

Echoes of the Red Flag

Chapter 1: Into the Storm

~By Carlos Gao

Time passed, and John settled into the flight. The hum of the engines became familiar, and John lost himself in clouds.

Ding ding, and then the captain's calm, monotone, "Hello ladies and gentlemen. We have about two more hours until we reach Seoul. Below, you'll see that we are flying over Southern China's wild forests, the stronghold of the legendary Chinese pirate, Ching Shih.

For the next hour, John researched Ching Shih, the Chinese pirate queen of the 18th century. The Royal Navy couldn't defeat her, so they asked her to join. And she accepted. John wished his life were so daring.

Then, suddenly, KATHOOM! KATHOOM! The plane shook violently, and John saw raging flames streaking behind them in smoke—the cabin filled with screams. The emergency oxygen bags fell, and John and his seatmate, Thomas, both looked at each other as they put them on. The horror in Thomas's eyes made John's throat tighten. *What's happening? Are we going to make it?* John gripped his armrest, knowing his death was on the horizon. His knuckles whitened. *This can't be real, he thought.*

A flight attendant struggled to keep her balance, shouting, "KEEP YOUR SEATBELTS FASTENED AND REMAIN CALM!"

John could see Thomas's hands shaking as he got out his cell phone to call his parents. John wanted to do the same, but couldn't let go of the armrest.

Then came the captain's voice, "BRACE FOR IMPACT! BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

In the moments between hearing the captain's final words and waking up, he blacked out completely—no sound, no pain, just a sudden, absolute silence that swallowed everything.

When John came to, the world was muted, even though chaos raged around him. Pain shot through his shoulder as he tried to move. A tree was crushing his arm.

"Thomas!?" he called out. Only the crackling fire answered him.

As the smoke cleared, his surroundings came into focus. Immediately around him, there was a field with a few trees, and in the distance, ancient-looking houses with roofs that looked like they'd been drawn into history books. His mind struggled to process what he was seeing. "John?!" asked a familiar voice.

"Thomas? You're alive!"

Thomas ran to him with torn clothes. John was relieved that he wasn't alone. Thomas pulled the tree branch off himself and picked him up. John said, "This doesn't make sense."

Thomas' eyes widened as a group of people in robes approached. "John, I think... we're in ancient China."

John faced Thomas in shock, "That's impossible."

Thomas pointed. "Look at their robes. This looks just like the Qing Dynasty from our history lessons."

"Imagine if this school trip actually took us into a textbook."

Thomas went pale, "John... I think we've time-travelled."

Before they could decide what to do, a tall, stern man in expensive-looking, ornate robes stepped towards us. "Who are you?" He spoke in Mandarin.

John glanced at Thomas. "What did he say?" Thomas swallowed hard and answered in Mandarin, "We are travellers. We are lost and mean no harm."

The man raised an eyebrow at their strange clothes and soot-covered faces, then signalled the guards. Two soldiers grabbed them and led them through the ancient city to a golden room, where a man in golden robes sat on a pyramid-like altar.

The Emperor's face remained neutral. "Speak," he commanded in Mandarin, "Who are you?"

Thomas bowed low and stammered, "We are travellers, Your Majesty. We are lost."

Before the Emperor could act, the palace roof broke open at the back of the great hall. Everyone hit the floor in a panic. After the smoke cleared, an enormous, legendary creature stood before us.

John gasped. "No way... Is that—?"

The creature towered over them, its body coated in bright, obsidian-coloured scales, with six red eyes fixed on Thomas.

The creature who stood there was Fei, the God of Disaster.

The Emperor's guards raised their weapons, but Fei let out toxic smoke, leaving all the soldiers unconscious.

Thomas and John looked at each other and communicated "Run!" with just a glance. As they bolted, a woman in shining armour, gripping a curved sword, stepped into their path.

"Fei, you do not belong here," she commanded.

She slashed at the beast with one swing of a sword. Fei screeched in pain, then disappeared instantly.

The woman turned to them expressionless.

"Who are—" Then they were hit from behind, dropping to their knees and blacking out again.

Chapter Two: The Queen of the Sea

They groaned, touching the wounds on the back of their heads. The wooden planks beneath them were wet and slippery. The fishy, ocean scent filled the air, and in the distance, seagulls shouted. The salty tang and fierce speed of the South China Sea wind lashed their cheeks with strips of hair and left their eyelids with little stings. John sat up and saw men climbing the ship's masts, preparing cannons, and polishing weapons.

Then, the woman from the palace stepped toward them, "You're awake."

"My name is Ching Shih, and you are on my ship, the Red Flag. Whether you live or die here depends on you. We are at war."

Thomas realized that the only female pirate queen the world has ever seen was speaking to him.

"What do you want from us?" John asked cautiously.

Before Ching Shih could reply, the boat shook violently after the boom of a nearby cannon.

"We're under attack!" someone shouted while other men scrambled to their places. John and Thomas barely had time to react before Ching Shih grabbed them by their collars and shoved guns into their hands. "You want to survive? Prove yourselves."

John's head spun in circles as he saw the massive enemy ship bash into theirs. Pirates clashed, and clanged their weapons, the sound resounding over the sea.

Something on the enemy's ship caught Thomas's eye. It was Mr. Bo, dressed in Chinese military armour, standing at the helm of the giant ship. Mr. Bo smiled at Thomas with a cold and evil smirk.

