

Wu, the owner of the trawler, poked his head in the hold and said, “Hold still, Big Brother. A patrol boat is approaching. Qing.” He opened the flap of his coat and pointed at the scimitar stuck in his belt. “Me and my crew will be ready, just in case,” he said. “Are you armed, sir?”

Lee answered by taking out his revolver. It was the same revolver he had used that fateful night in the woods to kill his first man.

“Good,” the skipper said. “If we must....” He didn’t finish. Closing the door behind him, he went back on deck to deal with the Qing patrol.

The trawler had a crew of five, including Wu. They weren’t members of Red Sky, but ordinary fishermen who pried the Bohai Sea for skate, snappers, and other catches to sell to fish merchants onshore. And like other commonfolk trying to eke out a subsistence in the grim economic reality of late Qing, they did a bit of illegal commerce on the side. This far north, opium was not as pervasive as in the south, but there was a brisk trade of ancient artifacts, as well as weapons, which transited the Bohai Sea. Wu and his crew were not unaccustomed to run-ins with the law.

A navy patrol boat at time of war however might be tougher to handle.

Lee heard muffled shouts from above. He couldn’t quite make out what was said, but it sounded like the fishing boat was told to heave to and be boarded. A few minutes later, the weight of the boat shifted, and he sensed a boarding party had come aboard. He moved quietly to a spot just behind the hold’s hatch, and cocked his revolver.

Wu spoke rapidly, in a thick local Liaotung dialect that Lee had great difficulty understanding. He sounded obsequious, unlike the Qing officer who barked out his commands. Footsteps approached. Lee squeezed back tighter into the corner.

“There’s nothing in there, sir,” one of Wu’s crew said. And then the hatch flew open. First a lantern and then a Qing sailor entered the hold. Lee

aimed the revolver at the sailor, but he knew that he would alert the patrol boat should he fire his weapon.

More talking from above.

Then the sailor turned his head, and presently he and Lee stared at each other, with only about three feet of stale fish smell between them. The sailor opened his mouth as if to sound a warning to the boarding party. But before he could speak, he let out a slight moan and fell headfirst into the hold. The hilt was all that was visible of a dagger that was driven into his back. The sailor collapsed on the floor of the hold, his face half submerged in the slimy water that continued to slosh around. One of Wu's man backed away from the hatch, but not before giving Lee an all-clear sign with a wave of his hand.

Lee quietly climbed through the hatch, and found himself facing the back of a Qing officer. The man was questioning Wu, it seemed. Two other sailors were in the boarding party, and they were searching on deck as Wu's crew looked on.

The wind howled, and Lee shivered as his soaked clothes felt like a sheet of ice against his body. It was raining, as if there needed an additional measure of misery.

He could see the patrol boat now. It was an old wooden vessel, and was itself not much bigger than the trawler. It was tied to the trawler, and four sailors, their rifles slung over their shoulders, stood listlessly by the gunwale talking among themselves. There was another man at the wheelhouse, and maybe a few more down below seeking shelter from the cold. A one-pounder pom pom on the foredeck was unmanned. Thank the gods for that, he thought. The fishing trawler was simply not considered dangerous enough to warrant much precaution. Lee suspected the officer and crew of the Qing patrol boat probably stopped the trawler just to extract some grease money.

Wu saw him coming out of the hold, and nodded almost imperceptibly.

That was all the confirmation Lee needed. Not bothering with the boarding party, he blasted out of the hold and emptied his revolver at the sailors by the gunwale. Three of the men were hit immediately. The remaining sailor unshouldered his rifle, but didn't have time to shoot before two of Wu's crew members jumped on board and cut him down with their scimitars. They then rushed the wheelhouse and disposed of the sailor there in like fashion. Before the man had fallen to the deck, the two disappeared below. A few seconds later, several loud screams erupted below decks.

Meanwhile, the Qing officer had spun around, alarmed by the gunshots. Wu chose that moment to punch the man in the head, and then with his scimitar, severed the man's head from the neck. Utter surprise still registered on his face as his head flew noiselessly in the driving rain.

Lee reloaded his revolver and pointed it at the two surviving Qing sailors of the boarding party. They threw down their weapons to surrender. Lee noticed that they could not have been much older than his own son. Kids, really. One of them began to cry. A few seconds ago they had been mighty warriors of the Great Qing. Now they were scared children howling for their mothers.

"No quarters!" Wu exclaimed. "No quarters!"

Wu's crew needed no more urging. They charged the two Qing sailors, who started to beg for mercy. But none was given. To the end the two screamed for help, but of course no help came. The crew swung away with their swords until both sailors collapsed to the deck.

One of the fallen sailors was still alive. Barely. Blood gushed out from six or seven different wounds. He looked up at Lee, and opened his mouth as if to speak. No sound came except for the man's last gasps for air. Lee saw in the boy's teary eyes what he meant to say. Mother.

The Qing dragon banner flapped limply atop the patrol boat.

Lee's heart pounded thunderously. He cocked his revolver and shot the

man in the head. The revolver's report punctuated the night, but all Lee could hear was the boy's silent scream for his mother.