

Great Ming 1251

Chapter 1251 The Grand Campaign of Capturing Meng Huo Seven Times

Dandong, also known as Andong, sat at the mouth of the Yalu River, a key frontier city of the Qing, a place where wind off the sea carried the smell of salt and iron, and where every watchtower seemed to stare both inward and outward at the same time.

Since the forty sixth year of Wanli in 1618, when Later Jin began implementing its so called border stabilization policy, the frontier had been locked down tightly to prevent Koreans from crossing freely, and by now, in the eleventh year of Chongzhen in 1638, Later Jin had already renamed itself Qing, and that policy had been in force for two decades, growing harsher year by year, like a rope being pulled ever tighter around the neck of the borderlands.

Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi stood atop the walls of Fenghuang City in Dandong, looking down at swarms of laborers carrying tools on their shoulders and dirt in baskets, piling up an odd looking earthen wall.

The wall was three chi high and three chi thick, snaking along the Yalu River like a crude brown scar across the land.

The laborers packed mud layer upon layer, and once a section was finished, they dug small pits along the top and planted willow saplings inside them.

This was the embryonic form of what would later be known as the Willow Palisade.

At this moment the willow saplings were thin and pitiful, barely taller than a child's knee, giving the entire project an almost comical air, as if someone were trying to guard an empire with a garden hedge.

No one standing there could foresee that this modest barrier would one day help turn the region into a desolate backwater, stifling economic vitality and cultural exchange for generations.

Kong Youde's brows were drawn tight as he watched the laborers work and then gazed across the Yalu River toward Korean territory shimmering faintly in the distance.

Geng Zhongming glanced at him. "Old Kong, why do you look as though someone stole your horse?"

Kong lowered his voice. "After Cao Wenzhao led troops to relieve Pi Island, why did he not follow up with further action? They gained such a decisive advantage in that battle and wiped out so many of our elite soldiers. It makes no sense for them not to press that advantage."

Geng Zhongming frowned, and Shang Kexi nodded slowly. "Their navy appears formidable, capable of transporting large numbers of troops and landing anywhere along the coast at will. Why have they remained idle all this time?"

The three men pondered for a long while before Kong Youde finally spoke again. "Could it be that they are waiting for something, perhaps for the Ming court to finish suppressing the bandits in the interior, giving their soldiers time to rest and reorganize before turning their attention to us?"

The moment he voiced the thought, the other two felt a chill crawl up their spines.

Geng Zhongming counted on his fingers and muttered, "We received intelligence days ago that Yang Sichang employed his strategy of Four Rectitudes and Six Corners, casting a net from ten directions, and that the Central Plains bandits have been largely suppressed. If we calculate from that time, allow for troop rest and embarkation to Pi Island, then..."

He did not finish his sentence, because a subordinate came sprinting toward them, face ashen, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Ships. On the waters off Dandong, Ming ships, an enormous fleet."

The Three Shun Kings abandoned all pretense of supervising the Willow Palisade construction and rushed from Fenghuang City, mounting their horses and galloping toward Dandong proper.

When they reached the coast and looked out to sea, they saw a vast fleet spread across the horizon, sails catching the light, hulls steady and deliberate, as if they were calmly surveying the city before them.

Kong Youde roared, "Prepare to repel a landing."

Geng Zhongming sneered. "Cao Wenzhao is reputed to be a famous general, yet he would attempt to land right under our noses. Let us form up on the beach and see how his troops set foot ashore."

Shang Kexi laughed coldly. "To land in full view of us would be sheer stupidity."

Soldiers began moving at once. The great crossbows on Dandong's walls were cranked into position. Waves of troops poured out of the gates and raced toward the shoreline to form ranks, bows drawn, shields raised.

Though the Three Shun Kings were branded traitors in later tales and often cast as buffoons in plays, Liaodong was no stage performance. It was a battlefield forged by years of relentless war.

Their troops had survived the chaos of the northeast through grit and blood, and their discipline, equipment, and ferocity far surpassed most of Gao Village's earlier opponents.

They were confident that they could hold the enemy on the sand.

No army, they believed, could conduct a landing operation right in front of them and succeed.

Meanwhile, out at sea aboard the Wanli Sunshine, Gao Village's commanders stood on deck observing the bustle along the shore.

Cheng Xu smiled. "They intend to form up on the beach and strike while our men are still finding their footing, driving them back into the sea before they can stabilize."

Shi Lang chuckled. "A beautiful plan in theory, utterly useless in practice. Gunners, prepare explosive shells and give the Qing troops on shore a small lesson."

The artillerymen set to work cheerfully, loading blooming shells packed with granular black powder into the cannons.

Almost as one, the ships adjusted their headings, presenting their starboard broadsides toward the coast.

"Fire."

The cannons thundered.

Black spheres screamed through the air toward the shore.

Kong Youde and his companions were stunned.

The enemy had not landed a single soldier, yet they had already opened fire.

Was there no sense of battlefield etiquette left in this world?

Qing soldiers had only just begun forming ranks outside the city gates when the first shells plunged into their formations, erupting with thunderous detonations, followed by secondary bursts that sent shards of iron flying.

Men fell in swathes.

Gao Village's artillery was still primitive by later standards, relying on old fashioned explosive shells rather than modern ordnance, yet even so, the destructive power far exceeded that of solid iron cannonballs.

Within moments, the Three Shun Kings' formations were thrown into chaos.

No orders were needed for what happened next. The soldiers instinctively began to retreat.

"The shells explode twice."

"They are not solid shot."

"Fall back, fall back farther."

The Qing troops withdrew from the beach, leaving behind only bodies sprawled across the sand.

The Three Shun Kings were furious.

The enemy fleet stood beyond reach, bombarding them at will, and without a navy of their own, they could do nothing but watch, humiliation burning hotter than the explosions.

Kong Youde gritted his teeth. "Ready the cavalry. We will not approach the shore. Let them begin landing, and when they are halfway ashore, send the horsemen charging."

Orders flew. Cavalry assembled just behind the city gate tunnels, riders donning armor, gripping lances, some shouldering three eyed fire lances or lifting Kaiyuan bows.

If they could not form up on the beach, it did not matter. Once the enemy committed to landing and found themselves divided between ship and shore, a sudden cavalry charge would throw them into disarray, and their cannons would become useless at close quarters.

They waited, tense and ready.

Then, before their eyes, the fleet turned.

The ships calmly adjusted their course and began to sail away.

"They have abandoned the landing."

"What in the world."

"They came all this way just to circle once and leave."

"They were never planning a real assault. This was harassment."

The Three Shun Kings' troops fumed in anger, staring at the retreating fleet.

"Those bastards were playing us."

Chapter 1252 Ajige's Continuous Campaigns

When the fleet first appeared, it looked fierce and imposing, the kind of formation that made any defender believe a full scale landing was imminent.

Yet just as quickly as it arrived, it turned and sailed away, disappearing dozens of nautical miles from the southern waters of Dandong.

On board the ships, the generals of Gao Village were grinning from ear to ear.

Shi Lang, being the youngest and least able to contain his excitement, burst out laughing. "Toying with those three Han traitors like that really feels great. Right now they must be stomping their feet in rage. They took a full round of our bombardment and suffered heavy casualties, and we did not even land a single soldier."

Zheng Sen laughed as well, though despite being younger than Shi Lang, his temperament was noticeably steadier. After the laughter faded, he added thoughtfully, "Even so, we mocked them quite thoroughly, but we still did not actually land."

At that moment Cheng Xu spoke.

"There is no need to rush a landing. Tactics must serve strategy. Our attack on Dandong right now is merely harassment. Even if we captured the city, we would not be able to strike directly at Shengjing.

We must wait until the main forces are gradually redeployed from all directions before the strategy advances to the stage of attacking Shengjing. Until then, harassment is our main objective."

The two young commanders immediately bowed slightly in acknowledgment.

Cheng Xu smiled. "All right, we have taken a leisurely spin at sea and had enough rest. By now the Qing troops must have relaxed their guard. Let us go back and take another look."

Shi Lang and Zheng Sen brightened at once.

"Excellent idea."

The fleet turned around again and headed back toward Dandong.

Meanwhile, Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi stood staring at the calm sea, still struggling to steady their breathing after the humiliating bombardment.

The enemy fleet had behaved shamelessly, firing a round of cannon and then fleeing.

The three commanders worried the fleet might suddenly return for another strike, so they dared not withdraw their defenses immediately. The giant crossbows on the city walls remained on alert, cavalry kept their armor on, and soldiers stared nervously at the horizon.

They watched for a very long time.

Nothing came.

Finally Kong Youde spat angrily, "Damn it. Order the entire army to stand down and rest."

Geng Zhongming asked, "Should we return to supervising the construction of the Willow Palisade?"

Shang Kexi shrugged. "What else can we do? Stand here all day staring at an empty sea?"

Orders were given. Cavalry lowered their guard, soldiers on the walls relaxed their grip on the massive crossbows, and many troops began removing their armor.

The three commanders mounted their horses and rode back toward Fenghuang City to oversee the laborers building the Willow Palisade.

They had barely returned and warmed their seats when a subordinate burst in, shouting breathlessly.

"Bad news. They are back. The fleet has returned."

All three men shouted at once.

"I curse them!"

They immediately leapt onto their horses again and galloped back toward Dandong.

By the time they arrived, the fleet had already opened fire.

This time the bombardment was even more outrageous.

The cannons were aimed directly at the walls of Dandong itself.

Who could blame them when the city had been built so close to the shoreline?

The walls sat comfortably within artillery range, and truth, as the saying goes, always lies within the range of a cannon.

The fleet from Gao Village had switched ammunition, now firing solid iron shot that slammed relentlessly into the city walls.

Boom. Boom.

Great iron balls smashed into the masonry, carving deep craters into the surface. Bricks loosened and tumbled down in showers of dust and rubble.

The defenders inside the city could do little except crouch behind the walls and tremble.

"Having no navy is truly disgusting," Kong Youde shouted in frustration.

Geng Zhongming frowned. "If they keep doing this, coming and going whenever they like, sooner or later it will turn into a real siege. Once their cannons open the way and their muskets advance behind them, we may not be able to hold the city. We must request reinforcements from Shengjing."

Shang Kexi nodded. "Send for help immediately."

Shengjing, Imperial Palace.

Huang Taiji sat casually on the dragon throne with one leg crossed over the other, flipping through a copy of the novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

This was the thirty second time he had read the book.

He could practically recite large sections from memory, yet he still felt he had not studied it carefully enough. Many details seemed worthy of deeper reflection.

At the moment he was pondering a particular scene.

The young warrior of Qu'a single handedly blocking twelve of Sun Ce's generals.

"That man is suspiciously powerful," Huang Taiji muttered, frowning deeply. "Perhaps he is truly the strongest warrior in the world. Even Lü Bu might only be fit to carry his shoes."

Just then a minister rushed into the hall.

"Your Majesty. The garrison of Pi Island, under Cao Wenzhao and Shen Shikui, has dispatched a fleet that is harassing Dandong and threatening a landing at any moment. The Three Shun Kings defending the city have no navy and cannot pursue the enemy at sea. They are suffering constant harassment and request reinforcements."

Huang Taiji frowned.

At the mere mention of Pi Island, his heart began to ache.

The last naval battle there had inflicted devastating losses, and ever since then the name Pi Island stabbed at him like a knife.

Pain.

Real pain.

He clutched his chest and exhaled slowly.

"Summon Ajige. Have him lead troops to reinforce Dandong."

But before the words had fully left his mouth, Ajige himself strode into the hall.

Huang Taiji blinked. "You arrived at a perfect moment. Were you lurking outside the door waiting for me to call you, planning to reenact the story of 'Speak of Cao Cao and Cao Cao appears'?"

Ajige was a straightforward, rough soldier who had no patience for such jokes. He looked bewildered.

"Your Majesty, I came to report urgent military intelligence."

Huang Taiji raised an eyebrow.

Ajige continued, "There is movement on the Mongolian steppe."

"What kind of movement?"

"That child khan Erzh'e, who was taken away by the Ming, has issued a proclamation, most likely under Ming instruction. He accuses us of bullying the Khalkha tribes and dishonoring the legacy of the Great Yuan. He is calling on all Mongol tribes to support the Khalkha. Large numbers of Mongol cavalry are now pressing toward our borders."

Huang Taiji was genuinely startled.

"So the Ming are playing a strategy of 'driving the tiger to devour the wolf' as well. There must be clever people advising them. Have they seriously studied Romance of the Three Kingdoms?"

Ajige scratched his head. "That book was written by a Ming author."

Huang Taiji fell silent.

Now he had to weigh priorities.

After a moment of serious thought, he spoke.

"Our losses at Pi Island were too heavy. We do not currently have the strength to deal with both fronts at the same time. The Mongol tribes are clearly the greater threat. The harassment from the sea will have to be ignored for now."

Then he looked at Ajige with a firm expression.

"Ajige, go and pacify the Mongol tribes. Bring them back under control. If they refuse, then keep beating them again and again, just like Zhuge Liang capturing Meng Huo seven times. Strike them repeatedly until they finally submit."

He paused before adding with a faint smile.

"The codename for this campaign shall be 'Capturing Meng Huo Seven Times.'"

Chapter 1253 I Came to Save You

Ajige did not move his troops to reinforce Dandong. Instead, he gathered twenty thousand soldiers and marched straight toward the Mongolian grasslands.

The grand campaign of "Seven Captures of Meng Huo" had officially begun.

Not long after they entered the steppe, a scout came galloping back at full speed, his horse foaming at the mouth.

"Report! Khalkha cavalry spotted ahead!"

Ajige laughed loudly, clearly amused. "We barely stepped onto the grasslands and they already showed up? Excellent. Beat them flat."

The Eight Banner soldiers erupted into excited howls. To them, Mongolian tribes were practically sparring partners. They charged forward with wild enthusiasm and slammed straight into the Khalkha riders.

The result was completely predictable.

The Khalkha cavalry stood no chance against Ajige's army. Within a short time they were battered, bruised, and fleeing in every direction like frightened mice.

The first capture of the Seven Captures of Meng Huo was complete.

Riding high on victory, Ajige immediately sent envoys to the Khalkha tribe. The message was simple. Submit to the Qing dynasty and present the tribute known as the Nine Whites each year. Eight white horses and one white camel. If they did that, Ajige would spare them from annihilation.

That night, the envoy returned.

He bowed and reported, "The Khalkha are clearly frightened. When they saw our twenty thousand troops they did not dare resist directly. They did not give me a formal answer yet, but their chieftain looked ready to surrender."

Ajige could not hide the smug satisfaction on his face.

"Of course they are scared. The Khalkha were never our match to begin with. The only thing worth worrying about is how many Mongolian tribes will answer the call of the Mongol Khan Eje after his proclamation. If a large number of tribes come to help them, that could become troublesome."

Early the next morning another scout came racing in.

"Report! Urgent news. Reinforcements from the Tumet tribe have arrived. After seeing support arrive, the Khalkha chieftain has suddenly changed his attitude. He no longer looks willing to surrender."

Ajige snorted coldly.

"Tumet? What is there to worry about. Send the troops. Give them a good beating and let the Khalkha see our real strength."

Another battle erupted.

The Tumet cavalry fought fiercely against the Eight Banner troops, but before long they were overwhelmed. They retreated westward in defeat and fled far into the distance.

The second capture was complete.

Soon another scout arrived.

"Report! Reinforcements from the Keshike tribe!"

Ajige waved his hand dismissively.

"What is there to be afraid of. Beat them flat as well."

The third capture was complete.

Reports continued arriving one after another.

Ajige, the brilliant general who excelled in both offense and defense, the reliable champion of the army, the self proclaimed guardian of justice in the world who loved to brag about punishing evil for the sake of good people, launched into a series of victories that looked ridiculously heroic.

He punched down the Khalkha.

He kicked over the Tumet.

He beat the Keshike.

He stomped on the Sunite.

The unstoppable image he displayed on the grasslands looked almost like the beginning of a new steppe legend.

Among all the heroes under heaven, who else could rival him?

Another scout galloped in.

"Report! The Uxin tribe has arrived to support the Khalkha!"

"Another tribe?" Ajige burst out laughing and tilted his blade toward the sky. "Fine. Move out. Give this Uxin tribe a solid beating too."

By now Ajige had accumulated plenty of experience bullying Mongolian tribes. He was completely fearless. No matter how many tribes showed up, they were nothing more than punching bags.

As long as you beat them hard enough, everything would be fine.

Ahead on the grasslands, a large formation of cavalry slowly spread out.

At the front stood a surprisingly young man. Like the other Mongols he wore clothes made of animal hide, yet there was something different about him.

It was hard to describe.

Imagine placing the Qing civil official Fan Wencheng among a group of rough military officers. A cultured scholar surrounded by illiterate soldiers would immediately become the most eye catching figure on the entire street.

That was the kind of feeling this young man gave off.

Ajige raised his voice and shouted, "Who are you?"

The young man answered loudly.

"Chief of the Uxin tribe. Erzh'e!"

Ajige narrowed his eyes slightly.

"I have heard your tribe has been quite impressive recently. Apparently you unified a bunch of small tribes in the western steppe. I also heard something about powerful war wagons. Very impressive rumors." He clicked his tongue mockingly. "So tell me, did you bring those famous war wagons today? Let me make one thing clear. I am not afraid of any nonsense wagons."

Erzh'e burst into laughter.

"If you like war wagons that much, of course I brought them."

He smiled calmly.

"In a moment you can play with them to your heart's content."

After saying this, Erzh'e suddenly moved his horse sideways.

Ajige blinked in confusion.

Instead of charging forward, the Mongolian cavalry began moving aside to the left and right, almost like they were opening a giant door.

Then Ajige understood.

Behind them, slowly rolling forward, appeared a massive formation of black iron vehicles.

A deep horn suddenly sounded.

"Woo."

One iron vehicle released a loud whistle.

Then all the others responded.

"Woo. Woo. Woo."

White steam burst upward into the sky.

The scene was so bizarre and overwhelming that Ajige stood frozen for several seconds.

At the front of the iron convoy, a small hatch flipped open. The head of Zao Ying popped out from inside. She waved a large five colored banner and pointed forward dramatically.

"Charge. Give the Jianzhou dogs a tiny little lesson."

"Charge!"

"Woo!"

The entire iron convoy roared in response.

The massive iron vehicles accelerated and charged straight toward Ajige's army like a steel flood.

Ajige stared at them and suddenly felt something very wrong.

How the hell were you supposed to fight this thing?

Just one glance was enough to understand that normal tactics would not work.

More than a hundred iron vehicles formed an unstoppable torrent of steel crashing toward them. The sheer momentum alone made the Eight Banner soldiers feel their legs trembling.

One soldier shouted in panic, "General! How do we fight this thing?"

"It is completely made of iron!"

Another soldier stammered nervously, "Can... can I start shooting arrows now?"

Ajige finally snapped out of his shock and roared.

"Fire arrows!"

The soldiers hurriedly drew their bows and unleashed a storm of arrows toward the iron vehicles.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Clang.

Enemy attacks failed to penetrate the armor.

Ajige's mind instantly descended into chaos.

Then came a gunshot.

Bang.

One Eight Banner soldier dropped instantly.

A hundred vehicles meant roughly a hundred guns firing. Within moments dozens of soldiers had fallen.

At first glance the casualties were not that severe.

But the real damage was elsewhere.

Morale.

Nothing terrified soldiers more than an enemy they had absolutely no idea how to fight.

It was the fear of the unknown. The despair of complete helplessness.

With a deafening crash, the iron vehicles smashed directly into the Qing battle formation.

Wherever they passed, men and horses were sent flying. Some soldiers had their legs crushed and lay screaming on the ground. Others were knocked several meters away and curled up while coughing blood. A few unlucky ones were simply run over completely, leaving them no chance to scream at all.

One hundred iron vehicles tore straight through Ajige's twenty thousand troops.

That single charge shattered the entire formation.

Ajige's mouth hung wide open, his expression identical to the look Dorgon had when he first saw the iron vehicles.

A subordinate beside him shouted desperately.

"General! What should we do now?"

Ajige finally woke from his shock.

He immediately turned his horse around.

"Run! Get out of here first!"

Chapter 1254 Artillery Cannot Blanket the Field

Ajige fled in utter disgrace.

He galloped far away before daring to glance back over his shoulder, and what he saw nearly scared his soul out of his body.

Several of those enormous iron vehicles were still chasing him.

The sight made him feel like one Buddha had died and another had ascended to heaven.

At the start, the iron vehicles were actually slower than warhorses. Their initial acceleration could not compare to a trained cavalry mount. But once they picked up speed, they seemed to possess a terrifying advantage.

They never got tired.

The speed stayed constant.

The iron machines continued rolling forward relentlessly, clinging to the pursuit like hunting wolves.

Ajige's horse, on the other hand, was beginning to reach its limit.

Its breathing grew heavy.

Its strides were no longer as light and swift as before.

Ajige's heart sank.

This is bad.

Just as panic began to creep into his mind, a cavalry unit suddenly appeared ahead.

The leader at the front waved his arm and shouted loudly.

"Follow me!"

Ajige squinted and immediately recognized the man.

"Dorgon? What are you doing here?"

Dorgon shouted back without slowing down.

"I came to save you. Stop asking questions and keep up!"

Ajige did not dare hesitate. He kicked his horse's belly and hurriedly joined Dorgon's cavalry formation.

The group raced forward with everything they had.

Behind them, the iron vehicles continued their relentless pursuit.

Only after they had run some distance did Dorgon shout over the thunder of hooves.

"When I heard the Emperor sent you to deal with the Mongols, I immediately requested permission to come reinforce you."

Ajige blinked in shock.

"You already knew they had these monster vehicles?"

"Yes," Dorgon replied loudly. "The last time I was defeated by them, this was exactly what they used. The moment I heard you were heading here, I rushed over as fast as I could."

Ajige felt a spark of hope.

"So you have a way to deal with them?"

Dorgon shook his head immediately.

"I cannot destroy them."

Ajige nearly fell off his horse.

"But I know how to stop them from advancing."

Ajige stared at him in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

Before Dorgon could explain further, the terrain ahead suddenly changed.

A wide stretch of marshland appeared before them.

Only then did Ajige understand.

Dorgon had deliberately led them into the swamp.

The grasslands often contained such areas. A winding clear stream would snake across the plains, and the surrounding land would turn into muddy, uneven ground full of soft patches.

Warhorses could cross this kind of terrain quite easily.

Their hooves splashed through mud and water, and in the blink of an eye they were already on the other side.

But the iron vehicles were different.

Hundreds of meters before reaching the swamp, the pursuing vehicles came to a halt.

They did not dare move forward.

Only then did Ajige finally understand.

"So that is how it works. These iron vehicles are too heavy, and they need relatively flat ground to move. In swampy terrain they cannot operate at all."

Dorgon smiled faintly.

"You should thank me. I discovered that through personal experience. Nearly died figuring it out."

The two of them remained in the middle of the marsh area and looked back toward the distant iron vehicles.

One of the machines released a long whistle.

"Woo."

A hatch opened on top of the vehicle.

Zao Ying popped her head out.

She pointed at the two men and burst into laughter.

"So the Jianzhou dogs aren't so mighty after all. Where did all that arrogance go? Why are you hiding in the mud?"

Ajige's face instantly turned red with fury.

Dorgon quickly grabbed his arm.

"Do not be impulsive."

Ajige clenched his teeth and forced down his rage.

"Let's go."

Just as they prepared to leave, Zao Ying shouted again.

"You're not planning to run away, are you?"

Ajige exploded with anger.

"I am going to chop that woman into pieces!"

Dorgon held him tightly.

"Do not go. You will die."

Zao Ying laughed loudly from the iron vehicle.

"Hahaha! Ajige is scared! Scared to death!"

Ajige howled with rage.

"AAAAAA!"

In a fit of anger, he became extremely angry for a moment.

Then he immediately turned his horse and ran away even faster.

Zao Ying clearly had no intention of letting him leave peacefully. She pulled out a metal loudspeaker and began mocking him in a voice that perfectly imitated Ajige's earlier arrogance.

"You have really offended me today. You just had to squeeze the soft persimmon. I, Ajige, will prove through my actions that offending me will result in absolutely nothing happening. Because I have no ability to fight back at all. The consequence of provoking me is watching my back while you run away in panic."

Ajige screamed in fury.

"AAAAAA!"

His blood surged violently. His vision suddenly went dark.

With a loud thud he fell straight off his horse and landed face first in the mud.

Dorgon quickly turned his horse around, grabbed Ajige by the arm, and hauled him back onto the saddle before galloping away again.

Ajige was shaking with anger.

"I am so angry. I am going to die from anger."

Dorgon sighed.

"Stop being angry. We should think about what to do next."

He looked toward the vast grasslands stretching endlessly around them.

"The Mongolian steppe is flat and open. There are no natural defenses here. We cannot stop that iron vehicle army."

He paused before continuing.

"But inside our own territory the terrain becomes more complicated. We can take advantage of the landscape. At important strategic locations we dig trenches, pile up rocks, build earth walls, and dig pits. In short, we must make the ground uneven and difficult to traverse."

Ajige immediately understood.

"If we do not do that, those things could charge straight to Shengjing."

Dorgon nodded.

"And if that happens, we are finished."

Ajige's spirit snapped back to life.

"Right. Quickly gather the scattered troops and start building defenses. Otherwise the Great Qing will be finished."

Neither of them dared wander around the Mongolian grasslands any longer.

They immediately dispatched cavalry units to gather the remnants of the Eight Banner troops who had been scattered by the iron vehicles.

Then they moved to the nearest cities and began organizing massive construction efforts.

The terrain of Liaodong was mostly flat, but south of Zhangwu County there were forests and hills. The land began to rise and fall more unevenly.

Especially near Shengjing.

To the south lay the Changbai mountain range, where the terrain was naturally complex. With a little artificial modification, it might be possible to block the advance of the iron vehicles.

The two princes focused entirely on building defensive fortifications as quickly as possible.

Neither of them had any interest left in playing games on the Mongolian steppe.

Meanwhile.

At the mouth of the Yalu River, where it flowed into the sea, lay a tiny island called Silk Island.

The island was extremely small, less than one square kilometer in area.

Across a narrow stretch of water stood the city of Dandong, visible from the island's shores.

The fleet of Gao Family Village was currently anchored beside this island.

Soldiers from the Gao Family Village militia had already landed on the island.

They set up cooking pots and stoves, and soon smoke rose from their campfires as they calmly began cooking meals.

Their relaxed attitude made the Three Shun Kings inside Dandong city furious.

"The enemy has landed on the island right in front of us."

"They even lit fires and started cooking."

"They have set up tents too. It looks like they intend to stay there overnight."

"They are not even returning to their ships. They are openly provoking us."

Listening to the reports from his subordinates made Kong Youde feel like his lungs were about to explode.

Yet there was absolutely nothing he could do.

The distance across the water was short, but it was still an island.

To reach it, ships were required.

And trying to use ships in front of the Gao Family fleet was basically asking for death.

Kong Youde had never felt so humiliated in his entire life.

"Has Shengjing still not sent reinforcements?" he roared angrily.

A subordinate lowered his head.

"No. Apparently the fighting on the Mongolian steppe has become very intense. Shengjing does not have spare troops to send."

Kong Youde blinked in confusion.

"What? The Mongols are capable of putting them under pressure?"

The subordinate hesitated.

"The messenger did not explain clearly. Or perhaps... he was too embarrassed to say. He kept stammering when he spoke."

Kong Youde frowned deeply.

A bad feeling was forming in his chest.

If the Pi Island army launched an assault on Dandong and Shengjing refused to send reinforcements, then the situation would become extremely troublesome.

At the same time.

On Silk Island.

Cao Wenzhao tossed a piece of luncheon meat into his mouth and chewed while shouting orders to the soldiers around him.

"Just now, Dao Xuan Tianzun delivered a divine message to me."

He raised his voice so everyone could hear.

"The Jianzhou army has already been tied down and cannot send reinforcements to Dandong."

He grinned broadly.

"So eat your fill. Get a good night's sleep tonight."

"At dawn tomorrow..."

"We attack the city."

Chapter 1255 Brothers, Follow Me

Evening arrived slowly.

The setting sun leaned toward the horizon, painting the sea with streaks of golden red light.

On Silk Island, the soldiers of the Gao Family Village militia had just finished a very satisfying meal. Cooking smoke drifted lazily through the air while the men sat around, looking out at the sea and the sunset.

The mood was relaxed and comfortable.

At that moment, the Special Water Combat Dao Xuan Tianzun suddenly climbed out of the cabin of the flagship Wanli Sunshine.

He stretched his arms in an exaggerated yawn, then walked to the bow of the ship and began playing a one man version of the famous Titanic pose.

The soldiers on the island immediately noticed him.

They hurriedly stood up and saluted.

Li DaoXuan raised his voice.

"Everyone come here. I have a few words to say."

The moment he spoke like that, everyone understood.

A divine instruction was coming.

All the soldiers and officers hurried over. The crowd quickly gathered in front of him.

Standing in the front row were Cheng Xu, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, Flat Rabbit, Zheng Gouzi, Cao Wenzhao, Cao Bianjiao, Shi Lang, and Zheng Sen.

Behind them stood a dense formation of soldiers, each one pricking up their ears to listen.

Li DaoXuan spoke calmly.

"Tomorrow we will attack Dandong City."

Everyone responded in unison.

"Yes!"

Li DaoXuan continued.

"This seems to be the first time all of you will conduct a proper assault on an enemy city."

He paused for a moment.

"The battle where Shi Jian attacked the frontier fort does not count. That place had no civilians."

Everyone thought about it carefully.

And suddenly realized something surprising.

That was actually true.

Gao Family Village had fought many battles before, but they had never truly assaulted a city. Their enemies were usually bandits, mountain strongholds, or rebel camps.

Li DaoXuan continued.

"From a purely tactical perspective, attacking a city is not much harder than attacking a mountain bandit fortress like Tieshanping. As long as we use artillery bombardment, the enemy can be crushed very quickly."

The soldiers laughed.

"All thanks to the weapons bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li DaoXuan nodded slightly.

"But there is one question I need all of you to think about."

His tone became serious.

"Can a city be covered by artillery fire?"

Many people froze for a moment after hearing that question.

Cheng Xu was the first to answer.

"No."

Zheng Daniu scratched his head in confusion.

"Why not?"

Gao Chuwu looked at him as if he had asked the most foolish question imaginable.

"Are you stupid?"

Zheng Daniu blinked.

"So why not?"

Gao Chuwu thought for a moment before answering with great confidence.

"Because Instructor Cheng already said we cannot."

He folded his arms proudly.

"We are soldiers. Orders are absolute. If Instructor Cheng says we cannot, then we cannot."

Zheng Daniu nodded immediately.

"That makes perfect sense."

The surrounding soldiers stared at the two of them in silence.

At that moment, Cao Wenzhao sighed softly and finally spoke.

"Dandong City, also known as Andong City, used to belong to our Great Ming."

He looked toward the distant city across the water.

"Inside that city there are not only the Three Shun Kings and Qing soldiers. There are also ordinary people of the Ming."

As soon as those words were spoken, the crowd suddenly understood.

If civilians were inside the city, then artillery bombardment was obviously impossible.

Anyone who dared bombard civilians would probably be flattened into meat paste beneath Dao Xuan Tianzun's divine seal.

Li DaoXuan gave Cao Wenzhao an approving look.

"Cao Wenzhao is correct."

"Dandong City is a Ming city. The people inside are citizens of Ming. We absolutely cannot cover it with artillery."

Then he added another sentence.

"And I want all of you to remember something else."

His voice carried across the entire gathering.

"Not only Ming cities."

"Even if the city belongs to the Qing dynasty, or Joseon Korea, or any other enemy nation, as long as there are civilians inside, you cannot simply cover it with artillery fire."

The soldiers reacted with surprise.

"Ah?"

Li DaoXuan smiled faintly.

"As for why, the explanation would be very long. Explaining it now would only waste everyone's precious rest time."

He waved his hand.

"If you carefully recall the education you received after joining Gao Family Village, you will understand."

The soldiers fell silent and began thinking.

After a long pause, Cheng Xu spoke again.

"Everyone heard the divine instruction clearly."

He looked around at the soldiers.

"In tomorrow's siege we cannot rely on our usual tactic of shouting 'Blow them up' to force the enemy to surrender."

"We must be prepared for a prolonged struggle against the city walls."

He continued carefully.

"Every artillery shell must be aimed at the walls as precisely as possible. Avoid firing into residential areas."

"Especially explosive shells. If one lands in a civilian district, it could cause massive casualties among the population. That is unacceptable."

He raised his voice.

"Does everyone understand?"

"Understood!"

At that moment a militia soldier hesitantly raised his hand.

His voice sounded nervous.

"What if civilians help the Jianzhou soldiers transport supplies? Or even assist in defending the city?"

Cheng Xu suddenly fell silent.

He did not know how to answer.

Li DaoXuan closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh.

"If enemy civilians step onto the battlefield, they must be treated as enemy soldiers."

He opened his eyes again.

"You do not need to hold back."

"I cannot ask you to show mercy toward someone who is attacking you with a blade."

"That would be unreasonable and unfair."

He spoke calmly.

"Showing mercy on the battlefield is equivalent to signing your own death sentence."

"When the moment comes to strike, then strike."

The soldiers paused for a moment before shouting together.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is merciful!"

When the first rays of morning sunlight appeared on the horizon, two battles began simultaneously.

Across the Korqin Grasslands, the steel torrent of iron vehicles swept forward like a storm.

The Korqin tribe had long been the Mongol group most closely allied with the Qing dynasty.

They had submitted to the Qing very early and even married several women into the imperial family.

The famous Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang herself came from the Korqin tribe.

In return, the Qing established multiple banners there. The Korqin Right Wing Middle Banner, Right Wing Front Banner, Right Wing Rear Banner, Left Wing Middle Banner, and Left Wing Front Banner. The nearby Gorlos tribe also received its own banner.

For a long time, Korqin Mongol cavalry had served the Qing army as forward units.

But today their cavalry could no longer function.

More than a hundred iron vehicles tore straight through their chaotic banner formations.

Korqin nobles soon found themselves surrounded.

On one side stood the iron vehicles.

On the other side were the cavalry of the Wushen tribe.

All around them were muskets, bows, and blades aimed directly at their position.

Under such circumstances, the Korqin leaders had only one option.

They raised their hands and declared surrender.

From that day forward they severed their vassal relationship with the Qing dynasty and returned to the rule of the Great Yuan's Heavenly Khan, Erzh'e.

At the same time, on Silk Island, the Gao Family Village militia began their assault on Dandong City.

Warships filled the water and sealed off every route of escape.

Naval cannons began bombarding the city walls with thunderous force.

The city gate most likely to release cavalry received especially heavy fire.

Inside the gate passage, Qing cavalry waited nervously.

They had originally planned to charge out and drive the landing enemy back into the sea.

But artillery shells kept exploding just outside the gate.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Fragments of metal flew everywhere.

The stone walls of the gate tunnel were already embedded with shattered iron shards and tiny metal balls.

The cavalry stared at the scene with trembling fear.

How were they supposed to charge out through that?

If a cannonball landed beside them the moment they exited, both rider and horse would be blown into a bloody sieve.

Under the cover of artillery fire, the Gao Family Village militia began landing on the beach using all kinds of strange transport vessels.

The moment they stepped onto the sand, the soldiers immediately crouched down and raised their muskets.

At that exact moment, the cavalry of the Three Shun Kings finally charged out.

"Charge!"

The Qing cavalry rushed forward through the smoke.

"Fire!"

From the ships and from the beach, every firing position unleashed a storm of gunfire at the charging riders.

Chapter 1256 I Cannot Possibly Lose to Him

The cavalry of the Three Shun Kings charged straight out of the city gate, forcing their way through exploding cannon shells.

But the moment they emerged, they ran straight into a three dimensional storm of gunfire.

Muskets fired from the ships.

Muskets fired from the shore.

The two directions formed a deadly crossfire.

Who could possibly withstand that?

In the blink of an eye, the cavalry formation collapsed into chaos.

Horses screamed, riders fell, and the charge dissolved before it had even properly begun.

The Gao Family Village militia successfully secured their foothold on land.

Only now did Kong Youde and the others finally understand something.

In the previous days, these Ming troops had clearly possessed the ability to force a landing whenever they wished. Yet they had deliberately held back.

They had been waiting for something.

Now the answer was obvious.

They were waiting for news from the Mongolian grasslands.

"We have been away from Great Ming for several years," Kong Youde muttered, still staring at the battlefield in disbelief. "Have Ming firearms really become this powerful?"

"They are coming!" Shang Kexi roared. "Prepare for city defense!"

On the beach, the Gao Family Village militia slowly began pushing forward after securing their landing zone.

Cheng Xu stood behind the formation and raised his arm, pointing toward a section of the city wall.

"Artillery Battalion. Remove that giant crossbow."

A voice immediately answered from behind him.

"Yes, sir!"

Cheng Xu pointed again.

"Artillery Battalion, pay attention to that position on the wall. A large number of enemy troops are concentrated there. Give it special attention."

"Understood!"

In a very short moment, several key positions on the city wall had already been marked as priority targets.

While the Artillery Battalion grew busy with preparations, the musketeers were also carefully selecting their own targets.

Meanwhile, the more than two thousand Guan Ning Iron Cavalry under Cao Wenzhao were quietly preparing their ladders.

Storming the wall and fighting hand to hand was something they understood far better than the Gao Family Village militia.

Naturally, the task of breaching the city wall fell to them.

A small cannon roared.

Boom!

A shell arced toward the giant crossbow on the city wall.

However, the projectile landed about ten meters short of the wall and exploded uselessly on the ground.

The defenders inside the city had flinched when they first heard the cannon fire.

But after seeing the shell land so far away, they relaxed.

Some of them even laughed.

A cannon that inaccurate?

What was there to fear?

Inside the Gao Family Village artillery line, several artillerymen were already cursing.

"Damn it. I was afraid of hitting the residential district inside the city, so I raised the firing angle too much for the first shot."

"Do not worry," another artilleryman shouted back. "There is still a buffer zone between the city wall and the residential district. What civilian would dare build their house directly behind the wall?"

"That makes sense," someone added. "The defenders would never allow houses to be built right next to a military structure like that."

The artilleryman took a deep breath.

"Alright. Again."

Boom!

Another cannon shot rang out.

The defenders inside the city were still wondering where this next shell would land when suddenly a second explosion erupted.

The giant crossbow exploded.

Thick black smoke swallowed the entire position.

Several soldiers operating the weapon screamed as they were thrown backward.

"Enemy giant crossbow destroyed!"

"Next one. Target the second crossbow!"

The artillery crew shouted excitedly as they adjusted the cannon again.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Several more thunderous shots followed.

One by one, the remaining giant crossbows on the wall disappeared in bursts of smoke and flame.

The moment Kong Youde saw this, he immediately understood.

The situation had turned very bad.

"The enemy's heavy weapons are gone," Cheng Xu shouted. "Advance!"

"Advance! Advance! Advance!"

A battle song rose among the ranks.

The militia began pushing forward.

With the threat of giant crossbows eliminated, the soldiers felt far more confident about approaching the wall.

"Shield bearers!"

Cao Wenzhao shouted loudly.

At the front of the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry formation, soldiers raised massive tower shields made of aluminum alloy.

The shields were enormous and extremely sturdy.

But they weighed only about thirty percent as much as traditional iron shields.

For cavalymen accustomed to heavy iron shields, these felt almost weightless.

As the shield formation advanced, the defenders on Dandong's wall began to panic.

An archer could not hold his nerve any longer.

He leaned out from behind the battlements, drawing his bow and preparing to fire.

But before he could release the arrow, a sniper from the militia fired.

The archer's chest burst open with a bloody hole.

He screamed and collapsed backward.

"Loose arrows!" Kong Youde shouted.

Archers along the wall popped up and began firing frantically.

Arrows clattered against the aluminum shields held by the Guan Ning cavalry.

Clang clang clang.

The sound echoed constantly.

The musketeers immediately fired back.

Bullets struck the battlements, sending sparks and stone fragments flying.

The archers quickly realized something.

As long as they hid carefully behind the battlements and used high arcing shots, the muskets could not easily hit them.

"Do not be afraid!" one archer shouted. "Use high arcs. Just shoot upward and let the arrows drop. The muskets cannot hit us if we..."

Boom!

A cannon shell landed directly where he was hiding.

The archer screamed as his body was blasted into the air.

You think you are the only one who can fire in an arc?

The artillery of Gao Family Village can arc shells too.

After destroying the giant crossbows, the artillery battalion had already adjusted their firing angles.

Now they began bombarding the city wall itself.

They operated with extreme care.

The shells could not land too close.

They also could not land too far.

Under no circumstances could they hit the residential districts inside the city.

It was a brutal test of the artillerymen's skill.

The new recruits who had just joined the artillery battalion did not dare fire at all.

Every single cannon was now being handled personally by veteran gunners.

Boom boom boom!

Rows of shells exploded along the wall.

Qing soldiers hiding behind the battlements were blasted into complete silence.

None of them dared show their heads again.

Instead they crouched in the corners behind the wall, trembling.

"Artillery Battalion, cease fire!" Cheng Xu suddenly shouted.

"Our troops are getting close."

Only then did the artillerymen realize that the Guan Ning shield formation had already advanced to the base of the wall.

Another shot now might hit their own men.

The artillery battalion, which had contributed tremendous effort in the early stage of the battle, finally stopped firing.

The tower shield formation of the Guan Ning cavalry suddenly split apart to both sides.

The soldiers hidden behind the shields swung their arms forward.

A wave of grenades flew over the wall.

Boom boom boom boom!

Explosions erupted behind the battlements.

At the same moment, soldiers carrying ladders rushed forward and reached the wall.

"Provide covering fire while they set up the ladders!" Cheng Xu shouted.

Every musket in the militia instantly pointed toward the wall.

Ladders rose into the air and slammed against the stone battlements.

Qing soldiers hiding behind the wall popped up, some of them holding huge stones that they intended to drop down.

But the moment they appeared, countless muskets fired at them.

The crackling gunfire sounded like exploding beans.

The stone slipped from the soldier's hands and smashed onto his own foot.

He did not feel the pain.

Several bullets had already torn through his chest.

Under the suppression of musket fire, more than a dozen ladders were successfully placed.

Cao Bianjiao roared loudly and took the lead.

Shield in his left hand.

Blade in his right.

He climbed the ladder first and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Brothers, follow me up!"

Chapter 1257 The Past Is Too Painful to Recall

Cao Bianjiao was famous for one thing above all else.

Reckless bravery.

He was the type of warrior who loved charging into battle more than anything. Whenever there was a fight, he always rushed forward first, moving faster than everyone else.

Commanding the army was his uncle Cao Wenzhao's job anyway.

Cao Bianjiao only needed to do one thing.

Charge.

But the moment he started climbing the ladder, something felt wrong.

He turned his head and glanced at the ladder beside him.

Gao Chuwu was climbing even faster than he was.

The number one reckless fighter of Gao Family Village, the biggest fool among the Three Idiots, was just as fearless when it came to charging into battle.

And a little further away, on another ladder, Zheng Daniu was also climbing upward at an outrageous speed.

Even more outrageous was the fact that he was still chewing half a steamed bun while climbing.

Cao Bianjiao's eyes widened.

"What the hell? Are they here to steal my battle credit?"

He immediately started climbing even faster.

He had barely climbed two rungs when an archer appeared on the wall above and fired an arrow straight at him.

Clang.

Cao Bianjiao casually raised the shield in his left hand and blocked it.

The arrow bounced away.

In the middle of climbing, he glanced again at Gao Chuwu.

Someone on the wall had also fired an arrow at him.

But Gao Chuwu had absolute confidence in his armor and did not even bother blocking.

Clang.

The arrow struck his helmet and bounced away.

Because he had not paused to block the arrow, Gao Chuwu used the opportunity to climb several more rungs.

Now he was even higher than Cao Bianjiao.

Cao Bianjiao roared.

"I absolutely refuse to lose!"

He immediately threw away the small shield in his left hand.

That useless thing was slowing him down.

Climbing with both hands was far faster.

Another enemy soldier appeared on the wall and fired an arrow at him.

This time Cao Bianjiao did not even bother dodging.

Dodging?

To hell with that.

If he lost the credit for being the first to reach the wall, what was the point?

Clang.

The arrow struck his helmet directly and bounced away harmlessly.

Cao Bianjiao burst out laughing.

"The Heavenly armor granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun really is amazing!"

But before his laughter had fully finished, another enemy soldier appeared on the wall.

This one was holding a stone weighing several kilograms.

He raised it high and hurled it straight down.

"What the hell!"

Cao Bianjiao instantly stopped climbing.

With one hand gripping the ladder, he swung his body violently to the side.

The stone whistled past him.

Cold sweat covered his back.

In the middle of all this chaos he glanced again at Gao Chuwu.

Another Qing soldier above Gao Chuwu had also picked up a stone and smashed it downward.

Cao Bianjiao shouted loudly.

"Watch out!"

But Gao Chuwu still did not dodge.

He only tilted his head slightly.

Bang.

The stone slammed directly onto his shoulder.

Cao Bianjiao's heart sank.

That must have injured him.

But Gao Chuwu merely paused for a moment before continuing to climb upward as if nothing had happened.

Cao Bianjiao inhaled sharply.

"What kind of monster is that? What did he eat growing up?"

Then he suddenly realized something terrible.

"Damn it. I fell behind again."

Grinding his teeth, he climbed upward with both hands and both feet working together.

Very soon he was close to the top of the wall.

A Qing soldier leaned over the battlements and thrust a spear down toward him.

Cao Bianjiao twisted his body to avoid the spearhead.

He grabbed the shaft with one hand and yanked hard.

The spear was instantly pulled away from the soldier.

Without hesitation, Cao Bianjiao stabbed it back upward.

The Qing soldier collapsed.

While fighting, Cao Bianjiao glanced again at Gao Chuwu.

Gao Chuwu had also grabbed a spear.

He pulled it violently.

The soldier holding it was stubborn and refused to let go.

The result was tragic.

The man was dragged right over the wall along with the spear.

He tumbled down the outside of the wall, screaming as he fell.

Cao Bianjiao blinked.

"That works too?"

Then he shook his head.

"Now is not the time to watch him."

With a powerful push, Cao Bianjiao finally flipped himself onto the city wall.

In the end he had reached the top just a tiny bit faster than Gao Chuwu.

He threw back his head and roared triumphantly.

"Hahaha! Cao Bianjiao has taken the wall first!"

Several Qing soldiers rushed toward him.

Cao Bianjiao swung his saber wildly, blocking left and right while refusing to retreat even a single step.

He stood firmly in place, guarding the ladder so that the soldiers behind him could climb up safely.

At that moment Gao Chuwu also pulled himself onto the wall.

The instant his feet touched the ground, he drew the heavy backed broadsword that Xing Honglang had given him.

Cao Bianjiao was still fighting defensively.

But Gao Chuwu had no interest in that.

He simply swung his blade.

The arc of the blade swept across like a crescent moon.

In the space of a single strike, everything within several meters of the ladder was cleared.

Cao Bianjiao stared in disbelief.

"What the hell!"

Not far away, Zheng Daniu finally climbed up as well.

He was still chewing his bun.

While chewing, he casually grabbed a Qing soldier and used him like a thrown weapon.

The man flew through the air and smashed into three of his own comrades.

Cao Bianjiao's mind went blank.

"What the hell, what the hell, what the hell. Gao Family Village is full of monsters."

Just as he was still recovering from the shock, a loud shout echoed nearby.

"Heaven! Rabbit! Tyrant Breaking Sword!"

The moment Cao Bianjiao heard that name of a sword technique, he gasped.

"Another monster? Just how powerful is this one?"

He turned to look.

And immediately saw Flat Rabbit trip over his own foot.

Thud.

He fell flat on the ground.

His ancestral sword slipped out of his hand and rolled several meters away.

A Qing soldier saw the opportunity and rushed forward, raising his blade to cut down the fallen Flat Rabbit.

Flat Rabbit shrieked.

Then he dove forward.

Straight between the man's legs.

As he slid through, he punched the soldier directly in the groin.

The soldier screamed in agony and dropped to his knees.

Flat Rabbit popped up behind him and kicked him in the back of the head.

The soldier collapsed unconscious.

Flat Rabbit then turned proudly toward Zheng Gouzi, who had just climbed onto the wall.

"Hmph. See? My sword technique is impressive, right?"

Cao Bianjiao nearly choked.

"You call that sword technique? That is clearly dirty fighting."

By this point, the fighting on the wall had completely exploded into chaos.

The soldiers under the Three Shun Kings had already been at a severe disadvantage during the ranged battle.

Now that the fight had become close quarters combat, they still could not gain the upper hand.

The difference in armor quality was simply too large.

Most of the soldiers under the Three Shun Kings could not afford proper armor.

Many of them wore cloth armor that was old and tattered.

Meanwhile, the Gao Family Village militia and Cao's Guan Ning Iron Cavalry were all equipped with top grade armor.

Lightweight aluminum alloy armor plates.

Calling it completely invulnerable might be slightly exaggerated.

But calling it nearly indestructible was not far from the truth.

Before the widespread use of firearms, armor had always been far more important than weapons.

And the Three Shun Kings had very few firearms.

The outcome of the battle was already obvious.

Cheng Xu needed only a single glance to see how this fight would end.

For many years his personal philosophy had never changed.

When the odds were bad, he became as cautious as an old dog.

But when victory was guaranteed, he transformed into the legendary God of War of Chengcheng.

Cheng Xu burst into laughter.

Then he personally joined the fight.

With a single leap he grabbed a ladder.

A few swift movements later he climbed onto the wall.

The moment the militia saw him appear, a thunderous cheer erupted.

"General He has arrived!"

"He has come to avenge the events of Dalinghe City!"

"General He is mighty!"

The militia's shout confused Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao.

"What just happened?"

Soon they realized something astonishing.

The chief instructor of the Gao Family Village militia had personally entered the battle.

That alone was shocking enough.

This mysterious masked man controlled the terrifying army of Gao Family Village.

Without question he was the supreme commander of the entire force.

And now he was personally fighting.

Just how terrifying would that be?

Cao Bianjiao even forgot about competing for battle credit.

He simply stared foolishly at Cheng Xu.

Chapter 1258 I Am an Angel

Kong Youde stood atop the city gate tower, directing the battle.

Suddenly he heard a huge commotion erupt from the enemy ranks. Voices were shouting:

"General He has arrived!"

Kong Youde looked over.

And then he saw it.

The enemy's masked supreme commander had personally joined the assault on the city.

The shock was enormous.

But the moment the shock passed, it was replaced by wild joy.

Kong Youde shouted loudly, "Brothers, our chance to reverse the battle has arrived!"

Geng Zhongming had the exact same thought.

"Kill their supreme commander."

Shang Kexi laughed.

"We were about to lose, and now their commander has personally run to the front line. Heaven is helping us. The three of us attack together and kill that man. If he dies, we turn the whole battle around."

The three of them did not hesitate.

They immediately led their personal guards down from the tower.

Ahead of them the city wall was already a chaotic battlefield. Their guards quickly became entangled with the Gao Family Village militia and the fierce soldiers of the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry.

But Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi slipped through the crowd.

Soon they arrived in front of Cheng Xu.

Kong Youde drew his blade with a sharp motion.

"The supreme commander personally comes to the battlefield. Heh. Your head will belong to me, Kong Youde."

Cheng Xu tilted his head slightly.

"Huh? Are you not also a supreme commander?"

From behind his left shoulder came Geng Zhongming's voice.

"But you are alone."

From behind his right shoulder came Shang Kexi's voice.

"Three against one. You have no path to survival."

Cheng Xu chuckled.

"Oh my. It has been a long time since I have seen a scene like this. When was the last time again?"

The last time had been...

Cheng Xu thought for a brief moment.

The last time was when he had been hunted by a group of Imperial Guards. Surrounded, fighting many enemies alone. Back then Dao Xuan Tianzun had saved him.

He clicked his tongue.

"Ah. The past is too painful to recall."

That sigh only made the Gao Family Village soldiers nearby even more certain of their assumptions.

"Returning to Liaodong has stirred General He's memories."

"These lands hold the stories of when he was one of the Three Heroes of Liaodong."

"The past really is painful to recall."

While the soldiers were thinking these things, Kong Youde suddenly stepped forward and slashed his blade toward Cheng Xu's face.

Cheng Xu's body suddenly swayed.

Kong Youde thought Cheng Xu was about to counterattack. Instinctively he pulled back some of his strength so he could shift to defense at any moment.

But Cheng Xu's movement was not an advance.

He stepped backward.

Toward the left rear.

Geng Zhongming had been waiting there, ready to ambush Cheng Xu from behind once he engaged Kong Youde.

But suddenly Cheng Xu's back was right in front of him.

Geng Zhongming blinked.

"Huh? He is retreating?"

Realizing the danger, Geng Zhongming quickly swung his blade.

But it was already too late.

Cheng Xu seemed to have eyes on the back of his head.

His blade flicked backward.

Thrust.

The knife plunged straight into Geng Zhongming's abdomen.

This was one of Cheng Xu's signature tricks. Years ago he had used this same move to kill Imperial Guards who surrounded him. It felt completely natural to him.

Kong Youde and Shang Kexi roared in fury and rushed forward.

Cheng Xu pulled his blade free from Geng Zhongming's body. Using the momentum of the motion, he slid one step to the side and arrived beside Shang Kexi.

Shang Kexi was startled and twisted his body to face him.

Cheng Xu might not have been the greatest battlefield general, but as a former patrol officer who had fought countless street fights and Jianghu brawls, he possessed an endless supply of strange tricks in close combat.

At the exact moment Shang Kexi twisted his body, Cheng Xu hooked his foot around the place where Shang Kexi's foot was turning.

Shang Kexi instantly lost his balance and stumbled forward.

Cheng Xu's blade came down.

One clean strike across the back of Shang Kexi's neck.

Blood sprayed half a meter into the air.

Kong Youde froze completely.

It had only been a single exchange.

And both Geng Zhongming and Shang Kexi were already dead.

The enemy commander was terrifying beyond belief.

The Gao Family Village militia immediately erupted into cheers.

"General He is mighty!"

"As expected of General He!"

"One of the Three Heroes of Liaodong!"

When Kong Youde heard the words "Three Heroes of Liaodong," his entire body went numb.

The Three Heroes of Liaodong were Zu Dashou, He Kegang, and Zhao Shuaijiao.

All three were famous generals.

And this masked man in front of him had the surname He.

That could only mean one thing.

He Kegang.

Kong Youde roared, "Impossible. You cannot be him. He is already dead. I personally saw his severed head."

Cheng Xu shook his head.

"Yes, yes. I am not him. My surname is He as in the grain character."

Kong Youde's pupils shrank.

"So it really is you. You did not die?"

Cheng Xu waved his hand.

"No, no. I told you already. My surname is He with the grain radical."

Kong Youde shouted, "He Kegang. It really is you!"

Cheng Xu rolled his eyes.

"Damn idiot. Can't you hear the Shaanxi accent in my speech?"

Kong Youde glared at him.

"You even learned a Shaanxi accent just to hide your identity?"

Cheng Xu fell silent.

Kong Youde gritted his teeth.

"Persistent ghost. Take my blade!"

He knew surrender was impossible. The Ming court would never forgive him. The only option left was to fight to the death.

He stepped forward and swung his blade toward Cheng Xu's neck.

Cheng Xu sighed softly and stepped forward.

The two men passed each other.

For a moment, the scene froze.

Then Kong Youde slowly collapsed.

Blood quickly soaked through his armor.

At that moment, the battle was essentially over.

What remained was merely the cleanup phase.

...

Across the Yalu River.

A group of Koreans stood staring with wide eyes at the battle unfolding in Dandong.

For a small and weak country like Joseon, both Great Ming and the Qing were terrifying giants.

When those two giants fought right beside them, it was something they had to watch carefully.

Because it concerned their very survival.

In the hearts of many Koreans, Great Ming was the greater civilization.

But Qing was the stronger military power.

Caught between greatness and strength, they had been forced to submit to the stronger side.

But now the situation seemed to be changing.

Across the Yalu River, Ming forces were beating the Qing army mercilessly.

The Qing side could barely fight back at all.

The Korean spectators could not help whispering among themselves.

"Great Ming is incredibly strong this time."

"Yes, yes. Dandong is such a powerful city, yet it was captured so easily."

"I heard the Qing suffered massive losses during the battle of Pi Island."

Ordinary civilians did not know much.

That was all they understood.

But hidden among them were Korean spies.

And those spies knew far more.

They knew that the Mongolian steppe was in turmoil. The Qing main army did not dare withdraw forces to reinforce Dandong.

Right now the Qing army was busy in the north digging trenches and pits to stop the advance of the Great Iron Wagons.

Dandong was being defended only by the Three Shun Kings.

How could they possibly hold it?

The Ming forces sent this time were simply too powerful.

Just the fleet of warships on the sea made the Korean spies tremble in fear.

There was no way to defeat that.

Even if Joseon's famous turtle ships joined the battle, they would still be destroyed.

No.

This information had to be sent back to the king immediately.

Chapter 1259 Binsheng's New Mission

Joseon, Hanseong.

The King of Joseon, Yi Jong, was forty-three years old this year. Yet judging from his appearance alone, one might easily guess he was already past sixty.

His spirit seemed hollowed out, as if someone had scooped the life out of him and left behind nothing but a shell.

The disaster known as the Qing invasion of Joseon (1636) had wounded Joseon deeply, and it had wounded Yi Jong even more.

His political stance had always been clear: support Ming, reject Qing.

Inside the country he had always taught his ministers the same principle. Because of that, the humiliation of surrendering to the Qing destroyed his prestige at court almost overnight.

True, he was the king.

Technically the highest authority.

But civil officials could protest by resigning.

A wave of resignations and retirements swept through the bureaucracy. Military officers were even worse. Conspiracies and rebellions popped up one after another like weeds after rain.

In bitter self-mockery, Yi Jong once called himself "a bird frightened by the mere twang of a bowstring."

His ministers did not spare him either. They criticized him bluntly:

"Since that great disaster, Your Majesty has shown not a single trace of renewed resolve, merely praying each day passes without trouble."

These days, simply holding onto his throne required exhausting effort.

And then, at that very moment...

One of his confidants rushed in, shouting breathlessly.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Terrible news, terrible news!"

Yi Jong answered weakly, "What is it?"

The man gasped, "A Ming coastal commander, Cao Wenzhao, has launched an attack on Dandong. The battle ended in complete victory. The city has already fallen. The Three Shun Kings, Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi, were all killed."

Yi Jong shot to his feet the instant he heard this.

"Is that true?"

"Completely true! Countless civilians stood along the Yalu River and witnessed the battle on the opposite bank with their own eyes. There can be no mistake."

Yi Jong burst into wild delight.

Joy. Pure, overwhelming joy.

The wrinkles on his aging face seemed to soften immediately. It was as if he had grown ten years younger, transforming from a weary old man of sixty back into someone closer to fifty.

"If Dandong has fallen into Ming hands," he exclaimed, "then the Qing and Joseon are separated by Ming territory!"

"Exactly," the confidant replied. "Until the Qing retake Dandong, they cannot possibly attack us."

Yi Jong laughed loudly.

"Hahaha! Hahaha!"

But after only six bursts of laughter, his face suddenly stiffened.

"Oh no."

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"If Ming has suddenly become powerful again... will they blame me for surrendering to the Qing?"

The confidant froze.

Yi Jong's face aged another ten years in an instant, wrinkles spreading across his brow as worry filled his eyes.

"This is bad. Ming will certainly blame me. I betrayed them, surrendered to the Qing, and even sent troops to assist the attack on Pi Island. Ming must hate me to death."

The confidant did not know how to respond.

"Will Ming send troops to attack us as well?" Yi Jong muttered.

As the thought formed, he seemed to age another five years, becoming an old man of sixty-five.

"Report!"

Another attendant rushed inside.

"A Ming envoy has arrived!"

"What?!"

Yi Jong's face instantly brightened again, returning to the appearance of a man in his mid-fifties.

"A Ming envoy? Quickly, bring him in!"

Soon the envoy entered.

Yi Jong studied him carefully.

The visitor wore white robes. He looked to be in his forties or fifties, yet his bearing was excellent. Calm, confident, and dignified, he carried the air of a refined gentleman that made people instinctively trust him.

The man cupped his hands in greeting.

"My name is Bai Yuan. I have been sent by the Ming coastal commander Cao Wenzhao to meet Your Majesty. There are important state matters to discuss."

Yi Jong froze slightly.

"Sent by Commander Cao?"

So he was not an envoy dispatched by the Ming emperor himself, but merely by a regional commander?

Oh no.

This was bad.

Yi Jong's face aged another five years, returning to the look of a weary sixty-year-old.

Bai Yuan smiled gently.

"Your Majesty need not worry that my status is insignificant. I only borrow the commander's name for convenience. The backing behind me is far greater. The words I speak here will be honored, and powerful people will ensure the agreement between us becomes reality."

Yi Jong wondered silently: How powerful could they possibly be?

Seeing the hesitation in his eyes, Bai Yuan guessed his thoughts.

Still smiling, he raised a finger and pointed toward the sky.

"The one behind me... is Heaven."

Yi Jong understood immediately.

Heaven meant the Son of Heaven.

In other words, the Ming emperor.

So this man was not merely Cao Wenzhao's envoy.

He was a heavenly envoy.

Yi Jong was overwhelmed with joy. His face seemed to grow younger again, returning to the appearance of a fifty-year-old.

"So that is the case. Wonderful, wonderful. May I ask what instructions the Heavenly Envoy brings?"

Bai Yuan spoke calmly.

"There is only one matter. We hope Your Majesty will sever relations with the Qing and return to the embrace of Great Ming."

Those words were exactly what Yi Jong longed to hear.

Yet he still hesitated.

"Would Ming... truly forgive Joseon?"

Bai Yuan pulled out a folding fan and snapped it open.

Two characters were written across it.

"Gentleman."

He smiled as he quoted:

"A gentleman's heart is vast as Heaven and Earth. A petty man's heart is smaller than grains of sand."

"We understand perfectly well why Joseon submitted to the Qing," Bai Yuan continued softly. "Your Majesty was placed in a difficult position. Do you think the Great Ming would fail to understand? If we grew angry over such matters, how could we claim the dignity of the Celestial Empire?"

Yi Jong burst into tears.

"This humble king... has carried so much anguish in his heart. Thank you to the Celestial Empire for understanding... sob... it has been so hard..."

Bai Yuan merely smiled and waited patiently for him to cry it out.

After a long time, Yi Jong finally raised his head.

"This king has always wished to stand with the Celestial Empire. If Ming is willing to send troops to assist Joseon, I would dare to break with the Qing immediately. However... there is one matter that cannot be ignored."

Bai Yuan nodded.

"You refer to the hostages."

"Yes."

After the Qing invasion, when the Qing army withdrew, they took the crown prince Crown Prince Sohyeon and the royal prince Prince Bongrim as hostages.

If Joseon dared to break with the Qing now, those two men would surely die.

Bai Yuan smiled calmly.

"We naturally understand this problem. Therefore the mission of rescuing the hostages will be handled by us."

Yi Jong blinked.

"For now, Your Majesty may continue pretending to be a Qing vassal. Once we successfully rescue your hostages, you may publicly declare your true allegiance."

Yi Jong's last hesitation vanished.

In a flash, his appearance seemed to revert to his true age of forty-three.

All the energy that had been drained from him returned at once.

The King of Joseon, Yi Jong, had revived completely.

Full health. Full spirit.

As expected, only when following Ming did he finally feel like a real human being again.

Yi Jong said excitedly, "Now I can summon back the officials who resigned in protest and ask them to serve again. All the ministers will support me even more. The rebellious military officers will also return to loyalty."

Bai Yuan smiled slightly.

"Then we shall wait for good news... from our side next."

Chapter 1260 The "Jiang Gan Steals the Book" Operation Succeeds

Xi'an. The Chang'an Factory.

Vice Director Binsheng was walking through the small garden of the workers' residential compound with his wife Yanzi, heading toward their apartment building.

The couple had quarreled a little while ago because of Binsheng's background. But after the argument, Yanzi accepted his apology, and strangely enough their relationship became even better than before.

Still, the incident had spread his old secret everywhere.

The entire factory now knew that Binsheng had once been a spy.

Not only that, people also knew about the ten men who had once served under him.

That knowledge brought a new kind of trouble.

They constantly worried people might secretly look down on them or distrust them.

Yanzi spoke softly to comfort him.

"Husband, you really do not need to worry. Anyone who has been influenced by Gao Family Village has a broad mind. There is a saying, a prodigal who returns is worth more than gold. Even in this factory there are countless people who used to be labor camp prisoners. Even Vice Director Qi Cheng once lived as a bandit. No one will mind your background."

Binsheng sighed.

"Bandits are still Ming people. But my background as an Ujen Chaoha soldier means I was once an outsider. I am afraid people will not say anything openly, but will stab our backs with their words."

Yanzi shook her head.

"That will not happen."

Just as they were speaking, a worker suddenly came running toward them.

"Director Bin! Director Bin! Director Gao is looking for you. He asked you and your ten former subordinates to come to the director's office immediately."

Binsheng jumped in fright.

"Ah? Director Gao wants to see me? And my ten old subordinates too?"

Yanzi also froze.

"Why? If even your subordinates are summoned, it cannot be factory business, right?"

Binsheng's expression turned uneasy.

"It clearly is not factory business. If it were, they would only call me. If all of us are summoned, it probably has nothing to do with the factory at all. It might be a reckoning about our backgrounds."

Yanzi became pale.

"I will go with you and listen."

Binsheng turned to the worker.

"Can my wife come along?"

The worker shrugged.

"The director did not say she could not."

Binsheng's heart was uneasy as he hurried toward the director's office with Yanzi.

When they reached the door, they found his ten former spy subordinates already waiting outside.

Every single one of them looked nervous.

No one knew what was happening.

One of them leaned toward Binsheng and whispered.

"Boss... do you think the factory is going to fire us?"

"I am worried too."

"Our spy identities were exposed. They probably cannot allow us to remain here so close to the production data for the Great Iron Wagons."

"Maybe they will even expel us from Dao Xuan Tianzun's liberated territory. Heaven help us."

The whole group was panicking.

Binsheng took a deep breath.

"Now that things have reached this point, fear is useless. Face it calmly. Our identities were exposed while helping capture spies from the Jinyiwei. We contributed to Gao Family Village. I believe the director will not be unreasonable."

His subordinates nodded.

"Right."

Even so, everyone was still very nervous.

They cautiously entered the office.

The director of Chang'an Factory, Gao Yiyi, was sitting behind his desk, looking at them with a faint smile.

Gao Yiyi was one of the original forty-two villagers from Gao Family Village. In the eyes of outsiders, that alone made him an extremely important figure.

Facing him, Binsheng and his group felt enormous pressure.

In truth, Gao Yiyi himself did not consider his abilities extraordinary. He was originally just an ordinary village blacksmith.

He gestured for everyone to sit down before speaking.

"Little Bin, and everyone else. There is no need to be so nervous. I called you here because there is indeed a matter. But this matter requires complete respect for your personal choice."

"Ah?" Yanzi blinked in confusion. "If you are firing my husband, you still ask for his personal choice? Dismissal is this humane now?"

Gao Yiyi stared at her in surprise.

"Firing? Who said anything about firing you?"

"You did!"

"I did not!"

Everyone let out a long breath of relief.

Yanzi asked, "Then why did you call us here?"

Gao Yiyi sighed.

"The situation is this. The village currently has a very difficult mission that needs someone to carry it out. After much discussion, the most suitable people appear to be you. However, you are workers now, not soldiers. We cannot order you to do it. The village committee wishes to ask your opinion. If you are willing, you may accept. If you are unwilling, you may refuse. I guarantee with my personal honor that no one in the village will punish you for declining."

Now everyone was even more curious.

"What mission is it?"

Gao Yiyi explained.

"When Joseon was conquered by the Qing, the Jianzhou people took two hostages back with them. The Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim. If those two hostages are not rescued, Joseon will never dare break with the Qing and return to Ming."

Binsheng understood instantly.

"You need a special operations team to infiltrate Shenyang and rescue the Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim."

Gao Yiyi nodded.

"Exactly."

"This task should normally be assigned to the village militia. But after careful consideration, the village committee believes it may be more suitable for you. Of course, as I said before, it must be your own choice."

Yanzi did not hesitate even for a moment.

"We refuse!"

The words had barely left her mouth when Binsheng reached back and gently pulled her behind him.

"I accept."

Behind him, the ten men almost spoke in unison.

"We accept."

Yanzi panicked.

"Wait! Wait! Husband, how can you accept? This is practically a suicide mission."

Binsheng answered calmly.

"If the militia goes, it truly will be a nine-deaths-one-life mission. But if we go, the chance of death decreases greatly, and the chance of survival rises."

Yanzi froze.

Normally she might act stubborn or quarrel with him, like she did before about his identity. But when something truly serious happened, once her husband made his decision, she did not argue anymore.

She simply stood there, worried and silent.

Gao Yiyi sighed.

"You are correct. That was also the committee's conclusion. If others go, it is nine deaths and one life. If you go, perhaps it becomes five deaths and five lives. That is why we asked you."

He paused.

"I did not expect you would truly dare accept."

Binsheng looked completely calm.

"Why would I not dare? This was my profession before."

The ten men behind him spoke together.

"If we were timid people, we would never have come here. We are here because we are brave."

Binsheng continued.

"Only after coming here did we understand what it means to be respected. What it means for effort to receive reward. Only here did we truly taste the beauty of being alive."

His expression softened slightly.

"If it is to protect this beautiful future, we are willing to risk everything."

Then he suddenly smiled.

"But the committee made one small mistake in its analysis. If we do this mission, it will not be nine deaths and one life. It will not even be five deaths and five lives."

His voice carried absolute confidence.

"I am certain we can make it one death and nine lives."

"We will come back alive."