

Great Ming 1301

Chapter 1301 The Emperor Is This Kind of Person

Two successive Chuang Wangs had been executed.

Yet the man who earned the nickname "Chuang Wang Slayer", Sun Chuanting, did not receive the reward everyone expected. The moment he returned to the capital, Zhu Youjian simply set him aside and told him to rest, giving him no duties at all.

The people of the capital had noses as sharp as hunting dogs. Even the common folk could smell when something strange was happening, not to mention the officials.

Before long, everyone began keeping their distance from Sun Chuanting.

At teahouses and dinner tables, the topic always came up.

"Have you heard? Sun Chuanting killed two Chuang Wangs in a row, yet he received no reward. Instead he was pushed aside."

"I heard he offended Gao Qiqian."

"Ah, Gao Qiqian is not someone you can afford to offend. He is the emperor's favorite."

"The emperor has always believed Gao Qiqian is good at warfare."

"The emperor trusts eunuchs more than outside officials. He is always afraid someone will rebel."

"I heard Gao Qiqian has been smiling nonstop these past few days."

"More than that. He has become even more arrogant. When he visits military camps now, he demands that all officers below the rank of Inspector salute him with a military salute."

"Are you serious? That half-man eunuch dares demand military salutes from real officers? That is outrageous. Someone should impeach him."

A few days later, officials Liu Jingyao of Yongping Circuit and Yang Yuguo of Guannei Circuit submitted memorials to the throne, accusing Gao Qiqian of forcing officers to salute him.

Unexpectedly, Zhu Youjian did not punish Gao Qiqian.

Instead, he dismissed Liu Jingyao and Yang Yuguo from office.

Only then did everyone in the capital finally understand.

This was simply the kind of emperor Zhu Youjian was.

Meanwhile, far away in Liaodong, along the border between the Qing state and the Mongols.

The once flat borderland had been turned into a chaotic maze.

Trenches were dug everywhere.

Pits dotted the ground.

Half-height earthen walls and stone mounds were piled up.

Anything that could complicate the terrain had been used.

All of these crude defensive works protected a small frontier fortress.

Originally, this fortress had belonged to the Ming Dynasty. After Liaodong fell, it became a Qing border stronghold.

In the past it had little strategic value. The Mongols had been allies of the Qing, so there was no need to defend against them.

Now the situation had changed completely.

The fortress had become extremely important.

Five thousand Qing troops were stationed there.

The fortress itself was far too small to hold so many men, so a huge military camp had been built around it.

The commander of this garrison was named Abatai, a prince of the Plain Blue Banner.

He was nearly fifty years old, considered a very old general among the Manchus.

Hong Taiji had chosen him specifically because of his calm and steady temperament. His task was simple.

Guard the border.

And watch for the Mongols' Great Iron Vehicles.

At that moment, the veteran general Abatai stood atop the fortress wall, staring north toward the grasslands.

The weather was perfect today.

The sky stretched clear for thousands of miles.

Not a single cloud.

Not even the faintest breeze.

Visibility was excellent.

Abatai soon spotted something moving on the northern grasslands.

Several Great Iron Vehicles were approaching.

"Sound the alarm!"

Abatai shouted.

"All troops prepare for battle!"

The fortress immediately came alive.

Banner soldiers of the Plain Blue Banner rushed out of their camps, putting on armor while running to their positions.

If they were fighting ordinary enemies, they would form battle lines.

But against the Great Iron Vehicles, forming ranks would only mean death.

So the banner soldiers did not form ranks at all.

Instead they jumped into trenches, crouched behind low walls, or hid inside pits.

Within moments, the entire five thousand-man army had disappeared behind various defensive works.

Abatai glanced at their positions and surveyed the battlefield.

He felt quite satisfied.

With the defenses arranged like this, the Great Iron Vehicles could never charge in.

Even Mongol cavalry would break their horses' legs if they tried.

"Hmph."

Abatai snorted.

"The Ming think that by inventing strange iron vehicles they can defeat the Great Qing?"

"As long as we hold our ground and defend properly, the moment our own Great Iron Vehicles are completed will be the day the Great Qing launches its counterattack."

Sure enough, the enemy vehicles did not dare enter the pit-covered terrain.

They stopped far away and simply watched the fortress.

Abatai laughed.

"Ha! They have been intimidated."

But after laughing twice, he suddenly sensed something strange.

Behind the enemy vehicles, two transport trucks with trailers drove forward.

Han Chinese workers began unloading something from the trailers.

They placed it on the grassland and began fiddling with it.

The distance was too great to see clearly.

Abatai frowned.

"What are they doing?"

One officer with sharp eyesight squinted carefully.

"It looks like they are assembling a huge basket... with some soft cloth above it."

Soon the Qing soldiers watched in astonishment.

The Han Chinese inflated an enormous balloon.

The balloon slowly rose into the sky.

Many people on the ground held ropes to stabilize it.

Abatai stared blankly.

"What in the world is that?"

"It looks like a giant Kongming lantern."

"What is it used for?"

Abatai was confused.

The Qing soldiers were confused.

Everyone stared upward with bewildered expressions.

Meanwhile on the Han Chinese side.

Zao Ying shouted loudly.

"Brothers of the Armored Cavalry Battalion, keep your eyes sharp. This place is very close to the Jianzhou barbarians. They might charge at any moment."

"Protect our scientists well. They are treasures."

The soldiers laughed.

"Don't worry. We have several telescopes watching the enemy. They are all hiding behind their defenses and don't dare come out."

Zao Ying laughed and scolded them.

"Carelessness can lose a war."

Behind the armored cavalry's iron vehicles, several transport trucks had formed a circle.

At the center stood Mo Li, leading a group of graduate researchers and senior technicians.

They had just finished filling a massive flying balloon with hot air.

Holding it with ropes, they slowly let it rise.

Inside the balloon's basket sat a brave reconnaissance soldier.

Mo Li cupped his hands and shouted upward.

"Is there any wind up there?"

The scout shouted back.

"No wind at the moment."

"Good. Let it rise a little higher."

Mo Li ordered someone to release more rope.

Again he shouted upward.

"Is there any wind?"

"Still no wind."

They repeated this process again and again.

Each time they released more rope, the flying balloon climbed higher into the sky.

Eventually it reached a height where arrows and muskets could never reach.

Even then Mo Li still asked nervously.

"Is there wind up there?"

The scout burst into laughter.

"Teacher Mo Li, relax. There is no wind. You can release the rope completely."

Mo Li replied seriously.

"You must be careful. If the wind suddenly comes and blows you into the territory of the Jianzhou barbarians, you will die."

The scout grinned.

"Relax. The weather today is perfect. Not a single breeze. I am lucky and hard to kill. If I really die, then..."

"Bah! Don't say such unlucky things!"

Everyone on the ground shouted at the same time.

The scout only shrugged.

He did not care much.

"Alright."

Mo Li shouted.

"Release the rope!"

The people on the ground let go.

The scout quickly pulled the rope up and stored it inside the basket.

The flying balloon now floated quietly above the armored vehicles.

Suspended high in the sky.

Chapter 1302 The Best Is Saved for Last

Abatai was confused.

The Qing soldiers were confused.

The Han army had released a gigantic Kongming lantern that floated above their heads. What kind of bizarre move was this?

What was the point of it?

After several seconds, Abatai suddenly realized something.

"Oh. That thing is for reconnaissance. It flies high and sees far, so it can observe our deployment."

He snorted.

"But what good does that do? Once they see all my defensive fortifications, their Great Iron Vehicles will be even less willing to come here."

Right at that moment, the reconnaissance soldier on the Flying Balloon took a deep breath and shouted toward the ground.

"I am beginning the test flight!"

Mo Li shouted back nervously.

"Be careful! We've tested it countless times already, but this is the first time it's entering real combat. You must be cautious."

The scout burst out laughing.

"Off I go!"

He grabbed a rope and pulled hard.

The rope activated a mechanism. On the north side of the balloon, several air vents opened and began blasting wind outward.

Whoosh.

Force works both ways. When the balloon pushed air northward, it gained momentum moving south.

And just like that, the Flying Balloon slowly began drifting toward the Qing border fortress.

Very slowly.

Painfully slowly.

After all, this was a first generation machine. The technology was extremely primitive.

But it was flying.

That alone was a massive victory.

On the ground, scientists, graduate researchers, and technicians erupted into cheers.

Across the field, Abatai and the Qing soldiers stared upward in confusion.

"What the hell?"

"That giant Kongming lantern is flying toward us!"

"There is no wind today!"

"How can it fly wherever it wants?"

While they stared stupidly at the sky, the Flying Balloon crept forward at a snail's pace until it reached the airspace above the Qing fortress.

Abatai tilted his head back and stared upward.

"Damn it. That thing is right above my head. I really want to shoot it down."

He waved his hand.

"Bring me a bow!"

A Qing soldier handed him a large bow.

Although Abatai was nearly fifty years old, his arm strength was still formidable. With a grunt, he pulled the bowstring to its fullest.

He barely even aimed.

The arrow shot toward the balloon like a meteor chasing the moon.

But halfway through its flight, the arrow lost its strength and dropped helplessly back to the ground.

Abatai clicked his tongue.

"Too high. Can't reach it."

He remained calm.

Unfortunately for him, the scout on the balloon had already begun preparing for battle.

Inside the hanging basket were piles of grenades, along with a specially made giant explosive pack.

The scout glanced at the largest bundle and decided to save it for last.

He had a bad habit.

Whenever he ate a meal, he always saved the best dish for the end.

First he ate the dishes he liked the least.

He casually picked up a grenade and held its fuse near the fire brazier that heated the balloon.

Sssss.

The fuse ignited.

The scout leaned over the edge of the basket and tossed the grenade toward the fortress below.

A small black object fell from the sky.

Abatai looked up.

"Is that bastard throwing rocks at us?"

Before his sentence finished, the object landed on a corner of the fortress wall.

BOOM!

Two Qing soldiers on the wall screamed as the explosion blasted them flying through the air.

Abatai's eyes widened.

"That's a bomb!"

Rage surged through him as realization struck.

The enemy was not flying overhead to sightsee.

They were bombing them.

"Ahhh!"

"Everyone be careful!"

"That guy up there is throwing bombs!"

"Take cover!"

"Where do we hide?"

The Qing soldiers suddenly realized something terrifying.

There was nowhere to hide.

Meanwhile the scout in the sky showed no mercy.

He grabbed two grenades at once.

Ignite.

Throw.

Ignite.

Throw again.

One grenade dropped straight into a trench.

BOOM.

The Qing soldiers hiding there were blown into the air like rag dolls.

Another grenade fell into a small pit.

BOOM.

Inside that pit, Qing soldiers had prepared fire pots meant to burn the underside of the Great Iron Vehicles.

Instead the grenade ignited them.

Flames erupted upward.

The soldiers inside the pit were instantly turned into Zibo barbecue.

The scout kept throwing.

Left hand grenade.

Right hand grenade.

Left toss.

Right toss.

Explosions erupted everywhere below.

The Qing soldiers completely lost their composure and ran wildly in every direction.

This was too fun.

Far more entertaining than playing whack a mole.

The scout laughed like a madman, dancing in the basket as he kept tossing grenades.

Left throw.

Right throw.

He had no idea how many soldiers he had killed.

All he knew was that the fortress below had become pure chaos.

Just as he was enjoying himself, he reached down to grab another grenade.

His hand touched nothing.

The grenades were gone.

"Damn it!"

No choice.

Time for the main course.

His eyes turned toward the giant explosive pack.

Meanwhile, the Qing soldiers on the ground had been blasted into complete stupidity. Many of them no longer even knew where to run.

They simply ran in circles in blind panic.

Then suddenly...

The bombing stopped.

Abatai crawled out from a small building inside the fortress and looked up.

"It stopped?"

He laughed loudly.

"Out of explosives, huh? Can't keep bombing now, can you?"

He pointed at the sky and cursed.

"Do you even realize how expensive all that gunpowder is? How much military funding do you think you have?"

The soldiers around him suddenly regained confidence.

Right!

The bombs must be used up.

What were they afraid of?

A large group of Qing soldiers looked up and shouted insults.

"Come on then!"

"Throw more if you dare!"

"Out of bombs already?"

"Hahaha!"

Right as they were laughing their loudest...

The scout leaned out from the basket.

Both hands held a massive explosive pack.

The fuse was still burning.

Sparks crackled.

The scout grinned and hurled it downward.

"Take this!"

The enormous explosive pack dropped from the sky and landed directly in the center of the fortress roof.

Then.

BOOM!!!

The earth shook.

This explosive pack had been manufactured by Xu Dafu, director of the Firearms Bureau, using the granulated black powder formula provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The power was terrifying.

The fortress roof shattered instantly and collapsed inward.

At the same time, the enormous shockwave blasted outward in every direction.

Abatai suddenly felt as if the air itself had punched him in the chest.

His body flew backward through the air.

He slammed into the ground, rolled several times, and finally crashed against a half broken wall.

Only then did he stop.

Pain exploded across his entire body.

It felt like every bone had fallen apart.

He forced himself to look around.

His subordinates inside the fortress were scattered everywhere.

Some were twisted.

Some were motionless.

Some were screaming.

Thick black smoke billowed through the ruins.

No one even knew how many soldiers had been buried beneath the collapsed structure.

The scout in the sky was extremely satisfied.

Since he had no bombs left, he pulled out a metal loudspeaker and shouted downward.

"Did that feel good?"

"Don't worry!"

"I am going back to refill my ammunition!"

"Wait for Grandpa to come back!"

Then the Flying Balloon slowly drifted away toward the grasslands.

Chapter 1303 Attack Is The Best Defense

The Flying Balloon slowly drifted back toward the grasslands.

What it left behind was a battlefield full of stunned Qing soldiers and a thoroughly panicked Abatai.

"How are we supposed to fight something like that?"

"We can't!"

"It flies so high in the sky and throws bombs down on us. What are we supposed to do?"

"General, we have absolutely no way to deal with it."

Abatai roared hoarsely.

"Send someone back immediately! Report this to the Emperor!"

While he was shouting himself hoarse, the Flying Balloon returned to the grassland base.

The balloon gradually released air and descended slowly. During the landing process, the pilot tossed down a rope so the people on the ground could grab it and stabilize the balloon's posture.

In the end, several men even pulled the rope together to drag it down.

The balloon finally landed safely.

The scout stepped out of the basket like a victorious hero returning from battle.

Instantly he was surrounded by a crowd of technicians.

"Well? How did it feel?"

The scout burst into laughter.

"Amazing! So amazing I could barely breathe!"

Zao Ying could not help but smile with delight.

"Excellent. Our first combat deployment produced such great results. We can now begin deploying it on a large scale."

Mo Li suddenly jumped out from the side and waved his hands urgently.

"Hey! Listen carefully! You must remember this. The Flying Balloon can only be used when there is no wind."

"No wind!"

"Absolutely no wind!"

"I am saying it three times because it is important!"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Teacher Mo Li, you are starting to sound just like Xu Dafu from the Firearms Bureau."

"What happened to that fearless graduate researcher who once insisted on testing the first balloon flight himself and ended up crashing into Hou Lan's room?"

Mo Li immediately put on a serious face.

"Times change."

"When we test balloons inside Gao Family Village, I am not afraid of anything."

"But using balloons in war is different."

"If we make even the smallest mistake, we could kill our own soldiers."

"That is absolutely unacceptable."

Before he even finished speaking, the Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidery on his chest suddenly spoke.

"Mo Li is correct."

"War kills people. I do not want to see anyone die needlessly."

"Mo Li, later you will write a complete set of safety regulations for operating Flying Balloons."

"All soldiers must strictly obey them."

"Anyone who violates the regulations and uses the balloon recklessly will be punished with confinement."

"Regardless of whether an accident occurs."

"And they will be permanently banned from piloting Flying Balloons."

Once Dao Xuan Tianzun had spoken, who would dare object?

Everyone immediately accepted the order.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued.

"Starting today, we will formally establish the Gao Family Village Air Battalion."

"Select only soldiers with excellent physical condition."

"Build our air force as quickly as possible."

"Understood!"

Shengjing

Inside the capital of the Qing Empire, Hong Taiji watched as several officials pushed half of a Great Iron Vehicle into the hall.

This machine had been constructed through the combined efforts of Manchu, Han, and Korean craftsmen.

Using the design blueprints brought by the traitor Bin Sheng, they had poured enormous effort into its construction.

However, only half the components had been completed so far.

Fan Wencheng had already assembled those parts together to demonstrate the progress to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, our Great Iron Vehicle has reached halfway completion."

Hong Taiji was overjoyed.

Unfortunately, his happiness lasted less than half a stick of incense.

News from the border fortress arrived.

After hearing the messenger's report, Hong Taiji's mouth hung open for quite a long time.

"What kind of nonsense is this?"

He stared at the memorial report in his hand.

"A giant Kongming lantern flying in the sky and dropping bombs?"

"This sounds like something out of mythology."

The messenger knelt on the floor and cried.

"It is real! I was there in the fortress!"

"Several bombs exploded right beside me. I barely made it back alive."

Hong Taiji was not like Zhu Youjian.

When he heard something absurd, he did not assume his subordinate was writing fiction.

Instead he preferred verification.

He waved his hand.

"Prepare horses. I will inspect the fortress personally."

For the Emperor of the Ming dynasty, leaving the capital was difficult.

For the Emperor of the Qing dynasty, it was not.

If he wanted to go, he simply went.

Within a short time, Hong Taiji and a large group of civil and military officials rode quickly to the border fortress.

When he arrived and saw the place with his own eyes, Hong Taiji sucked in a breath of Guo Bao Rou.

The fortress had already been full of trenches and pits before.

Now those trenches had been blasted into blackened craters.

The soldiers had already cleaned up the battlefield before the Emperor arrived, but the devastation was still obvious.

Dark clotted blood could be seen everywhere.

Several burned pits were still smoking and releasing a disgusting smell.

The collapsed fortress looked miserable.

Groups of laborers were digging through the rubble, pulling out corpse after corpse and loading them onto carts.

Hong Taiji looked up at the sky.

"How high was it?"

Abatai replied.

"Our arrows could only reach halfway."

Hong Taiji asked again.

"What about firearms?"

"Still too short."

Hong Taiji inhaled sharply again.

The previous breath of Guo Bao Rou was not enough.

This time he sucked in a breath of Xi Ta cold noodles.

Even he was stunned.

"So what exactly are we supposed to do?"

At that moment, Fan Wencheng stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, please do not worry. Let us think carefully."

"If that giant Kongming lantern is truly so powerful, why did it leave after one round of bombing?"

"Why did it not continue deeper into our territory?"

Hong Taiji paused.

His mind suddenly cleared.

"Right. Let me think."

He quickly reached a conclusion.

"Abatai. There was only one soldier on the lantern?"

Abatai nodded.

"Only one."

Hong Taiji slapped his thigh.

"I understand!"

"It is not easy for a Kongming lantern to rise into the sky."

"It cannot carry much weight."

"Once it carries a man, it is already extremely heavy."

"So naturally it cannot carry many bombs."

Everyone suddenly understood.

Hong Taiji continued speaking.

"Once those few bombs were thrown, what could a single soldier do?"

"Nothing."

"So of course he had to retreat."

"This thing is powerful, yes, but its carrying capacity is limited."

"It cannot destroy too much."

Fan Wencheng nodded.

"Your Majesty's analysis is exactly the same as mine."

Hong Taiji smiled slightly.

"This weapon cannot decide the outcome of the war."

"When it appears, everyone simply take cover."

"With just one lantern and one soldier, they cannot occupy our land."

"We still have plenty of time to manufacture our Great Iron Vehicles."

"When they raise their lanterns in the distance, we will simply charge forward on the ground before they can even take off."

The officials bowed.

"Your Majesty is wise."

Hong Taiji turned his head.

"Dorgon!"

Dorgon immediately stepped forward.

"I am here."

Hong Taiji spoke coldly.

"If they harass us, we will return the favor."

"You will immediately lead a unit of roaming cavalry and ride south into Ming territory."

"Harass Northern Zhili."

"They use giant lanterns to harass us."

"We will use cavalry raids to harass them."

"Attack is the best defense."

"Disrupt the Ming court so they cannot focus all their strength on helping the Mongols."

"What we need right now is time."

"As long as our Great Iron Vehicles are completed..."

"We cannot lose."

Dorgon bowed deeply.

"Your command will be carried out."

Chapter 1304 Cao Cao's Southern Campaign.

Chongzhen Year Eleven.

Ninth Month. Twenty Second Day.

The Qing army launched another invasion.

Historically this invasion had been massive. But because Gao Family Village had intervened in the situation, the strategic environment had changed.

To the north, the Mongols were watching the Qing closely.

To the south, the strongholds at Pi Island and Dandong were like two poisonous needles stuck deep in Qing flesh.

Because of this pressure from two directions, the scale of this invasion was actually not large.

Only one major general led the operation.

Dorgon.

And he only brought a large force of roaming cavalry.

Of course, such things could never be openly announced to the Ming court.

One could not send a message saying:

"We are only sending a small group to harass you."

Hong Taiji understood strategy very well.

If he wanted to buy time through harassment, he needed the Ming court to fear him.

So he made a grand public announcement.

He claimed that he himself would personally lead an army of one hundred thousand troops in an invasion of the south.

The operation was given an impressive name.

Cao Cao's Southern Campaign.

After making this announcement, Hong Taiji quietly stayed inside the palace at Shengjing.

He rarely appeared in public.

To the outside world, it looked as if he had already gone to war.

Meanwhile, Dorgon led the roaming cavalry southward.

They called themselves the vanguard of the great army.

The moment the news reached Ming territory, the entire country trembled.

Inside the capital, high officials and nobles became extremely anxious.

Landowners and gentry families living in Northern Zhili immediately began packing their belongings.

Entire families fled toward the capital.

Children.

Servants.

Elderly parents.

Everyone rushed toward Beijing.

Within a short time, the atmosphere in the capital became tense.

The streets filled with refugees fleeing the threat of war.

High officials could stay with friends who held positions in the capital.

Wealthy merchants rented inns or expensive houses.

But poor people had no such options.

They huddled in corners of the streets, shivering together.

Crying and arguing could be heard everywhere.

The imperial capital began to look less like the seat of an empire and more like a giant marketplace in chaos.

At times like this, the common people suddenly remembered someone.

"Where is the Minister of War, Sun Chuanting?"

"Sun Chuanting is an incredible commander!"

"He killed two Chuang Wang leaders!"

"Quick! Ask him to come back and deal with the Jianzhou Barbarians!"

It was not just the common people thinking this way.

Many officials in the capital thought the same.

Soon numerous memorials appeared in court.

"Your Majesty, Sun Chuanting should not be resting anymore. He must be recalled to command the war."

Zhu Youjian himself was also feeling nervous.

Not about the capital.

About his Imperial Estates.

Those farmland estates were outside the Forbidden City.

If Qing soldiers arrived and trampled the crops that he had painstakingly grown using chemical fertilizer...

Who would he cry to then?

Just as he was about to issue an imperial order recalling Sun Chuanting, Gao Qiqian came running into the imperial study.

He bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, that Sun Chuanting is arrogant and disrespectful."

"When he heard that the Qing army had invaded, he laughed loudly."

"He said Your Majesty would definitely recall him."

"And he even said Your Majesty would have to swallow your pride and beg him to return."

Zhu Youjian exploded in anger.

"What?"

"How dare he say such things?"

"Am I truly forced to rely only on him?"

He snorted coldly.

"If he is so arrogant, then I will refuse to use him!"

Inside his heart, Gao Qiqian was quietly delighted.

This emperor was unbelievably easy to manipulate.

Zhu Youjian thought for two seconds and made a decision.

"Summon Lu Xiangsheng, Governor General of Xuanda."

"He will enter the capital and command the reinforcements from across the realm."

Gao Qiqian quickly stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, I too wish to share Your Majesty's burden."

Zhu Youjian had always trusted Gao Qiqian's so called military abilities.

He was immediately pleased.

"If you go as well, that would be excellent."

"I appoint you as supervising commander."

"You and Lu Xiangsheng will jointly command the reinforcements to defend the capital."

Gao Qiqian was overjoyed.

"Thank you for Your Majesty's trust."

As he left the palace, he practically walked with the wind.

With nothing but a smooth tongue, he had pushed Sun Chuanting out of command.

Not only that, he himself had become supervising commander.

Once seated in that position...

The money would never stop flowing.

Just skim a little from the eastern army's pay.

Take a little from the western grain supply.

Pocket a few warhorses from the southern cavalry.

He clicked his tongue happily.

Becoming rich would be effortless.

While Zhu Youjian was falling straight into Hong Taiji's strategy and panicking himself into chaos...

Bin Sheng and his ten subordinates had just returned to Chang'an Factory.

This mission had been classified as a covert intelligence operation.

Because of that, no battlefield reporters had followed them.

Naturally the mission had never appeared on Gao Family News.

Aside from a few relevant military personnel, almost nobody knew what they had been doing.

When Bin Sheng jumped down from the train and stood at the factory gates, only a few people were there to welcome him.

Gao Yi Yi.

Qi Cheng.

Yan Zi.

The crowd was small.

But the reception was prestigious.

Even the factory director Gao Yi Yi had come personally.

Bin Sheng suddenly noticed a slightly plump middle aged man standing behind Gao Yi Yi.

He looked about forty or fifty years old.

Clean shaven.

Smiling gently.

The man seemed strangely familiar.

Bin Sheng stared carefully.

Then suddenly he recognized him.

The highest administrative leader of Gao Family Village.

San Shier.

The Third Steward.

Bin Sheng froze in shock and forgot to greet anyone.

Yan Zi rushed forward and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly for a long time.

Bin Sheng stammered.

"Director Gao... Director Qi... this gentleman... could it be..."

Gao Yi Yi laughed.

"Correct."

"This is the Third Steward."

"He came personally to commend you."

Bin Sheng and his ten men were instantly overwhelmed with joy.

"This is why Gao Family Village is the best place in the world!"

When they returned to Shengjing with the blueprints for the Great Iron Vehicle, none of the Qing officials had even looked at them.

Only after Bin Sheng volunteered to supervise the construction did Hong Taiji finally summon them.

But Gao Family Village was different.

The highest administrative leader had personally come to greet them at the factory gates.

This level of respect alone was enough to make a man feel that dying for someone who truly understood him was worthwhile.

San Shier smiled.

"Because of the nature of your mission and your former identities, the village council has decided to keep things low profile."

"Your identities cannot be exposed."

"You cannot appear on Gao Family News."

"But heroes should never be treated unfairly."

"That is why I came personally."

"You will enjoy the rewards you deserve quietly."

"This is called rewarding merit."

Bin Sheng and his men instantly had tears in their eyes.

Just look at Gao Family Village.

This was what a real society should be.

San Shier took out a medal carved from pure gold.

One by one, he placed them around the men's necks.

Special Hero Medal of Gao Family Village.

Then he handed each of them a large reward bonus.

Bin Sheng's nose tingled.

He desperately wanted to cry.

San Shier patted his shoulder gently.

"Come now. A man should not look so embarrassed."

Bin Sheng quickly wiped his eyes and laughed awkwardly.

San Shier turned to leave.

Suddenly Bin Sheng spoke.

"Third Steward, I have a request."

San Shier turned back.

"Oh? What matter?"

Bin Sheng said seriously.

"Gao Family Village seems to lack an intelligence department."

"I am not particularly talented."

"But while serving as deputy director of Chang'an Factory..."

"I would like to train a group of professional intelligence agents for the village."

Chapter 1305 Being Young Really Is Wonderful

San Shier let out a small sound of surprise, then smiled.

"They said you were the hardest worker among the hard workers. I did not quite understand before. Now I do. You truly are not afraid of carrying a heavy burden."

He chuckled.

"This is what people call giving one's all to the very end."

Bin Sheng snapped to attention, standing straight as a spear.

His voice was sincere.

"If I carry a heavier burden, my Yan Zi can live a better life."

Yan Zi instantly burst into tears.

The ten men behind Bin Sheng spoke at the same time.

"We are not afraid of heavy burdens."

"Good!" San Shier nodded.

"We may not wish to harm others, but we must still guard against enemy nations. A defensive intelligence department is necessary."

He paused a moment and then smiled.

"Since it is for defense, we shall call it the Divine Shield Bureau."

"Bin Sheng, I hereby appoint you as the first director of the Divine Shield Bureau."

"The other ten of you will serve as the bureau's first officers."

"This is what it means to assign positions according to talent."

Bin Sheng and his men were overjoyed.

San Shier then added thoughtfully,

"But if you take on this responsibility, will your work at Chang'an Factory suffer?"

Bin Sheng grinned.

"Please do not worry, Third Steward."

"I have no intention of leaving Chang'an Factory. I love the work there."

"I can handle both jobs at the same time."

He leaned forward slightly.

"After all, intelligence agents naturally need two identities."

His subordinates laughed.

"Chang'an Factory is already a military industry facility. Being soldiers there is perfectly normal."

"In the old Jin state we did the same thing. We served as soldiers in the Wuzhen Superha while also carrying out espionage work."

San Shier finally nodded.

"Very well."

"The establishment of the Divine Shield Bureau will be entirely in your hands."

And so, just like that...

The most powerful intelligence agency of Gao Family Village, the Divine Shield Bureau, quietly began its existence.

In a rather random place.

At a rather random time.

And founded by a rather unusual group of people.

On the train heading back to the village, San Shier could not help sighing.

"I am getting old."

"Bai Yuan is old too."

"Cheng Xu is almost fifty."

"Even that fellow Flat Rabbit is nearly forty."

"The first generation of Gao Family Village is approaching retirement."

He gazed out the window.

"The future belongs to people like Bin Sheng, Liu Maopao, and Gao Sanwa."

He chuckled softly.

"This is what people mean when they say the waves behind push forward the waves ahead."

Just as he was thinking this, a young man about eighteen years old ran down the train corridor.

He suddenly tripped.

It looked like he was about to fall hard.

But halfway through the fall, the young man planted both hands on the floor.

He flipped forward in a quick somersault, spun once in midair, and landed firmly on his feet.

San Shier raised his eyebrows.

"Oh! Quick reflexes."

The young man turned his head.

The moment he saw San Shier, he immediately recognized him and nearly jumped in shock.

He quickly bowed.

"Greetings, Third Steward. I did not expect you to be on this train. Please forgive my rudeness."

San Shier smiled.

"Your skills are impressive. What do you do?"

The young man's face showed an awkward smile.

"A reform through labor prisoner."

"What?"

San Shier blinked.

"A labor reform prisoner?"

The young man looked so embarrassed he nearly wanted to crawl into the floor.

"I took the wrong path before. I mistook thieves for my fathers and joined a bandit group."

"Fortunately I had not committed any real crimes yet when Gao Family Village captured me and sent me for labor reform."

"My crime was minor, so my sentence was short."

"I was released two days ago."

"I am taking this train to Gao Family Village to join the village militia."

San Shier laughed.

"I see."

"A prodigal son who returns is worth more than gold."

"Gao Family Village welcomes you."

"However, whether you can join the militia is not my decision. The militia instructors will decide."

"Everyone has their own responsibilities."

The young man grinned and flexed his arm proudly.

"I am confident. The militia will definitely want me."

San Shier laughed.

"It is good for young people to have confidence."

"What a fine young man."

The youth bowed again and continued running down the corridor.

Just as he was about to disappear at the end of the train car, San Shier suddenly asked,

"By the way, what is your name?"

The young man turned back and smiled brightly.

"My name is Li Dingguo."

"Third Steward, one day I will become a great general who will make you look at me with new respect."

San Shier laughed warmly.

"Good!"

"Ah... being young really is wonderful."

At the same time.

Dandong.

Two young men stood before Cheng Xu and saluted.

They spoke almost at the same time.

Shi Lang.

Zheng Sen.

"Instructor He, now that Korea has returned as a tributary state of the Ming, there will no longer be powerful enemy fleets on the sea."

"We request permission to sail to Yi Zhou Island and assist Yao Xingjuan."

Recently the Gao Family Village navy had been operating near Pi Island.

The reason was simple.

At that time Korea had not yet returned to Ming allegiance, and Korea still possessed a navy that was at least somewhat usable.

Gao Family Village's navy had to stay there to keep the Korean fleet in check.

Otherwise Pi Island and Dandong might lose their maritime supply routes.

That would have been disastrous.

But now things were different.

Crown Prince Sohyeon and Grand Prince Bongrim had returned to Korea.

Korea had once again acknowledged the Ming as its overlord.

The sea had become safe.

The supply routes to Pi Island and Dandong were no longer threatened.

The two young admirals could not sit still anymore.

Cheng Xu laughed.

"You youngsters really cannot stay idle."

"Korea has only returned for a few days and you already want to run off again."

Shi Lang grinned.

"Of course."

Zheng Sen added,

"I have long been interested in Yi Zhou Island."

Cheng Xu nodded.

"Very well."

"Yao Xingjuan is facing the entire Dutch East India Company alone with just one ship. That is not easy."

"You two can go reinforce him."

The two youths were delighted.

Then Cheng Xu suddenly beckoned to Zheng Sen.

"Oh, right. Tianzun has a special instruction for you."

Zheng Sen looked puzzled.

"Huh?"

Cheng Xu smiled.

"Tianzun has already calculated that the two of you will successfully pacify Yi Zhou."

"So he wishes to grant you a new name."

He paused.

"It will be Zheng Chenggong."

Zheng Sen was overjoyed.

"A name bestowed by Tianzun is the greatest honor."

"I will gladly accept it."

Shi Lang immediately looked jealous.

"What about me?"

"Hey! What about me?"

Cheng Xu laughed.

"You do not need to change your name."

"Tianzun said your name already has great spiritual character. You should keep it."

Shi Lang was delighted.

"Ah! Tianzun praised my name."

Cheng Xu waved his hand.

"Enough. I know young people like you cannot sit still."

"I will not delay you any longer."

"You may depart immediately."

"Return to Zhoushan Island first to resupply."

"Then head to Jinjiang Port in Quanzhou and rendezvous with Yao Xingjuan."

He took out two documents and handed them to the boys.

"Tianzun prepared these long ago."

"Privateering licenses."

"They allow you to freely attack the ships of Western pirates in the waters around Yi Zhou."

The two youths were ecstatic.

They had heard that Yao Xingjuan had received one of these licenses before.

They had been extremely envious.

Now they had their own.

Cheng Xu added seriously,

"Remember."

"The license allows you to attack Western pirates."

"It does not allow you to attack everyone you see."

"If you misunderstand that..."

"You will become real pirates."

The two young men answered together.

"Understood!"

Chapter 1306 Entering the Capital to Defend It

Shanxi Province.

Taiyuan.

Wu Shen.

Also known to the people as Wu Million.

Savior of Shanxi.

Most popular official in Shanxi.

Living God of Wealth.

At this moment he was sitting inside the Governor's Office, calmly handling official documents.

In recent years Shanxi had been doing extremely well.

The common people had become prosperous.

And the name Wu Million had long become famous across the province.

At first everyone believed Wu Shen had personally brought a million taels of silver to rescue Shanxi.

But as time passed, the people gradually came into contact with the teachings of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Only then did they finally understand.

That one million silver had actually been given by Tianzun.

The real savior of Shanxi was Tianzun.

Even so, their admiration for Wu Shen did not diminish in the slightest.

After all, he was the man who had implemented everything.

Wu Shen was reviewing documents when a messenger entered the room and bowed.

"Governor Wu, Governor General Lu Xiangsheng of Xuanda has sent word."

"The Jianzhou army has invaded. He asks the Shanxi Commander to join him in defending the capital."

Wu Shen nodded calmly.

"That is only proper."

"I will immediately order the Shanxi Commander to mobilize."

The current Shanxi Commander was Hu Dawei.

When Wu Shen first became Governor of Shanxi, Hu Dawei had only been a regional general.

At the time he was not one of Tianzun's people, so he had been quietly sidelined.

However, since he remained in Shanxi, he inevitably came into contact with the teachings of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Little by little, he joined the faith.

After that, Wu Shen brought him back into an important position.

Among the military figures of Tianzun's faith in Shanxi, people like Xing Honglang, Lao Nanfeng, and Wang Xiaohua were often busy elsewhere.

They frequently participated in Tianzun's greater strategic plans.

So Hu Dawei, who had stayed in Shanxi all this time without running off on adventures, naturally became the Shanxi Commander.

Now that the Jianzhou army had invaded, Shanxi troops obviously needed to assist.

With a single order from Wu Shen, Hu Dawei immediately assembled three thousand soldiers.

Well.

Three thousand village militia, to be precise.

At this point, almost all the official troops within Shanxi had already transformed into Gao Family Village militia.

Some still wore the uniforms of imperial soldiers.

But inside they had already been completely reshaped by Tianzun.

Commander Hu Dawei, together with Regional General Liu Guangzuo, marched north.

Soon they arrived at Xuanda.

There they joined the relief army led by Lu Xiangsheng.

Alongside them were two other commanders.

Xuanfu Commander Yang Guozhu.

Datong Commander Wang Pu.

Ah.

Wang Pu was an old acquaintance.

Lu Xiangsheng led this group of familiar faces toward the capital.

After several days of marching, the walls of Beijing finally appeared in the distance.

Crowds of officials and commoners had gathered outside the city gates to welcome them.

At this moment the Qing vanguard led by Dorgon had already entered Northern Zhili.

Roaming cavalry were wreaking havoc across the countryside.

The entire capital was trembling with fear.

And because the emperor refused to recall Sun Chuanting, the burden of hope had fallen entirely onto Lu Xiangsheng.

To the people of the capital, he was now their final savior.

Both officials and citizens stretched their necks eagerly as they waited for his arrival.

When they finally saw the well disciplined Tianxiong Army marching forward, cheers erupted everywhere.

"Lord Lu has arrived!"

"The capital is saved!"

"Lord Lu is mighty!"

"Lord Lu, I have a daughter..."

However, Lu Xiangsheng himself was in no mood for celebration.

Not long ago, his father had died.

When Lu Xiangsheng received the news of his father's death, he had been devastated.

He submitted seven separate memorials requesting permission to observe mourning and retire temporarily.

Zhu Youjian had originally allowed him to return home for mourning.

But only a few days later, Hong Taiji launched the operation known as Cao Cao's Southern Campaign.

The emperor immediately changed his mind.

He revoked the mourning leave and forcibly summoned Lu Xiangsheng back into service as Minister of War.

No decent person could be cheerful when their father had only just died.

Lu Xiangsheng rode his horse toward the city gate, his face heavy with grief.

The cheering voices around him sounded distant.

All he could think about was the towering figure of his father.

Just then, a grand eunuch approached with an arrogant expression.

It was Gao Qiqian.

He had been sent to welcome Lu Xiangsheng on behalf of the emperor.

Originally Zhu Youjian had intended this as a gesture of care and respect.

But Gao Qiqian had his own ideas.

He wanted to establish clearly who was in charge.

He did not want a repeat of what had happened with Sun Chuanting.

That incident where Sun Chuanting's men had beaten Gao Qiqian's subordinates had been deeply humiliating.

Gao Qiqian walked up proudly.

"Lord Lu."

Lu Xiangsheng responded quietly.

"And you are?"

Gao Qiqian lifted his chin.

"Supervising Commander. Gao Qiqian."

He deliberately emphasized the words supervising commander.

The meaning was obvious.

I am here to supervise you.

You had better recognize your superior early.

Lu Xiangsheng, however, was still lost in his memories.

The last time he had seen his father.

His father had been standing at the city gate of Xuanda.

He had said:

"You stay here and do not move."

"I will go buy you some oranges."

Gao Qiqian's words barely registered in his mind.

He simply replied automatically.

"Greetings, Eunuch Gao."

Gao Qiqian instantly grew angry.

This man heard that I am the supervising commander and still shows no respect?

Not even a little flattery?

Does he not know how the court works?

Suppressing his irritation, Gao Qiqian forced a smile.

"Lord Lu, this time the Jianzhou army has invaded in great numbers."

"It is said that Hong Taiji himself is leading the army."

"With a force of one hundred thousand troops."

"The emperor has ordered the two of us to jointly command all reinforcements."

"We must cooperate closely."

He emphasized the word cooperate.

What he actually expected was for Lu Xiangsheng to immediately say something like:

"I will follow Eunuch Gao's command in all matters."

But Lu Xiangsheng had no patience for such empty court etiquette.

Especially not in his current mood.

He simply cupped his fists politely.

"I will perform my own duties properly."

Gao Qiqian froze.

Lu Xiangsheng continued calmly.

"I have only just arrived and am unfamiliar with the situation."

"Eunuch Gao is the supervising commander and must understand the situation well."

"Please brief me on the current military situation in Northern Zhili."

Gao Qiqian was furious.

Discuss military matters with you?

Who do you think you are?

He waved his sleeve impatiently.

"I suddenly feel tired."

"I must return to rest."

"You may speak with my subordinates."

With that, Gao Qiqian turned and left.

Lu Xiangsheng blinked in confusion.

A moment later, a young eunuch approached quietly and spoke in a low voice.

"The main Jianzhou army has not yet arrived."

"But Dorgon has already led the vanguard cavalry near Shunyi."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

Something felt wrong.

Based on past experience, the Jianzhou army always advanced extremely quickly.

Once they crossed the border, they would immediately split into several groups and begin burning and looting everywhere.

But this time...

Why did things feel different?

Chapter 1307 A Perfect Opportunity for a Counterattack

Lu Xiangsheng could not help thinking about something strange.

The emperor had summoned him to the capital.

The message had traveled from Beijing to Xuanda.

Then he himself had marched from Xuanda back toward the capital.

All of this had taken quite a bit of time.

So why had the main Jianzhou army still not appeared?

Only a small vanguard force was near Shunyi.

That was very strange.

He remembered something from a few years ago.

Back when he had been suppressing bandits in Huguang, he had heard that the Jianzhou army had invaded.

He immediately rushed north with his troops to defend the capital.

But by the time he reached Beijing, the Jianzhou forces had already finished looting and burning everything.

They had happily returned to Liaodong.

Comparing that situation with the current one, something clearly felt wrong.

This was not how the Jianzhou army usually behaved.

Lu Xiangsheng immediately said to the young eunuch beside him,

"Please go and bring Eunuch Gao back. I need to discuss urgent military matters with him."

The young eunuch hurried off.

But after a while he returned.

"Eunuch Gao is feeling unwell and has gone home to rest. If there are military matters, they can be discussed tomorrow."

A question mark slowly appeared above Lu Xiangsheng's head.

Just a little discomfort and he refuses to discuss military affairs?

Did he not realize the situation was extremely urgent?

While Lu Xiangsheng was still trying to understand what was happening, the Shanxi Commander Hu Dawei walked up beside him.

"Lord Lu, there is probably nothing useful to discuss with a eunuch anyway."

"That man clearly does not understand warfare. He also has no interest in fighting."

"He only knows how to play political tricks."

Lu Xiangsheng raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Hu Dawei had long received guidance from Tianzun, and his speech was surprisingly refined.

He sounded less like a military officer and more like a thoughtful scholar.

Lowering his voice, he said,

"Lord Lu, instead of discussing military strategy with that useless eunuch, why not speak with the former Minister of War?"

"The man who killed two generations of Chuang Wang."

"Sun Chuanting."

"He certainly knows far more than Gao Qiqian."

Lu Xiangsheng thought about it for a moment.

Right.

Sun Chuanting was a famous figure.

He had always been known at court as an expert on frontier affairs.

Discussing the situation with him would surely be helpful.

So Lu Xiangsheng stopped worrying about Gao Qiqian.

He brought along Yang Guozhu, Wang Pu, and Hu Dawei, and went directly to visit Sun Chuanting.

Ever since Sun Chuanting returned to the capital after killing two generations of Chuang Wang, the emperor had ordered him to "rest."

Which meant he had not been assigned any real work.

Every day he simply stayed inside the new residence he had purchased in the capital.

Writing essays.

When Lu Xiangsheng arrived, he found Sun Chuanting bent over his desk, writing rapidly.

Lu Xiangsheng leaned forward and glanced at the paper.

The title read:

"The Use of Armored Cavalry on the Plains."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

Armored cavalry?

Did he mean heavy cavalry?

Why call it armored cavalry?

Was that some kind of regional term from Sun Chuanting's hometown?

"Lord Sun."

Lu Xiangsheng cupped his fists politely.

"I am Lu Xiangsheng, the newly appointed Minister of War."

"I have come to consult you regarding matters concerning Liaodong."

Sun Chuanting turned around and smiled warmly.

"Ah, Lord Lu. Please sit."

His smile was sincere.

There was not the slightest trace of resentment about losing the Minister of War position to the man standing in front of him.

That alone made Lu Xiangsheng respect him greatly.

This man had lost his position, yet he showed no bitterness at all.

Such magnanimity was rare.

Lu Xiangsheng quickly explained his concerns.

"I feel something about the Jianzhou movement is not right."

"Their main force has still not appeared."

"It is very strange."

Sun Chuanting smiled.

The embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest also seemed to be smiling.

When Sun Chuanting laughed, the folds of his robe moved slightly, so nobody noticed.

Sun Chuanting said calmly,

"Have you considered another possibility?"

"That the Jianzhou army does not actually have a main force here at all."

"Only this vanguard cavalry."

"This invasion may simply be harassment."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"Is that possible?"

"But in the past, every Jianzhou invasion involved massive armies."

"Why would it change this time?"

Sun Chuanting replied with just two words.

"Mongolia."

"Pi Island."

That was all he said.

But Lu Xiangsheng immediately fell into deep thought.

The Ming court did maintain spies in Manchu territory, Mongolia, and Joseon.

So Lu Xiangsheng was not completely ignorant of outside affairs.

However, he only knew the broad situation.

He did not know the details.

For example, he knew Mongolia had recently become aggressive.

But he did not know why.

He also knew Pi Island had been reinforced by Coastal Commander Cao Wenzhao and successfully defended.

But he did not know the island had already grown strong enough to launch counterattacks against the Qing.

Because his information was incomplete, his analysis could only be partially accurate.

He had no idea just how much pressure the Qing were currently facing.

Of course Sun Chuanting could not explain everything.

Things like massive iron vehicles or great fleets were not topics that could be casually discussed.

People outside the faith of Dao Xuan Tianzun still needed to hear a limited version.

So Sun Chuanting simply explained that the Qing were currently facing pressure from three directions.

Under those circumstances, they could not launch a full scale attack against the Ming.

Lu Xiangsheng slowly nodded.

"So you mean the Qing are being restrained by Mongolia and Pi Island."

"They cannot commit their full strength against us."

"That is why their main force has not appeared, and only a cavalry vanguard is here."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Exactly."

Lu Xiangsheng's eyes suddenly brightened.

"In that case this is a perfect opportunity."

"Instead of fearing them, we should launch a counterattack."

"We should march into Liaodong."

"While the Jianzhou forces are distracted, we could reclaim our lost territory."

Sun Chuanting smiled.

"You are correct."

"This is indeed a perfect opportunity."

He paused for a moment.

"However..."

"The cowards at court may not see it that way."

Lu Xiangsheng straightened immediately.

Even the grief over his father's death seemed to fade slightly.

"I am the Minister of War."

"I do not need to worry about the opinions of cowards."

"As long as I advocate the counterattack, it will be done."

Sun Chuanting sighed softly.

"Lord Lu."

"Be careful of petty villains."

"Cowards are useless against enemies."

"But against their own people, they are experts."

Lu Xiangsheng paused.

Then he cupped his fists respectfully.

"Thank you for the warning, Lord Sun."

"I will remain cautious."

He soon took his leave.

Yang Guozhu and Wang Pu followed immediately.

Hu Dawei deliberately lingered behind.

After Lu Xiangsheng and the others turned away, Hu Dawei quickly glanced at Sun Chuanting.

He opened the cloak covering his armor.

On the heart mirror of his breastplate was a shining engraving.

The image of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Bright and unmistakable.

Sun Chuanting smiled and nodded.

Hu Dawei cupped his fists and left.

The moment he was gone, a head suddenly popped out from a room behind Sun Chuanting.

It was Chen Qianhu.

He grinned.

"Hu Dawei is one of our people."

"With him following Lu Xiangsheng, there should not be any major problems."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Yes."

"Even if Gao Qiqian tries to sabotage him, things will not get too bad."

"Hu Dawei will protect him."

"Even if Lu Xiangsheng's plan cannot be carried out..."

"At least he will not lose his life."

Chapter 1308 Let's Hold a Meeting and Talk It Through

Early the next morning, inside the Imperial Study.

Zhu Youjian sat behind his desk reading one military report after another while his brows slowly knotted tighter and tighter.

The Qing army's vanguard force had already reached Shunyi.

Their advance now threatened the area around his Imperial Estates.

Those estates had recently received a large investment from his Imperial Privy Treasury. He had purchased a huge amount of chemical fertilizer, planted vast fields of crops, and was already daydreaming about a rich harvest this year.

If everything went well, the harvest might even replenish his pitiful private treasury.

Maybe, just maybe, he could finally afford to replace the patched undershirt he had been wearing.

Unfortunately the hateful Jianzhou forces had chosen this exact moment to invade.

If their cavalry reached the Imperial Estates before harvest, then all his hopes for a bumper crop would be completely ruined.

Absolutely ruined.

Zhu Youjian's mood felt like sitting on a drop tower ride.

One moment he was lifted high with hope.

The next moment he plunged straight down into despair.

At that moment a young eunuch entered quietly.

"Your Majesty, the newly appointed Minister of War Lu Xiangsheng requests an audience."

Zhu Youjian immediately brightened.

"Good timing. I was just about to summon him."

"Let him enter."

A moment later Lu Xiangsheng walked in.

His expression looked rather tired.

Of course it would.

Anyone whose father had just died recently would not look particularly energetic.

Unfortunately Zhu Youjian had no time to worry about a minister's family affairs.

The moment Lu Xiangsheng stepped in, the emperor spoke first.

"You came at the right moment. I have something for you to handle."

Lu Xiangsheng had barely opened his mouth when the words got stuck.

"Please give your command, Your Majesty."

Zhu Youjian said,

"The Jianzhou vanguard has already reached Shunyi. My Imperial Estates in Shuntian Prefecture could be looted at any moment. Harvest season is approaching, and I cannot allow this to happen."

"You must immediately think of a way to protect those estates."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

Inside his mind he nearly exploded.

This man is thinking about protecting his private farms?

At a moment like this?

If the person speaking had been an ordinary official, Lu Xiangsheng might already have punched him.

Unfortunately the person speaking was the emperor.

Punching the emperor was generally considered bad career planning.

So he forced himself to swallow his anger.

"Your Majesty, should you not be considering the defense of the entire Ming Empire?"

Zhu Youjian replied calmly,

"My Imperial Estates are also part of the Ming Empire."

Lu Xiangsheng stood there speechless.

Fine.

Very well.

He sighed quietly.

"In that case, I will send a unit to station there."

Zhu Youjian immediately brightened.

"Excellent. Let me think."

"When you came to the capital this time, you brought Yang Guozhu, Wang Pu, and Hu Dawei, correct?"

"Yes," Lu Xiangsheng answered.

Zhu Youjian continued.

"I have never heard much about Yang Guozhu or Hu Dawei, but Wang Pu I know well."

"A few years ago when the Jianzhou forces invaded, Wang Pu rushed to defend the capital and defeated them. I personally rewarded him."

"He is a very capable general."

"Let him guard the Imperial Estates."

Lu Xiangsheng nearly choked.

Originally he had planned to send Yang Guozhu, who had the weakest combat ability.

Instead the emperor immediately chose Wang Pu, the strongest commander in Lu Xiangsheng's force.

Sending his best fighter to guard a bunch of farmland was practically sabotage of his counteroffensive plan.

But what could he do?

"Your command will be obeyed."

Zhu Youjian nodded happily.

"Oh right. You came to see me. What did you wish to report?"

So now you remember.

Lu Xiangsheng felt extremely frustrated but quickly began explaining the analysis that Sun Chuanting had previously shared with him.

"Your Majesty, this Jianzhou invasion is different from previous ones."

He spoke for quite some time.

He explained the pressure Mongolia was placing on the Qing.

He described the threat posed by Cao Wenzhao on Pi Island.

He also mentioned the pressure coming from Joseon.

After laying out all these factors, he finally reached his conclusion.

"Your Majesty, our problem right now is not how to defend against the Jianzhou."

"Our best option is to launch a decisive counterattack."

"If we act now, we can recover Liaodong and drive those Tungusic savages back into the forests of the Changbai Mountains, where they belong hunting animals and digging wild roots."

Zhu Youjian listened carefully.

The reasoning sounded convincing.

Yet something inside him still felt uncomfortable.

How could one describe his state of mind?

Deep in his heart he truly wanted the Ming Empire to defeat the Jianzhou.

However, ever since he ascended the throne, the Jianzhou had repeatedly beaten Ming armies into the ground.

After experiencing that for so many years, fear had taken root inside him.

He both hated the Jianzhou and feared them.

This contradictory emotion prevented him from confidently declaring,

"Good. Launch the counterattack."

Instead he hesitated.

"Lord Lu... do you truly believe this is the right moment?"

"What if our counterattack fails and instead gives the Jianzhou an opportunity?"

Lu Xiangsheng answered firmly.

"I have analyzed the situation carefully. This is absolutely the best opportunity."

"If Your Majesty agrees, we can order the King of Joseon to cooperate."

"We can also send envoys to Mongolia, promising border trade."

"The Mongols will certainly support us."

"Three armies attacking together will permanently eliminate the Jianzhou threat."

Zhu Youjian scratched his head awkwardly.

"Many years ago there was a man named Yuan Chonghuan."

"He once made a similar promise to me."

"He said Liaodong would be pacified within five years."

"I believed him at the time."

"You saw how that ended."

"I have been afraid of such promises ever since."

Lu Xiangsheng had no answer.

That was... awkward.

Zhu Youjian thought and thought.

He wanted to destroy the Jianzhou.

Yet he also feared provoking them.

He wanted to eliminate the threat forever.

Yet he also feared that Ming might instead be destroyed.

Inside his mind two little figures appeared.

One white.

One black.

They fought fiercely for quite some time, sweating and struggling, yet neither side could win.

Finally Zhu Youjian sighed.

"I cannot decide."

"Let us do this."

"I will summon the court officials."

"We will hold a meeting at Anding Gate."

"Everyone will listen to your proposal."

"Then we will decide whether to launch a counterattack."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded.

"Very well. I will make sure the ministers understand that this is our best opportunity."

Early the next morning.

Inside the inner city of Beijing.

At Anding Gate.

The court ministers had been summoned before sunrise.

They sat in neat rows outside the gate like children sitting together waiting for fruit to be distributed.

Emperor Zhu Youjian sat high on the city wall above the gate.

Below him the ministers stood in several rows across the square.

They whispered among themselves, having no idea why the emperor had summoned them.

Only a few eunuchs close to the emperor knew the topic of the meeting.

Gao Qiqian was one of them.

He sat among several senior eunuchs while watching Lu Xiangsheng prepare his speech.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

So.

This fellow Lu had refused to show him proper respect on his first day in the capital.

Very well.

Today he would return the favor.

Soon Lu Xiangsheng stepped forward.

He had already memorized everything he intended to say.

The moment he began speaking, he launched into an impassioned speech that lasted nearly half an hour.

He explained every reason for launching a counterattack.

He laid out the strategic advantages.

He even pointed out that the roving rebels inside the empire had already been suppressed, meaning domestic affairs were stable and the empire could now focus entirely on external enemies.

He believed that after hearing such a speech, many officials would support him.

Unfortunately he had misjudged the situation.

Ever since the Tianqi era, the Qing had repeatedly beaten Ming forces in battle.

For more than ten years the capital officials had lived under that shadow.

Their courage had long since been broken.

Just like the emperor, they both hated the Qing and feared them.

They wanted to destroy them.

But they were also afraid of provoking them.

After Lu Xiangsheng finished speaking, the entire square fell silent.

Not a single person said anything for quite some time.

Lu Xiangsheng blinked in confusion.

This reaction was completely different from what he had expected.

At that moment Gao Qiqian finally spoke.

"Your Majesty, esteemed ministers, please allow me to say a few words."

"My view of the situation beyond the Great Wall is completely different from Lord Lu's."

Chapter 1309 What Are We Supposed to Do Now?

Gao Qiqian had long been regarded by Zhu Youjian as the eunuch who understood military affairs the best.

The moment he opened his mouth, the emperor immediately turned his attention toward him.

"Gao Aiqing, speak freely. Let us hear your thoughts."

Gao Qiqian folded his sleeves calmly.

"Just now, Lord Lu mentioned that Pi Island has stabilized under the support of coastal commander Cao Wenzhao."

"However, everyone here knows that Pi Island sits isolated overseas and has never been very obedient to the court."

"There have been multiple rebellions there."

"A large number of traitors have come from that place."

"Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, Shang Kexi. Which one of them did not jump out from Pi Island?"

Zhu Youjian hesitated.

"Well... that is true."

Gao Qiqian continued smoothly.

"Pi Island is unreliable."

"And the King of Joseon is even less reliable."

"Joseon is weak and easily bullied."

"Even if they send troops to help us, what good would it do?"

"The Jianzhou could dispatch a single general and crush them in two or three moves."

"They would be of no real help at all."

Zhu Youjian nodded repeatedly.

"Yes, yes, that makes sense."

Gao Qiqian went on.

"As for the Mongols, we do not know what medicine they have taken recently that makes them harass the Jianzhou so frequently."

"But the Mongols have always been enemies of the Ming."

"They are like snakes and rats, swaying from side to side."

"How can we be certain they will truly help us?"

"Just opening border trade markets will win them over?"

"You are thinking too optimistically."

Lu Xiangsheng immediately replied.

"The horse markets I opened in Xuanfu and Datong have already traded with the Mongols many times."

"There have been no problems."

"They quite like it."

Gao Qiqian sneered.

"That is aiding the enemy."

"It is no different from the Shanxi merchants supplying goods to the Jianzhou."

"The Mongols buy salt, tea, and iron pots from you."

"Turn around and those very goods become weapons used against the Ming."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"That is not the case."

"They have become our friends."

Gao Qiqian laughed coldly.

"The Mongols becoming friends with us?"

"That is impossible."

The argument between the two men made many ministers below the platform frown deeply.

Some officials who had served on the frontier began quietly pondering.

Can the Mongols really become allies?

Maybe yes.

Maybe no.

Hard to say.

Zhu Youjian himself was growing uneasy.

Compared to Lu Xiangsheng, he instinctively trusted the eunuch who had grown up beside him inside the palace.

So he could not help leaning toward Gao Qiqian.

"Gao Aiqing, are you saying we should not launch a counterattack?"

"Correct," Gao Qiqian replied calmly. "We should not counterattack."

The crowd erupted.

Lu Xiangsheng's face flushed with anger.

"If we do not counterattack, should we simply allow the Jianzhou to keep beating us?"

Gao Qiqian waved his hand.

"That is not what I mean."

"The Jianzhou are currently attacked on multiple fronts."

"This is precisely the best time to pacify them."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

The ministers froze.

Pacify?

This required a bit of explanation.

When the Ming court dealt with roving rebels, they often used the word pacify.

The meaning was condescending.

A great power soothing rebellious peasants.

However things were different with the Manchu Jianzhou.

In truth, many officials in the capital knew perfectly well that Ming could not defeat them.

So the idea of "pacifying" them was nonsense.

What they actually meant was negotiating peace.

But openly saying peace negotiations would damage the dignity of the Celestial Empire.

How could the great Ming dynasty negotiate peace with a bunch of Jianzhou slaves and Tungusic forest hunters?

That sounded humiliating.

Therefore court officials preferred to use a nicer phrase.

Pacification.

So when Gao Qiqian said,

"Now is the time to pacify them,"

what he truly meant was,

Now is the time to negotiate peace.

When Lu Xiangsheng had earlier proposed war, the ministers had remained silent.

But the moment the word pacify appeared, everyone suddenly became energetic.

A senior official stood up immediately.

"Pacification is good!"

"Excellent!"

"After all, the Jianzhou are merely our Jianzhou slaves who rebelled."

"They are not very different from the bandits we already pacified."

"Since we have pacified so many rebels, why not pacify the Jianzhou as well?"

"Right now they are surrounded by enemies and suffering great difficulties."

"If we send envoys to negotiate peace, the results will surely be excellent."

"They will withdraw their troops obediently and cease invading our borders."

Lu Xiangsheng nearly exploded.

"The Jianzhou cannot be compared with bandits!"

"This is exactly the moment to strike while they are weak!"

"Why would we give them time to recover by negotiating peace?"

Another minister stood up and bowed.

"Your Majesty."

"We spent a great deal of money suppressing the rebels recently."

"The national treasury is still empty."

"If we now launch a campaign to retake Liaodong, the treasury will be under even greater strain."

"Why not pacify the Jianzhou during this opportunity?"

"Once the war stops, we can focus on governance and replenish the treasury."

Hearing this, Zhu Youjian felt deeply tempted.

Lu Xiangsheng shouted angrily.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!"

"If we miss it, once Joseon and the Mongols can no longer restrain the Jianzhou, they will invade again."

"At that time the Ming dynasty will be in grave danger!"

Gao Qiqian scoffed.

"Alarmist nonsense."

Lu Xiangsheng clenched his fists.

"Military opportunities cannot be missed."

"If lost, they will never return."

At this moment, Zhu Youjian had already made up his mind.

He would listen to Gao Qiqian.

After all, when it came down to it, he trusted eunuchs more.

Just as he was about to finalize the decision, something unexpected happened.

A senior eunuch who had remained silent the entire time suddenly spoke.

Cao Huachun.

"I believe Lord Lu is correct."

Before he spoke, every minister had been supporting Gao Qiqian.

The moment he spoke, the entire atmosphere froze.

A high official who had just supported Gao Qiqian suddenly changed sides.

"Ah... now that I think about it, Lord Lu actually makes some sense."

Another official stood up.

"After careful thought, I believe Lord Lu is correct."

"Military opportunity must not be missed."

"I support the counterattack."

Gao Qiqian was startled.

Why was Cao Huachun opposing him?

He turned and stared at the other eunuch.

Cao Huachun looked back.

Their eyes collided in midair.

For the first time, sparks flew between the two great palace eunuchs.

Gao Qiqian could not understand.

Why would Cao Huachun oppose him?

In truth, Cao Huachun himself felt surprised.

He had not expected to help an outside official.

But somehow he had spoken anyway.

Only when he saw Gao Qiqian's hostile glare did he realize something.

Deep inside his heart, he still possessed a tiny fragment of conscience.

He wanted the Ming dynasty to survive.

He did not want personal grudges to destroy the best opportunity the empire had.

At this moment, Cao Huachun was experiencing the brightest moment of his life.

Zhu Youjian had almost finalized the decision.

But the moment Cao Huachun spoke, his mind wavered again.

After all, Cao Huachun was also a eunuch he trusted.

On the left stood Gao Qiqian.

On the right stood Cao Huachun.

The flesh in his left palm.

The flesh in his right palm.

Both mattered.

So what was he supposed to do now?

Chapter 1310 Shut Down the Corridor

Counterattack, or negotiate surrender?

Zhu Youjian suddenly found himself in an awkward position.

The senior officials gathered beneath Anding Gate split into two factions almost instantly.

Officials in the capital had world class skill when it came to reading the wind. One eunuch speaks and everyone supports him. Two eunuchs speak and the court conveniently divides into two halves, each side backing one of them.

Simple.

"I support a counterattack!"

"I support negotiation!"

"I damn well despise you muscle brains who only know how to fight."

"And I damn well despise spineless cowards like you."

"Your Majesty, Lord Lu is correct."

"Your Majesty, Eunuch Gao is the one who is right."

"Your Majesty..."

At this moment, Li Dao Xuan was sharing perception through the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Hu Dawei's chest, watching the ridiculous scene with cold amusement.

If you said these officials were stupid, that would not be entirely fair. Their ability to read the political wind was first rate. Their brains spun faster than windmills.

But if you said they were intelligent, well... when they acted stupid, they could redefine the very meaning of the word.

Pitiful and ridiculous. Ridiculous and tragic.

Hu Dawei lowered his head and whispered quietly.

"Tianzun, these useless officials... once we take the capital in the future, we will drive them all out, right?"

Li Dao Xuan replied softly.

"Yes. Not one of them will remain."

Hu Dawei asked again.

"What should we do in this situation?"

Li Dao Xuan chuckled quietly.

"Nothing at all. Let them argue."

"Given Zhu Youjian's temperament, he will eventually allow Lu Xiangsheng and Gao Qiqian to each command a force. One will counterattack. The other will defend."

Hu Dawei blinked.

"Wouldn't that split the army? That would cut our combat power in half."

Li Dao Xuan smiled.

"Exactly. But it does not matter."

"The half under Gao Qiqian is useless anyway. We might as well not count them."

"As long as Lu Xiangsheng receives the imperial order to counterattack, you can advance naturally. Bring the militia and push toward Liaodong from the front."

"At the same time Mongolia and Pi Island will attack from the other directions. Three sides closing in."

Hu Dawei nodded immediately.

"I obey the divine decree."

Then he muttered again.

"Tianzun... honestly, we could launch a mutiny right now and remove Zhu Youjian from the throne. We could easily install another obedient emperor. Why go through all this trouble?"

The embroidered Tianzun smiled.

"The Qing has not yet been defeated."

"If we create internal chaos now, the soldiers still stationed in Liaodong might begin to waver."

"And when soldiers start wavering, the most likely outcome is defection to the Qing."

"Right now those men are still good people. There is no need to test human nature and push them into becoming traitors."

"It is better to destroy the Qing first."

"After that, dealing with Zhu Youjian will be easy."

Hu Dawei finally understood and sighed with admiration.

"Tianzun is truly benevolent."

While they spoke quietly here, the massive argument among the officials had also finally reached its end.

Two grand eunuchs arguing would never produce a result anyway. The outcome was always fifty fifty.

In the end Zhu Youjian slammed the decision down.

"Enough arguing."

"You all make valid points."

"Lu Xiangsheng will lead the army to counterattack."

"Gao Qiqian, you will take command of the Guanning Army and focus on defense. At the same time send envoys to contact the Jianzhou forces and see whether they are willing to accept pacification."

The ministers immediately stopped arguing.

They bowed together.

"Your Majesty is wise."

Lu Xiangsheng stood there feeling both frustrated and speechless.

Fine.

So be it.

Early the next morning Lu Xiangsheng led his army out of the capital.

The famous general Wang Pu, who had once "defeated" the Jianzhou forces, remained behind to guard the Imperial Estates and protect Zhu Youjian.

Lu Xiangsheng himself marched northeast with two commanders.

Yang Guozhu, Commander of Xuanfu.

Hu Dawei, Commander of Shanxi.

He turned back to inspect the troops.

Yang Guozhu had brought three thousand soldiers.

Hu Dawei had also brought three thousand.

Together with Lu Xiangsheng's own three thousand Tianxiong Army troops, the total force amounted to nine thousand men.

Nine thousand.

For a counterattack?

Lu Xiangsheng sighed heavily the moment they left the city.

"Forget it. A true counterattack is impossible with these numbers."

"We should focus on defense."

"Yang Guozhu, take the vanguard and ride ahead to Shunyi. Scout the Jianzhou cavalry and determine their current situation."

He sent Yang Guozhu as the vanguard instead of Hu Dawei for a simple reason.

Yang Guozhu commanded the frontier troops of Xuanfu. In Lu Xiangsheng's mind, frontier soldiers were naturally tougher fighters.

Hu Dawei's Shanxi troops, on the other hand, were likely weaker. Better to keep them close to the Tianxiong Army so they could at least support the formation instead of dying uselessly.

Yang Guozhu accepted the order and rode off.

Now only Hu Dawei remained beside Lu Xiangsheng.

At that moment Hu Dawei leaned closer and grinned.

"Lord Lu, I have a strategic idea."

Lu Xiangsheng raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Let's hear it."

Hu Dawei said,

"This Jianzhou invasion route is extremely unusual."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"Why do you say that?"

Hu Dawei explained.

"The Guanning defenses are still in Ming hands. In previous invasions the Jianzhou forces entered through the Mongolian grasslands."

"But now the Mongols are no longer obeying them. In fact they are harassing Jianzhou in the north."

"So this time the Jianzhou army definitely did not use the Mongolian route."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded.

"That makes sense. Then how did they enter?"

Hu Dawei answered.

"Jinzhou."

"The Jianzhou army must have passed through Jinzhou, then ridden along the southern edge of the Mongolian grasslands before rushing into Northern Zhili."

"In other words, their route is like a narrow corridor."

"If we defeat the Jianzhou army in front of us while simultaneously cutting off that corridor..."

"Then the raiding cavalry that entered the pass will have no way back."

Lu Xiangsheng thought carefully for a moment.

Then his eyes lit up.

"Excellent!"

"This could be a perfect opportunity to annihilate the Jianzhou vanguard."

"Defeating them in open battle might not be too difficult. After all, this is only their advance force."

"But cutting off the corridor behind them..."

"That means striking at Jinzhou."

Hu Dawei nodded.

"Exactly."

"I suggest leaving Yang Guozhu to hold Shunyi. Wang Pu remains in Shuntian Prefecture and can reinforce at any time. Gao Qiqian's capital army will also defend the capital."

"With those three forces the capital will be safe."

"Meanwhile the two of us sail by sea. We ask the coastal commander Cao Wenzhao to receive us. Once aboard ships we strike directly toward Jinzhou."

"Take the city as quickly as possible and the corridor will collapse."

"When that happens, Dorgon may find it easy to enter the pass..."

"But returning will be another matter entirely."

Lu Xiangsheng inhaled sharply.

"This plan is extremely bold."

"The man currently guarding Jinzhou is not someone easy to deal with."

Indeed.

At this time the commander stationed in Jinzhou was a very famous general.

One of the three great figures of Liaodong.

Zu Dashou.

Back then Zu Dashou had killed He Kegang and surrendered to the Qing.

But not long afterward he found an excuse to escape back to Jinzhou, slammed the city gates shut, and betrayed the Qing again.

Hong Taiji wrote letters ordering him to cooperate with Qing attacks against the Ming.

Zu Dashou ignored them.

Zhu Youjian summoned him to return to Ming command.

Zu Dashou ignored that too.

He simply hid inside Jinzhou and refused to listen to anyone.

Not the Ming.

Not the Qing.

Whoever you were, he did not care.