheting away. Some bounced off at sharp angles and skipped across the water. Others plunged into the sea with heavy splashes, having achieved nothing.

"Bloody hell!" John Weddell stared in disbelief. "What kind of ship is that?"

Beside him, the Portuguese translator trembled visibly. His face had gone pale.

"A treasure ship," the man stammered. "It must be one of the legendary treasure ships. The secret art of the mysterious Eastern empire."

Weddell rounded on him furiously. "Secret art? Don't you Portuguese know anything about science?"

The translator snapped back despite his fear. "Then you tell me what science this is!"

Weddell opened his mouth to answer.

Nothing came.

His eyes drifted back to the impossible vessel cutting through smoke and flame, impervious to his broadsides.

"Is it..." he muttered, voice thinning, "the power of a god?"

The translator bristled. "Science? And you dare say that word?"

Their argument dissolved into the roar of artillery.

The cannons of Gao Family Village had not paused.

Volley followed volley in ruthless rhythm. High explosive shells and solid shot alternated with calculated precision. Explosive rounds shredded enemy personnel, ripping open decks and scattering bodies. Solid shot hammered hulls, widening breaches, weakening structural integrity, and ensuring that damage accumulated beyond repair.

Under that relentless storm, John Weddell's fleet deteriorated rapidly.

Rigging sagged. Masts groaned. Planking split open like cracked bone. Blood stained the decks.

"Admiral!" one officer shouted over the din. "If we continue like this, we are finished!"

"We board them!" another cried desperately.

"Board?" came the answer. "They have twelve ships. We have five. We would be swallowed the moment we try."

The suggestion hung in the air, heavy and bitter.

"Then we withdraw..." Weddell said at last, forcing the words out through clenched teeth.

It was the only rational choice left.

But reason had arrived too late.

The instant Weddell signaled retreat and ordered his helm to turn, the opposing commanders reacted.

On Wanli Sunshine, Shi Lang raised his arm sharply.

"Full speed ahead. Cut off their retreat."

On Xiaobai No. 3, Zheng Sen gave the same command almost simultaneously.

"Advance. Block their escape routes."

The Wanli Sunshine responded immediately. As an electric vessel, its acceleration required nothing more than adjustment of control. The hull surged forward with sudden, decisive speed.

On Xiaobai No. 3, stokers below deck shoveled coal into the boilers with frantic intensity. The furnace glowed hotter. Steam pressure climbed. From the chimney, thick black smoke billowed skyward in a heavy plume. The great steam whistle released a long, mournful wail that rolled across the river like a declaration of pursuit.

Its paddlewheels churned faster, biting into the water.

The two vessels surged ahead in coordinated movement, angling across the British line and sealing the escape corridor with mechanical inevitability.

"Fire!"

"Open fire!"

The exchange resumed with savage intensity.

British cannonballs continued to strike the Wanli Sunshine only to bounce away in futility. One lucky shot slammed into the side of Xiaobai No. 3, punching a significant hole through its wooden plating, sending splinters flying and forcing damage crews into immediate action.

But that single success did not shift the tide.

Explosive shells from Gao Family Village continued to tear through British decks. Every direct hit meant death. Every blast shredded men who had been shouting battle cries only moments earlier.

Under such a one sided assault, even soldiers of a rising empire felt their resolve fracture.

Panic began to spread.

"There's no way out!"

"They've blocked the front and sealed the rear!"

"If we keep fighting, we all die!"

"Surrender. We must surrender. If we submit, perhaps diplomacy will spare us."

Fear does what cannon fire alone sometimes cannot.

Soon, a white flag rose above John Weddell's battered flagship.

The thunder of guns gradually ceased.

Smoke drifted slowly over the Pearl River.

An hour later.

Humen Fortress.

Kai Long of the Ministry of Rites' Bureau of Receptions sat in the central chair, posture composed, expression stern but controlled. Civil officials flanked him. Military officers stood nearby. Zheng Zhilong, Shi Lang, and Zheng Sen stood among them beside the Regional Commander of Guangdong, observing the formal pronouncement.

Before them stood John Weddell, no longer proud, no longer mocking.

Kai Long spoke with measured authority.

"On behalf of the Great Ming imperial court, I order you, the Red Haired Barbarians, to compensate our nation for the losses inflicted during this conflict. You will immediately withdraw from the waters of the Great Ming and you are forbidden from returning."

When he had first arrived, Weddell had carried himself with unmistakable arrogance.

Now he lowered his head.

"I understand," he said quietly. "We will return thirty five cannons, thirty pigs, and compensate your nation with twenty eight thousand silver yuan."

Kai Long gave a brief nod.

"Very well."

Weddell no longer had freedom of action. Arrangements for payment would require contacting a merchant named Paul, who would in turn reach out to the East India Company to secure the funds. The process would take time. Perhaps one month. Perhaps two.

Until then, he would remain in custody.

Escorted by soldiers, he was led away and locked inside a cell in Guangzhou.

Days passed in monotony.

Then one afternoon, he heard voices outside his door. Chinese voices. He could not understand a word.

The door creaked open.

Two middle aged men entered, followed by two youths.

The guards withdrew to a distant corner, clearly instructed not to listen.

The two older men were Zheng Zhilong and Zheng Zhihu.

The two youths were Shi Lang and Zheng Sen.

They sat down opposite John Weddell.

He felt unease settle in his chest.

What did they want?

Zheng Zhilong spoke first, in fluent Dutch.

"Do you understand Dutch?"

Weddell's heart skipped.

"I do."

"Good," Zheng Zhilong said calmly. "Let us speak in Dutch. My English is limited."

Limited.

The understatement irritated Weddell, because the man's accent and phrasing were already better than many traders he had encountered.

He had believed this Eastern empire stagnant and closed.

Yet here sat a commander fluent in European tongues.

"The court wishes you gone," Zheng Zhilong continued. "They forbid the British from trading here again."

Weddell nodded gloomily. "So I have been told."

Zheng Zhilong leaned forward slightly.

"However, I believe the court's approach is shortsighted."

Weddell blinked.

"Shortsighted?"

"Trade benefits all parties," Zheng Zhilong said evenly.

For a moment, Weddell wondered if this was mockery.

He had attacked Humen Fortress precisely because Portuguese control of Macau prevented him from trading freely. He had assumed that losing this battle meant the end of any commercial ambitions.

Yet here he was, a prisoner, and someone was proposing trade.

The situation felt absurd.

Zheng Zhilong chuckled softly and gestured to the youth beside him.

"Little Sen. You speak."

Zheng Sen stepped forward.

"Hello, John Weddell."

Weddell frowned at the sudden shift. "You replace him with a child?"

Zheng Sen met his gaze calmly.

"Though young, I hold the rank of Qianhu under the Coastal Regional Commander of the Great Ming."

Weddell stared.

"A thousand household commander?"

"Yes."

The boy smiled faintly.

"Now, let us discuss trade."

Chapter 1158 Trade Surplus

John Weddell stared at Zheng Sen as though the boy had just proposed something completely absurd.

His eyes widened slowly, confusion flickering across his face.

He had been defeated in battle. He was a prisoner. Reparations were being arranged. In every logical sequence of events he understood, this should have been the end of negotiations.

And yet here sat a youth calmly proposing trade.

Zheng Sen did not give him time to linger in disbelief.

This meeting itself existed in a narrow crack between authority and convenience. Zheng Zhilong had paid the guards well and ensured no word would travel upward. The higher ranking imperial officials must not know of this conversation. If they did, outrage would follow.

Those stiff and self righteous literati officials had behaved one way when cannon smoke filled the sky and British guns roared at Humen. Then they had trembled like frightened birds, urging compromise, whispering about appeasement, desperate to avoid catastrophe.

But the moment victory had been secured by the combined strength of Zheng Zhilong and Gao Family Village, their posture had changed.

Now the arrogance of the so called Celestial Empire had returned in full bloom.

They declared the Ming superior to all under heaven. They proclaimed no need for barbarian trade. They demanded that the English be expelled permanently and forbidden ever to return.

Their pride was loud.

Their understanding was shallow.

Zheng Zhilong had no patience for such blindness. If the court wished to posture, then he would act quietly where profit lay.

Zheng Sen spread out a rough sea chart on the table between them.

His finger tapped a point on the southern coast.

"Macau," he said.

The port, under Portuguese control, was a bright mark of foreign foothold on Ming soil.

"You cannot enter there, correct?"

Weddell gave a bitter nod. "The Portuguese seek monopoly over Far Eastern trade. They will not allow English ships into their harbor."

Zheng Sen had learned from Li Daoxuan's lessons that monopolies suffocate markets. Without competition, prices distort. Producers are squeezed. Consumers are manipulated. A single foreign power controlling access would only weaken the coastal economy in the long run.

Competition was necessary.

His finger slid northward.

"Quanzhou," he said, tapping the port in Fujian. "Currently under our Zheng family's control. We can allow your fleet to dock and trade there."

Weddell studied him carefully. "You speak boldly for a prisoner's visitor. Is this real?"

Zheng Sen looked at him evenly. "Do we need to lie to a prisoner?"

Weddell paused.

Then he exhaled lightly. "Fair enough."

Zheng Sen's finger continued tracing the coastline.

"Shanghai," he said. "Also within our sphere of influence. We can permit docking and trade there as well."

At the mention of Shanghai, Weddell's pulse quickened.

Its position was excellent. From there, one could sail efficiently to Nagasaki in Japan, connecting silver flows and goods across East Asia. It was a node in a web of opportunity.

Excitement surged in him, but caution quickly followed.

"And what," he asked carefully, "would Britain owe in return?"

Zheng Sen folded his hands calmly.

"One simple demand."

"Name it."

"Fair dealings," Zheng Sen replied. "Honest trade with all. No coercion. No violence."

Weddell stared at him.

"That is all?"

"That is all."

The simplicity unsettled him more than a list of demands might have.

But after a long moment, he nodded. "That is acceptable."

And so the negotiation concluded, quietly, unofficially, and decisively.

The bribed guards returned to their positions at the door, faces composed as if nothing had occurred.

Zheng Zhilong, Zheng Zhihu, Shi Lang, and Zheng Sen left together, walking along the road outside the prison compound.

Zheng Zhihu scratched his head, still perplexed.

"Elder Brother," he said, "I do not quite understand."

Zheng Zhilong smiled faintly. "What troubles you?"

Zheng Zhihu frowned. "The English sailed thousands of miles, brought cannons, and fought a battle just to force trade. Clearly trade benefits them greatly. Otherwise they would not risk so much. Since we won, should we not deny them anything that benefits them? Why agree? It feels like we are the ones conceding."

Zheng Zhilong laughed softly. "Xiaosen, explain to your Second Uncle."

Zheng Sen did not hesitate.

"Second Uncle," he began, "the fact that they believe trade benefits them does not mean they are correct."

Zheng Zhihu blinked.

Zheng Sen continued, voice steady and patient.

"The Westerners believe they can gather goods from across the world and sell them to us at profit. They think the Ming is merely another market. But they misunderstand something fundamental."

He looked toward the coastline in the distance.

"In the eyes of the common people of the Ming, many of their goods are of little value. Before long, something interesting will happen. Our goods will sell easily in their lands. Their goods will struggle to sell here."

Zheng Zhihu tilted his head.

Zheng Sen elaborated.

"Our farmers shape clay into porcelain so fine that Western nobles treasure it. That porcelain exchanges for their gold and silver."

"Our peasants plant mulberry trees, raise silkworms, weave silk of astonishing texture. That silk exchanges for their gold and silver."

"Our growers cultivate tea leaves that refresh the mind and soothe the body. Those leaves exchange for their gold and silver."

He smiled faintly.

"We create goods from earth and leaf. They pay us with precious metals."

Zheng Zhihu's eyes widened slowly.

"And what," he asked, "do they have that we truly need?"

Zheng Sen spread his hands.

"That is the difficulty they will face. They will find it extremely hard to take our gold and silver away."

He paused briefly, recalling Li Daoxuan's lectures.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun taught that this is called a trade surplus."

Zheng Zhihu repeated the unfamiliar phrase awkwardly.

"Trade... surplus?"

"Yes," Zheng Sen said. "When we sell more to them than we buy from them, silver flows into our country. Their wealth diminishes. Ours accumulates."

Zheng Zhihu let out a long breath.

"So that is the plan."

Zheng Sen nodded.

"That is why I advised Father not to let the imperial officials interfere. If the court refuses to open ports officially, we will do so quietly. Let the Westerners search the world for gold and silver. Let them bring it to us willingly."

Zheng Zhihu looked at his nephew with renewed admiration.

"Xiaosen," he said, "you have grown astonishingly sharp. Your explanations are clearer than many scholars."

Zheng Sen chuckled lightly.

"I only repeat what I learned at the Naval Academy on Zhoushan Island. Now that fighting here is finished, I must return to classes. Everything there is fascinating."

Beside him, Shi Lang made a face.

"Not for me," he muttered. "I prefer battle. All this talk about surpluses and deficits makes my head ache."

Zheng Sen laughed. "If you avoid study, you will grow dull."

Shi Lang grinned without embarrassment. "Then you be clever. I will charge forward in war, and you devise the strategies. Together, we remain undefeated."

The two youths laughed, their confidence bright and unburdened.

Several days later, the English delivered the agreed compensation.

Twenty eight thousand silver dollars were paid to the Ming as war reparations. John Weddell and his companions were released.

The moment he regained freedom, Weddell sent word to the East India Company that Quanzhou and Shanghai would be open to English trade.

In London and among Company merchants, excitement flared.

"A fortune awaits in the Ming," they declared.

Ships were prepared eagerly. Swords polished. Ledgers opened in anticipation.

They sailed toward what they imagined to be a golden land.

And upon arrival, they found abundance beyond expectation.

Tea of countless varieties.

Porcelain of exquisite craftsmanship.

Silk shimmering like flowing water.

Everything seemed desirable.

Everything seemed profitable.

They wanted it all.

But when they attempted to sell their own goods, they encountered a problem.

What did the common people of the Ming actually want from them?

Metalware? Inferior to local production.

Wool cloth? Ill suited to southern climates.

Curiosities? Novel for a moment, then forgotten.

They found themselves purchasing far more than they could sell.

Silver began to flow outward.

They puzzled over the imbalance.

In conventional history, such imbalance would persist for generations until a destructive solution was found in opium. When tea and silk drained Western silver reserves, merchants would eventually turn to narcotics to reverse the flow, culminating in conflict during the Opium War and figures such as Lin Zexu at Humen.

But that was another timeline.

In this world, guided by Li Daoxuan's foresight, events would not unfold so easily toward barbarity.

Here, the game of trade had only just begun.

And whether surplus would remain a blessing or provoke a new kind of conflict in the future was a question still waiting for its answer.

## Chapter 1159 Lord Rabbit's Policy

Kaixian County, county town.

A brand new factory had just been completed, its tiled roof still bright, its wooden beams smelling of fresh sap. Red paper banners fluttered at the entrance, snapping in the wind like they were impatient for business to begin.

Flat Rabbit stood at the main gate with both hands clasped behind his back, chin tilted up, the very picture of self-satisfaction. If smugness could be taxed, Kaixian would have funded three more factories by noon.

The sign above the gate read: Kaixian Tujia Ethnic Folk Arts General Factory, abbreviated as Kaiyi Factory.

Its three main products were clearly listed on a wooden board:

Xilankapu, the traditional Tujia woven brocade.

Handcrafted scented silk fans.

Finely woven bamboo sleeping mats.

The arrangement was unusual enough to alarm the Kaixian county magistrate.

His sedan chair came to a stop before the gate. The curtains parted. The magistrate stepped out, eyes scanning the bustling workers carrying looms and bamboo bundles inside.

He approached Flat Rabbit and asked, "Lord Rabbit, what exactly is the meaning of all this?"

Flat Rabbit spread his hands grandly. "As Your Excellency can see, I have opened a factory."

The magistrate sighed. "These Tujia crafts are made in their mountain villages. If you want them, you could simply purchase them there. Why go to the trouble of building a factory in town? Once a factory is established, wages must be paid regardless of sales. If the goods fail to sell, you will bleed silver every month."

Flat Rabbit chuckled, eyes gleaming. "Your Excellency, that is precisely where you are mistaken. The factory's true purpose is not the goods. It is the people."

"The people?" The magistrate frowned. "What people?"

"The Tujia," Flat Rabbit said. "I intend to draw them down from the mountains."

The magistrate blinked. "Why would you do that?"

Flat Rabbit's expression sharpened. "And you call yourself an official managing domestic affairs. Do you not know why the many ethnic groups of Sichuan are so difficult to govern peacefully?"

The magistrate's brows lifted slowly. Then his eyes widened.

"Of course."

For generations, tension simmered between the mountain minorities and the Han settlers. The mountain tribes formed their own strongholds under hereditary chieftains. Sichuan was dotted with semi-autonomous domains, each valley a small kingdom. Governance from the county seat barely reached beyond the plains.

"If they descend and live in town," the magistrate murmured, "they will trade, intermarry, and mix with the Han. The mountains will no longer be fragmented bastions."

Flat Rabbit nodded. "Exactly. When people share markets and schools, they stop sharpening knives."

"The idea is sound," the magistrate admitted. "But what if they cannot survive in town? They will simply return to the mountains."

"Which is why," Flat Rabbit said, turning with a sweep of his sleeve toward the factory complex behind him, "we offer employment."

He grinned. "Now let us see how many Tujia people Lord Rabbit can persuade to come down."

Though he often boasted about his exploits in the jianghu, Flat Rabbit was no fool when it came to administration. He had served under Dao Xuan Tianzun for years and understood the Gao Family Village model intimately. He had managed operations in Xi'an and supervised the labor reform camp at Tianzhu Mountain. Systems, recruitment, wages, logistics. He knew the machinery of order.

Recruitment notices were drafted immediately and dispatched to villages across the surrounding Bashan Mountains.

"The Kaixian Tujia Ethnic Folk Arts General Factory is hiring.

Recruiting 300 female workers for Xilankapu weaving.

100 workers for bamboo mats.

200 workers for scented silk fans.

Skilled laborers earn two taels of silver per month."

In Gao Family Village, skilled workers once universally earned three taels. Later, in Jiangnan, wages rose to four taels due to higher living costs. Sichuan, however, had long been poor. Two taels here was generous beyond expectation.

When word spread that two taels were being offered, the mountain villages erupted.

Two taels meant two thousand copper coins.

The roads from the mountains filled with people descending in waves. Men, women, elders, children. By the next morning, the queue stretched from the factory gate to the entrance of the county town.

Flat Rabbit set up a long table at the gate and personally oversaw recruitment.

His eyes landed on a small girl, barely ten years old.

"You there," he called. "What are you doing in line at your age?"

The girl shrank but did not retreat. "Sir, I may be small, but I can weave Xilankapu."

Flat Rabbit shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not. I do not employ child labor. If I dare, Dao Xuan Tianzun will descend in person and knock my skull flat. Anyone under eighteen, step out of the line. Immediately."

Faces fell. Children shuffled out reluctantly.

A few sixteen or seventeen year olds, tall for their age, tried to hide deeper in the crowd.

Flat Rabbit snorted. "I will verify birth records. Anyone caught lying about their age will be arrested and given a sound spanking."

The older girls turned pale. Spanking was humiliation enough to ruin marriage prospects. They fled the line at once.

Flat Rabbit scanned the queue again. "So the boys remain?"

He raised his voice. "Any boy who lies about his age will be castrated and sent to the palace as a eunuch."

The effect was immediate. Several boys scrambled out of line so quickly they nearly tripped over each other.

Flat Rabbit burst into laughter. "Trying to deceive Lord Rabbit? When I was roaming the jianghu slaying demons, you were still drinking milk."

The children lingered nearby, disappointment heavy in their eyes. Two taels a month was a fortune.

Flat Rabbit waved at them. "Do not sulk. In a few days, I will open a school here in Kaixian. Free tuition. Free meals. Teachers will be hired. You will study properly. Once you turn eighteen, come work. By then, Lord Rabbit will have opened even more factories. You will have choices."

The Tujia villagers erupted in cheers.

Nearby Han commoners exchanged glances, envy flickering.

"Lord Rabbit," one ventured carefully, "does this free schooling apply only to Tujia children?"

Flat Rabbit laughed. "Ah, so now you are interested. Let me guess. It is not education you care about, but the free meals."

The Han commoners coughed awkwardly.

"No matter," Flat Rabbit said generously. "Children are the flowers of our nation's future. Those who wish to learn may learn. Those who only wish to eat may eat. If you take a meal from Lord Rabbit, I will find a way to stuff some knowledge into your heads along with it."

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

Behind the humor lay a deliberate design.

Factories to draw the mountain people down.

Schools to bind the next generation together.

Work to replace isolation.

Education to replace suspicion.

Flat Rabbit clasped his hands behind his back again, surveying the throng with satisfaction.

Policy, after all, did not always require swords.

Sometimes it required looms, bamboo mats, and a very loud rabbit.

Chapter 1160 All Right, I'll Send Troops

While Flat Rabbit was running about Kaixian like a rabbit possessed, building factories, recruiting workers, setting up schools, and shouting policies at anyone who stood still long enough to listen, the others were no less busy.

Cheng Xu was stationed in one prefecture.

Gao Chuwu in another.

Zheng Daniu somewhere further downriver.

Flat Rabbit himself darted between counties as if the entire province were one large vegetable patch.

Across eastern Sichuan, from Wanzhou to Zhongxian, from Shizhu to Fengdu, all the way to Chongqing, Gao Family Village moved with astonishing speed.

Factories rose almost overnight.

They did not waste time constructing from scratch. Instead, they purchased or requisitioned the sprawling estates of large landlords. Courtyards became workshops. Granaries became warehouses. Ancestral halls were converted into accounting offices. Since these were handicraft factories rather than heavy industry, there was no need for the famous Blue Hats of Gao Family Village to bring in advanced machinery.

The focus here was traditional minority craftsmanship.

Xilankapu weaving.

Carved wood ornaments.

Bamboo ware.

Embroidered textiles.

Handmade musical instruments.

As soon as silver arrived by river transport from Gao Family Village and team leaders secured operating funds, the gates opened and recruitment began.

Artisans who once worked in scattered mountain homes, producing small batches of goods with no reliable buyers, now faced a tempting offer. A stable monthly wage. Regular meals. A predictable income.

Stability was irresistible.

One by one, families abandoned the uncertain household workshop model. They packed their looms and tools, descended from the mountains, and took positions in the new factories. In town, they lived

side by side with Han residents. Markets grew crowded. Dialects mixed. Children played together in alleyways.

Even farmers who lacked specialized skills were not ignored.

Zhao Sheng's Agricultural Knowledge Teams traveled tirelessly. They held free public lectures in prefectural cities, county towns, and remote villages. They taught crop rotation, soil improvement, irrigation techniques, and the cultivation of new high yield seeds.

It was not easy to coax farmers down from the mountains. Land tied them like roots. Yet when they saw yields double under scientific methods, hesitation began to crack. To purchase improved seeds and Celestial Fertilizer, they had to travel to town. Travel meant contact. Contact meant familiarity.

Movement created exchange.

Exchange created understanding.

Understanding created integration.

Within a few short months, eastern Sichuan pulsed with new life.

But while the east prospered, the west trembled.

Chengdu.

On the vast plain outside the city, an army spread like a dark tide. At its head rode the Chuǎng Wang, Li Zicheng, the man who had shaken half the empire. Behind him stood notorious bandit chiefs: Guo Tianxing, Mantianxing, Huntianxing, Cao Cao, Geli'yan, and others who had carved their names into chaos.

Cannon barrels glinted beneath the winter light. Their number exceeded those mounted on Chengdu's walls.

On the battlements stood the Governor of Sichuan, Wang Weizhang, and the Provincial Censor, Chen Tingmo. Both men shivered, though whether from cold or fear was difficult to say.

"Fire!"

The roar came from both sides almost simultaneously.

Cannons thundered. Smoke rolled across the plain. Iron balls tore through the air.

When cannonballs smashed into the bandit ranks, a few men fell. The rest barely flinched. Years of war had hardened them. Steel, blood, and death were old companions.

But when the same iron balls struck Chengdu's walls, Governor Wang and Censor Chen immediately ducked, clutching their heads as though that might stop a projectile traveling faster than thought.

Smoothbore cannons were notoriously inaccurate. A shot meant for stone might just as easily find silk and official flesh.

From the side, the one eyed Ma Xianglin stepped forward sharply. "Your Excellencies, please leave the wall. You are obstructing operations."

Governor Wang needed no second invitation. "General Ma, I entrust command to you. I shall organize militia and supplies within the city."

"Go quickly," Ma Xianglin snapped. "Clustering here only damages morale."

The two officials retreated in undignified haste.

With them gone, Ma Xianglin's expression changed. His back straightened. His voice rang clear.

"Cannons, return fire. Archers, reinforce the left flank. Send more men to the western parapet."

A messenger rushed up. "General, the bandits are approaching the moat on the north side. They are attempting to fill it."

"Deploy the Giant Crossbow Vehicles there. Concentrate archers. Do not let them near the walls."

Orders flew like arrows.

At one point Ma Xianglin muttered under his breath, "I should simply charge out and cut them down myself."

His wife, Zhang Fengyi, who stood nearby in armor, grabbed his sleeve. "Do not be reckless. These bandits are not the rabble of past years. Their strength has grown formidable. If you open the gates, you may not return. As long as we hold Chengdu's walls, there is hope."

Ma Xianglin exhaled slowly. "Very well. Send a messenger. Request reinforcements from my mother."

News of Chengdu's siege traveled swiftly along the river routes. From Chongqing to Zhongxian, from Shizhu to Wanzhou, then to Kaixian and beyond.

In Kaixian, at the Bashan Grand Canyon, within Baren Village, Flat Rabbit stood before Ran Ke, the Pacification Commissioner.

"You have heard the news," Flat Rabbit said. "The roaming bandits are besieging Chengdu."

Ran Ke nodded. "I have."

"This rabbit intends to lead troops to relieve the city," Flat Rabbit continued. "Will you join us?"

In the past, Ran Ke would have refused without hesitation. He was a mountain lord, a guardian of his own domain. The affairs of distant Han cities were none of his concern. Even if bandits threatened Kaixian, he would sooner retreat deeper into Bashan than march out in support of others.

But now he did not answer immediately.

Because things had changed.

Factories had brought wages.

Schools had brought learning.

Trade had brought prosperity.

If the outside world fell into chaos, who would build factories? Who would purchase handicrafts? Who would pay silver each month?

Ran Ke glanced at his son, happily gnawing on roasted corn. He looked at his daughter, wearing a bright cotton dress purchased from a Han merchant, a red flower tucked in her hair. She laughed freely, unburdened by the hunger he had known in his youth.

Peace had given them this.

He turned back to Flat Rabbit.

"After we drive away these bandits," Ran Ke asked slowly, "there will be more factories?"

"Of course," Flat Rabbit replied without hesitation. "As long as peace endures, we will bring countless good things to Kaixian. Your Tujia people will live as prosperously as the Han."

Ran Ke's gaze sharpened. "Do not deceive me. The Han outside the mountains have deceived us before."

Flat Rabbit laughed softly. "You know this rabbit by now. When I say one, it is one. When I say two, it is two. If I promise good goods, I will not deliver rotten ones."

Ran Ke studied him for a long moment.

Then he nodded.

"All right," he said solemnly. "I will send troops."