

Great Ming 1311

Chapter 1311 There Is a Novel Here

Lu Xiangsheng knew very well how difficult Zu Dashou was to deal with, and how hard Jinzhou would be to capture.

During the Battle of Daling River, how many troops had the Jianzhou forces mobilized? How long had they besieged the city before finally defeating Zu Dashou?

And now he was supposed to rush over with this tiny force and take Jinzhou in a surprise attack?

That sounded a bit... overly optimistic.

He hesitated.

Hu Dawei, however, clenched his fists.

"The blood feud of Instructor He must be avenged."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"...What?"

Hu Dawei froze for a moment.

"Ah... right. I forgot you haven't read A Small Border Soldier at the Daling River."

Lu Xiangsheng looked puzzled.

"What is A Small Border Soldier at the Daling River?"

Hu Dawei scratched his head.

"A movie... uh... well, movies are not very convenient to watch. So instead I brought the novel version adapted from the film. Written personally by the famous author Sun Chuanting. Want to read it?"

Lu Xiangsheng had absolutely no interest in novels at the moment.

But the moment he heard the name Sun Chuanting, his interest rose immediately.

Sun Chuanting's essays were extremely famous in the court.

So he accepted the book.

On the cover were several bold characters:

"A Small Border Soldier at the Daling River."

Below that it said:

Adapted from the film of the same name. Authorized by Huahua World Celebrity Agency. Written by Sun Chuanting.

He flipped open the cover and saw the publisher.

Puzhou Publishing House.

A string of question marks spun slowly inside Lu Xiangsheng's head.

What exactly was going on with this book?

Why did it look so... official?

What movie? What celebrity agency? Why did a book need so many strange labels printed on the cover?

Still...

Since Sun Chuanting had written it, he might as well take a look.

So he opened it.

And within seconds he was pulled into the story.

Sun Chuanting's writing was excellent. The novel was vivid and gripping, and the story itself was based on real events.

The reading experience was intense.

When Lu Xiangsheng reached the part where Zu Dashou killed He Kegang, he became so furious that he nearly fell off his horse.

He roared in anger.

"Move out!"

"We march on Jinzhou and twist Zu Dashou's head off his neck."

Hu Dawei blinked.

"Lord Lu... just a moment ago you said Jinzhou would be difficult to attack. We only have six thousand men. That is not enough."

Lu Xiangsheng snorted.

"I do not care!"

"That two faced snake Zu Dashou must die."

He shouted twice.

Then he gradually calmed down.

The emotions from the novel slowly faded, and reality returned.

His voice lowered again.

"Zu Dashou may be despicable, but he is still one of the three great generals of Liaodong."

"Jinzhou has strong walls and many troops. It is not a place we can attack lightly."

"We must consider this carefully."

Hu Dawei secretly admired him.

As expected of Lord Lu. He could shout in anger one moment and regain calm rational judgment the next. That was the bearing of a true general.

Hu Dawei spoke quietly.

"Lord Lu, we do not actually have only six thousand soldiers."

Lu Xiangsheng looked over.

"Oh? Who else?"

Hu Dawei replied.

"We also have the coastal commander Cao Wenzhao."

"If he sends ships to transport us to Jinzhou, his troops can naturally join the battle as well."

"You are the Minister of War. You can simply order him to cooperate."

Lu Xiangsheng's spirits immediately lifted.

"Cao Wenzhao is one of the great generals of our age. With his help, our strength will increase considerably."

Hu Dawei continued.

"And once General Cao arrives, the garrison of Pi Island will surely join us as well."

Lu Xiangsheng gave a surprised sound.

"Wait... if that is the case..."

He quickly calculated in his head.

"Our total force could reach fifteen thousand men?"

"And Cao Wenzhao's Guanning cavalry, along with Shen Shikui's Pi Island garrison, are all battle hardened elite troops. They are far superior to the interior garrison soldiers."

Lu Xiangsheng's mind began racing.

Fifteen thousand soldiers.

His own three thousand Tianxiong Army were highly capable fighters.

Cao Wenzhao's Guanning cavalry were also famous.

If Shen Shikui's Pi Island troops joined them, that would be another powerful reinforcement.

The only slightly weaker force would be Hu Dawei's three thousand Shanxi soldiers.

But that was not a serious problem. They could simply stay close to the stronger units.

With this many troops...

If they launched a surprise attack, capturing Jinzhou might actually be possible.

At the very least, it was worth trying.

"Good!"

Lu Xiangsheng issued the order immediately.

"The entire army will march to Tianjin."

"Send a messenger to Cao Wenzhao. Tell him to dispatch ships to Tianjin Port to pick up our forces. We will travel by sea and launch a surprise attack on Jinzhou."

The messenger galloped off at full speed to notify the coastal commander Cao Wenzhao.

Officially, Cao Wenzhao claimed to be stationed with the navy at Dengzhou.

Meanwhile Lu Xiangsheng led his army toward Tianjin Port.

The distance from the capital to Tianjin was roughly three hundred li by land. The army marched for several days before finally arriving.

When they reached the harbor, Lu Xiangsheng looked out over the sea.

Not a single ship was visible.

His heart tightened slightly.

Would Cao Wenzhao actually obey the order?

These days many regional generals commanded their own armies and ignored court authority. Cao Wenzhao had always been fairly obedient, but who knew when someone might suddenly change their mind?

Just as he was thinking about these possibilities, Hu Dawei suddenly shouted.

"Lord Lu, look! General Cao's fleet has arrived!"

Lu Xiangsheng looked out over the sea again.

This time he saw it clearly.

A vast fleet of ships was approaching from the horizon.

The ships had actually been nearby earlier. But none of them had sails, so when Lu Xiangsheng glanced across the water before, he had assumed the sea was empty.

Now that he looked carefully, there were ships everywhere.

And they were enormous.

Even the smallest vessels were as large as the Ming navy's Cangshan ships.

The largest stretched more than twenty zhang in length.

Lu Xiangsheng stared in astonishment.

"Wait... Cao Wenzhao commands such a massive fleet?"

"And these ships are so large."

"Has the Ming navy really become this powerful? Why does the Minister of War know nothing about it?"

Hu Dawei coughed lightly.

"You only just took office recently. It is normal that there are things you do not yet know."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded slowly.

"That... is reasonable."

After all, he had been appointed Minister of War during a crisis. Only a few days after arriving in the capital he was already leading troops into battle again. He had never had time to study the situation of military forces across the empire.

The enormous fleet soon arrived before them.

On the deck of the leading ship stood two energetic generals.

Cao Wenzhao and Cao Bianjiao, uncle and nephew.

They cupped their fists in greeting.

"Lord Lu!"

Back when Lu Xiangsheng had been suppressing rebel forces in Henan and Huguang, he had fought alongside the Cao family uncle and nephew. They had worked together to encircle roving rebels, so they were old comrades.

Lu Xiangsheng trusted them deeply.

He laughed and called out.

"General Cao, it has been a long time!"

"You are doing quite well as the coastal commander. Just look at this fleet of yours. The scale is incredible."

"These ships are enormous. Where did you get them?"

"And how can they sail without sails?"

Cao Wenzhao laughed.

"We captured them from the Westerners. The foreigners have all sorts of strange contraptions."

"Oh!"

Since they were captured from foreigners, Lu Xiangsheng did not ask further questions.

He waved his hand and ordered his troops to board the ships.

Three thousand Tianxiong Army soldiers began boarding.

Three thousand Shanxi troops followed.

The Tianxiong soldiers stepped onto the ships cautiously.

But the Shanxi soldiers...

They were exchanging glances with the Gao Village militia sailors aboard the ships.

Eyebrows raised.

Eyes flashing.

They looked like people who had just spotted long lost relatives.

They were only one step away from hugging each other on the spot.

Chapter 1312 Chen Qianhu Has Arrived Too

Back on the deck, both sides had only exchanged glances, pretending they did not know each other.

But the moment they stepped into the cabin, somewhere Lu Xiangsheng could not see, the Shanxi soldiers and the sailors instantly threw their arms over each other's shoulders.

"HAHA! Kid, it's you?"

"Back then you joined the Xiaolangdi militia while I went to the Shanxi militia. Never thought we'd run into each other here."

"Heh. I already moved up. From Xiaolangdi militia to a navy soldier."

"I'm in the army now. Different branch entirely."

"So what? Remember Xiao Sanzi from our squad back then?"

"Of course."

"That guy joined the air force."

"The air force?"

"Yeah. Their benefits is amazing. I heard his pay is fifty percent higher than ours."

"Holy hell. Now you got me wanting to switch to the air force."

"Not that easy. Their physical requirements are brutal."

"By the way... looks like we're heading to attack Jinzhou this time."

"Right. The same Jinzhou mentioned in A Small Soldier by the Daling River. That damned Zu Dashou."

"He was the one who killed Instructor He."

"But Instructor He is still alive though."

"Exactly. That means we need revenge even more."

"Right! We're going to avenge Instructor He!"

Similar conversations broke out across ship after ship.

Soon the soldiers were shouting in unison.

"Take Jinzhou!"

"Avenge our grievance!"

The roars spread through the entire fleet.

Lu Xiangsheng heard the shouts echoing everywhere and felt rather surprised.

He turned to Cao Wenzhao.

"Your soldiers have incredible morale. The expedition hasn't even begun and they're already roaring like thunder. Seems I don't even need to give them a pre-battle speech."

Cao Wenzhao chuckled.

Cao Bianjiao smiled awkwardly.

"Well... you see... they might have a tiny bit of personal grievance involved."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"Personal grievance?"

He thought about it for several seconds.

Then realization dawned.

Of course.

Cao Wenzhao's troops were the Guanning Cavalry. They had fought outside the passes for years. It would not be strange if they had private grudges with Zu Dashou.

Yes.

That must be it.

The fleet was just about to depart.

Suddenly another group came running along the shore, shouting toward the ships.

"Wait for us! We're coming too!"

The sailors looked closely and immediately recognized them.

It was the six hundred Guyuan frontier soldiers that Sun Chuanting had brought to the capital earlier.

Leading them was the terrifying and infamous figure.

Chen Qianhu.

Sun Chuanting was currently cooling his heels in the capital, but letting six hundred frontier soldiers sit idle would be a terrible waste. Naturally they had come running to join the expedition.

The sailors on the ships burst out laughing the moment they saw Chen Qianhu.

"Oh no!"

"Zu Dashou must have heard we're launching a surprise attack on Jinzhou!"

"He got here first and is launching a surprise attack on Tianjin Port!"

"Brothers! Fire the cannons at Zu Dashou!"

The sailors laughed wildly.

One cannon that had not even been loaded slowly rotated and aimed at Chen Qianhu's group.

Chen Qianhu exploded in anger.

"Damn it! What kind of training did you receive at the military academy?"

"Loaded or not, you never point a gun or cannon at your own people!"

"Who turned that cannon just now? Lock him up for a day!"

His scolding made perfect sense.

The artillery battalion commander immediately dragged out a clueless young recruit and threw him into a small cabin for confinement. He also apologized to Chen Qianhu.

Chen Qianhu grumbled a bit but did not pursue the matter further.

He led his men onto several transport ships.

The sailors and Shanxi soldiers all stared at him with strange expressions.

After all, he was the actor who played Zu Dashou.

Boarding this ship felt extremely awkward.

Chen Qianhu took one look at their expressions and instantly knew what they were thinking.

He felt miserable.

His eyes darted around the ship.

"Where's the reporter? The war correspondent?"

"Brother Chen, I'm right here."

Sure enough, there was a reporter aboard.

It was the veteran war correspondent Zhou Daya.

She used to report on the anti-bandit campaigns in the Central Plains, but now that the roving rebels had been wiped out, she had moved to Liaodong.

Behind her followed a special operations team carrying a door sized miniature camera.

Zhou Daya's style had always been soft.

Soft voice. Soft smile.

She smiled sweetly.

"Brother Chen, what do you need from your little sister?"

Chen Qianhu said quickly,

"Good. You're here."

"This time I'm going to Jinzhou personally to chop off Zu Dashou's dog head."

"You must film that moment."

"I want everyone to see that I am a good man. A GOOD MAN!"

"I'm a good person, understand?"

Zhou Daya smiled gently.

"Brother Chen, you seem especially fierce today. Why are you so obsessed with Zu Dashou?"

The question nearly brought Chen Qianhu to tears.

Truth be told, he had not been that famous before.

Yes, his face looked terrifying, but the impact was limited. At most his fellow soldiers were afraid of him.

But everything changed because he made two films.

The first one was Mu Guiying.

In that film he played the Liao general Xiao Tianzuo.

That role established his image as a villain.

Then came the second film.

A Small Soldier by the Daling River.

In that movie he played Zu Dashou.

If the first film was just the prelude, the second one was the grand climax.

The character of Zu Dashou completely locked him into the role of "the man responsible for every evil in the world."

His fame skyrocketed.

During Mu Guiying, only children sprayed him with bamboo water guns.

After A Small Soldier by the Daling River, both adults and children wanted to beat him up.

How could Chen Qianhu possibly accept that?

He bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"I fell because of Zu Dashou."

"So I must stand back up because of Zu Dashou."

He leaned extremely close to the camera.

"You're filming, right? Good."

His terrifying face filled the entire lens.

He snarled at the audience.

"Dear viewers watching at home."

"Just wait and see."

"I'm going to chop Zu Dashou into seventeen or eighteen pieces and mail them back to you!"

Zhou Daya hurriedly waved her hands.

"Brother Chen, don't get so close to the camera."

"If you're too close the image will distort. It will make your face look even more terrifying."

Chen Qianhu froze.

"What?"

Unfortunately it was already too late.

The camera had recorded everything.

Several days later, when this footage was broadcast on the giant screens in the marketplaces of Xi'an, Puzhou, Gao Family Village, Pingyang Prefecture, Luoyang, and every Tianzun liberated region...

The audience saw a monstrous, twisted face filling the entire massive screen.

The terrifying figure bared his white teeth and said in a chilling voice:

"I'm going to chop him into seventeen or eighteen pieces and mail them back to you."

People watching the screens turned pale with fright.

That night many of them could not sleep.

The moment they closed their eyes, they imagined Chen Qianhu standing there holding a bloody chunk of meat, grinning wickedly.

"This is Zu Dashou's meat."

"I mailed it back for you to eat."

"Don't be ungrateful."

"Eat it."

"Eat it!"

Seriously.

Who could handle that?

Chapter 1313 I Was Worried for Nothing

Lu Xiangsheng pointed at the ship Chen Qianhu had just boarded.

"The ship next to us looks lively. That newly arrived reinforcement unit seems very popular."

Cao Bianjiao smiled and explained,

"Those are the household troops of the former Minister of War, Sun Chuanting. They've met our men before, so they're chatting."

"I see."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded.

"Even though Lord Sun has been sidelined by the Emperor, he still thinks about serving the country. He even sent his personal troops to support this campaign. Truly admirable."

The fleet set sail.

Following the coastline, they headed toward Jinzhou.

Several hours later, evening arrived.

It was time for dinner.

Sailors on every ship began preparing food.

The Tianxiong Army had not brought much with them. Each soldier carried only a few days' worth of dry rations. Launching such a long-distance raid on Jinzhou meant logistics would be a serious concern.

Lu Xiangsheng could not help turning to Cao Wenzhao.

"Commander Cao, our supply line will probably depend on you. If we retake Jinzhou, your fleet will need to transport grain from Tianjin."

Cao Wenzhao nodded and agreed on the surface.

But in his mind he thought something very different.

There was no way their military supplies could rely on Tianjin.

If they depended on the court's provisions, the soldiers would starve sooner or later.

Their real supplies would have to come from Dengzhou.

By now the Dengzhou Navy had practically taken the shape of Tianzun's system.

Gao Village had sent large numbers of transport ships carrying massive quantities of military supplies. These were transferred through Dengzhou, then shipped onward to Pi Island and Dandong.

Dengzhou had already become a crucial supply port.

Of course, Lu Xiangsheng had no idea about any of this.

He was still worrying whether Gao Qiqian might sabotage the supply line when the cooks carried a table onto the bow deck.

They set it down and began placing dishes in front of Lu Xiangsheng, Cao Wenzhao, and the others.

"Gentlemen, dinner is served."

Lu Xiangsheng glanced at the table.

Then he blinked.

There were several plates. Fish and shrimp, nothing unusual there.

But one particular dish caught his attention.

It was a kind of meat cut into neat square cubes.

Lu Xiangsheng had seen this before.

Back when he served as the Yunyang Pacification Commissioner, the garrison officer Luo Xi had once given him some in Shangnan. Flat Rabbit had even transported large quantities of it to relieve famine victims near Shennongjia.

The food was called luncheon meat.

A rather rare item.

After a brief moment of confusion, Lu Xiangsheng asked,

"Where did this meat come from?"

Cao Bianjiao was just about to make up some excuse.

At that moment a figure appeared at the cabin entrance, stretching lazily as he walked out.

"Oh? Dinner already? I definitely can't miss dinner."

Everyone turned to look.

It was the naval combat specialized version of Tianzun.

Well... more precisely, Li Dao Xuan.

Everyone knew one thing about Tianzun.

He loved eating.

Especially seafood.

Being a deity who had originally lived inland, he had not eaten much seafood before. Now he frequently came to the navy just to join their meals.

Cao Wenzhao and the others were about to salute with "Greetings, Tianzun."

But Lu Xiangsheng was standing right there.

So they quickly changed it into a polite greeting.

"Master Li, you're awake."

Li Dao Xuan grinned.

"Yep. Woke up and thought I'd come out for a stroll."

Lu Xiangsheng looked at Li Dao Xuan and let out a surprised sound.

He and Li Dao Xuan were actually old acquaintances.

Back when he served in Yunyang, he had met him at Luo Xi's garrison in Shangnan.

Later, during the anti-bandit campaigns in Huguang, Li Dao Xuan had also provided supplies.

He never expected to meet him here.

"Master Li, so you came as well."

Li Dao Xuan smiled.

"General Cao is a friend of mine. If he comes to Liaodong, I naturally come to lend a hand."

He added casually,

"And Lord Lu is an old friend too. If you need anything, just say the word."

Lu Xiangsheng pointed at the luncheon meat on the table.

"I was wondering about this earlier. Now that I see you here, it all makes sense."

"You have been supporting the army with your personal wealth, from suppressing bandits to reclaiming Liaodong. Your patriotic heart is truly admirable."

"Small matter, small matter."

Li Dao Xuan clearly had no interest in small talk.

He rushed straight to the table and scanned the dishes.

"Bohai Bay shrimp. Heh, I like these."

"Three spotted swimming crab. Now that's good stuff."

He plopped down in a seat and immediately grabbed a crab, cracking it open without ceremony.

The people from Gao Village were already used to Tianzun showing off his eating skills.

They quickly sat down as well.

Hu Dawei even started peeling shrimp for him.

Carefully removing every shell, even pulling out the shrimp vein before placing it in Li Dao Xuan's hand.

"Here, try this."

Li Dao Xuan dipped it into seafood soy sauce and tossed it into his mouth.

"Ah. Nice. Very nice."

Cao Bianjiao added,

"Try this too. A specialty of these waters. It's called Spanish mackerel. The meat is excellent."

Li Dao Xuan immediately picked up a piece with his chopsticks.

"Not bad, not bad. Coming here occasionally for a free meal is pretty great. Always something new to try."

Lu Xiangsheng watched all this with a confused expression.

This Master Li...

He eats like this and still doesn't get fat?

Wait a minute.

The table was filled with imperial generals.

Why were all of them serving him food?

Who exactly was in charge here?

Lu Xiangsheng decided to test the situation.

If these generals treated Master Li as their leader, then he must also be the one making decisions in battle.

Lu Xiangsheng spoke.

"Gentlemen, regarding the strategy for the surprise attack on Jinzhou, I would like to hear everyone's opinions."

After saying this, he quietly observed.

Would they all wait for Master Li to speak?

But he quickly noticed something.

Master Li had zero interest in discussing strategy.

He was still focused entirely on devouring seafood.

The generals also showed no sign of waiting for his opinion.

Instead they immediately began discussing tactics.

Cao Wenzhao spoke first.

"Jinzhou lies more than forty li from the coastline. Naval artillery won't reach it."

"So we will have to rely heavily on portable cannons."

"My navy doesn't carry many of those."

He turned toward Hu Dawei.

Hu Dawei chuckled.

"Don't worry. I brought plenty."

"Before departing I already guessed we would be fighting alongside the Guanning Cavalry, the Tianxiong Army, Chen Qianhu, and the Pi Island forces."

"With all of you charging into melee, I probably won't have much chance to fight directly."

"So I figured I might as well bring a whole lot of artillery."

Cao Bianjiao immediately brightened.

"Lots of artillery? Excellent."

Lu Xiangsheng thought to himself.

Good.

Master Li clearly had no control over the army.

He didn't even participate in military discussions.

He really was just providing supplies.

Lu Xiangsheng sighed internally.

Looks like I worried for nothing earlier.

Chapter 1314 We Just Couldn't Get on the Same Wavelength

Several generals were discussing the plan with great enthusiasm.

Cao Wenzhao said,

"We land at dawn on the southern coast of Jinzhou. From there it is forty li over land. A full day's march will get us to the city. If we do not want to give Zu Dashou time to prepare, we must finish those forty li and immediately begin the siege. Only then can it count as a true surprise attack."

Cao Bianjiao nodded.

"So the soldiers will have to eat while marching. One day to cover forty li, finish their meals on the road, arrive beneath Jinzhou's walls, and start fighting immediately. Not a single minute wasted. Only then can we compress Zu Dashou's preparation time and catch him completely off guard."

The moment those words were spoken, Shen Shikui, the Pi Island commander, looked a little awkward.

"That is asking a lot of the soldiers' stamina. My troops might not be able to do that."

"No problem." Cao Bianjiao laughed.

"I already know your men cannot keep up. When we reach Jinzhou, our troops will go first. Your Pi Island forces can rest. By the time our soldiers finish the first round of fighting and grow tired, your men should be fully rested and ready to join the battle."

Shen Shikui nodded with relief.

"That sounds perfect."

Hearing this, Lu Xiangsheng felt a little shocked.

March forty li in a single day, arrive by evening, and immediately begin combat?

Were these people insane?

What kind of army could possibly do that?

His Tianxiong Army could manage it, certainly, but only with heavy rewards to motivate the soldiers. Without generous incentives, morale would never hold up.

Yet the group in front of him seemed to decide this as if it were nothing.

Only Shen Shikui had hesitated. Everyone else looked completely unconcerned.

Lu Xiangsheng could not help glancing toward Hu Dawei.

In his mind, the Shanxi Army should be the weakest force present.

March forty li and fight immediately afterward? Surely Shanxi troops could not manage that.

But when he looked over, Hu Dawei appeared perfectly calm. Not a trace of pressure on his face. In fact, he was smiling.

"You people do not need to rush once you arrive," Hu Dawei said cheerfully. "Wait until my men fire a few rounds first before charging. Especially you, Cao Bianjiao. You are always desperate to be the first one up the walls. Do not get yourself blown up by our own artillery."

Cao Bianjiao burst out laughing.

"What do you take me for, an idiot? If our cannons are still firing, why would I charge forward?"

The whole group erupted in laughter.

Lu Xiangsheng felt the strange feeling return again.

Why did it feel like they were all part of the same circle, while he was the outsider?

No, that had to be an illusion.

Perhaps it was simply because he was a civil official while they were all military men. Naturally they spoke the same language while he struggled to keep up.

Civil officials should talk with scholars.

Lu Xiangsheng turned toward Li Dao Xuan.

"Master Li..."

Crunch.

Li Dao Xuan bit clean through a crab leg.

Lu Xiangsheng paused.

"...Never mind."

Nearby, several generals continued their lively discussion. After a while another ship pulled alongside them and Chen Qianhu came aboard to join the conversation. The warriors chatted happily, completely absorbed.

Lu Xiangsheng stood there for quite a while without managing to insert a single word.

Only after they had finally finished did the generals suddenly remember that this matter still required Lu Xiangsheng's approval, at least in form.

So the entire group turned to look at him.

"Lord Lu," they asked, "what do you think of the tactics we just discussed? Is it feasible?"

Lu Xiangsheng replied calmly,

"As long as you believe your soldiers will still have the strength to fight after marching forty li, I have no objections."

Everyone brightened instantly.

"Looks like Lord Lu agrees!"

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"Wait. That counts as agreement?"

"Of course it does!"

"..."

Meanwhile, northeast of the capital.

Gao Qiqian had stationed the capital garrison troops on the western bank of the Chaobai River.

Not long ago he received intelligence that Jianzhou cavalry had been seen operating on the eastern side of the river.

The news terrified him.

Gao Qiqian was no brave battlefield commander. The troops under his command were the so called capital soldiers, pampered young masters from the city. Their combat strength was roughly on par with the early roving rebels.

The moment he heard that Jianzhou cavalry were nearby, his soul practically left his body.

"Report!"

A scout came running back.

"A detachment of Jianzhou cavalry is heading this way!"

"Oh hell."

Gao Qiqian nearly jumped out of his skin.

"We run."

One of the officers blinked.

"Run? Were we not sent out to intercept them?"

"Intercept my ass," Gao Qiqian snapped. "Running comes first."

The subordinates began to panic.

"But how do we run? If we retreat straight back to the capital, the Emperor will surely charge us with fleeing without fighting. The former Minister of War Zhang Fengyi killed himself because he feared exactly that accusation."

Gao Qiqian was sweating.

"Where is the Tianxiong Army of Minister of War Lu Xiangsheng? They are strong fighters. We will simply claim we got lost and accidentally wandered near them. With the Tianxiong Army around, the Jianzhou cavalry will not dare touch us."

The scout answered helplessly.

"Lu Xiangsheng appears to be doing something strange. He marched toward Tianjin."

The moment Gao Qiqian heard that, his entire face collapsed.

"He abandoned the capital and ran to Tianjin? What is he doing there?"

The scout replied,

"Possibly boarding ships to go somewhere. He has always advocated a counterattack. Maybe he plans to sail directly into Jianzhou territory."

Gao Qiqian cursed.

"That man must be insane. If the Jianzhou were so easy to defeat, the Great Ming would not have struggled with them for decades!"

The pampered capital soldiers were trembling.

"Eunuch Gao... what do we do now?"

Gao Qiqian asked urgently,

"Where is the nearest friendly force?"

"In Shunyi. Yang Guozhu, the Xuanfu commander, has troops stationed there."

Gao Qiqian slapped his thigh.

"Good. We go find Yang Guozhu and link up with him."

He immediately led his army toward Shunyi.

But they had barely marched a few li when thunderous hoofbeats suddenly erupted behind them.

Gao Qiqian turned his head.

The color drained from his face.

Jianzhou cavalry.

Leading them was none other than Dorgon.

Gao Qiqian screamed,

"Do not come any closer!"

Run.

Run with all their might.

The capital soldiers under him had zero desire to fight. They sprinted away with everything they had.

Their reaction actually left Dorgon momentarily confused.

In truth, Dorgon's scouting cavalry had long since scattered. He only had about five hundred riders with him, roaming the countryside to gather supplies and loot small villages.

After passing several villages without finding any civilians, he was already irritated.

Then he spotted a large Ming army ahead.

He had no intention of fighting a larger force with only five hundred riders and was just about to withdraw.

Yet before he could do so, the Ming army suddenly turned and ran.

Not only did they run, they threw away helmets and armor while fleeing, utterly disorganized.

Dorgon raised his riding whip and pointed forward.

"The Ming army is showing fear! That means they may be numerous, but they are nothing more than a mob."

"Chase them!"

"If we cannot rob civilians, robbing the Ming army will do just fine."

The five hundred cavalry howled with excitement and charged forward.

Gao Qiqian shrieked again.

"Do not come any closer!"

Dorgon shouted loudly,

"Stop running! Turn around and fight me for three hundred rounds if you dare!"

But in his heart he was thinking something very different.

If the Ming army actually turned around, I would run immediately.

Unfortunately for him, Gao Qiqian had no intention of turning around.

He only knew how to run.

And so the fleeing capital soldiers were caught from behind by Dorgon's cavalry.

Blades rose and fell.

The slaughter began.

Chapter 1315 She Wants to Go Too?

Dorgon chased Gao Qiqian until the eunuch was practically losing his mind.

Several arrows brushed past him along the way. One even sliced through the air right beside his ear. Each time it happened Gao Qiqian nearly lost his soul.

Luckily, just as things were about to turn truly disastrous, another army suddenly appeared ahead of them.

It was Yang Guozhu, the commander from Xuanfu.

Unlike Gao Qiqian's pampered capital soldiers, Yang Guozhu commanded real frontier troops.

With a loud roar, the Xuanfu border army charged forward.

Dorgon only had five hundred cavalry with him. Chasing down weak prey was one thing, but facing an actual border army was a completely different matter. He did not hesitate for even a moment.

"Withdraw!"

The cavalry turned and galloped away.

Gao Qiqian finally managed to keep his life. He wiped the sweat from his face, still trembling with fear.

"The Jianzhou soldiers are truly ferocious," he sighed. "Such a powerful enemy can only be pacified, not fought. That Lu Xiangsheng is simply acting recklessly."

Yang Guozhu rolled his eyes.

He wanted very badly to mock the eunuch, but his rank was lower and he was only a military officer. Picking a fight with a court eunuch would be suicidal.

So he swallowed the complaint and spoke about something practical instead.

"The Jianzhou forces are not numerous. Only a few hundred cavalry. It seems their riders have scattered everywhere to plunder villages. We should spread out as well and establish defenses across the region. We cannot allow them to ravage the countryside freely."

Gao Qiqian waved a hand impatiently.

"Then go do it. Why are you standing here talking?"

Yang Guozhu cursed silently in his heart.

Damn you, you dead eunuch. One day you will get what you deserve.

Deep in the night.

Everything was pitch black.

A small flat bottom boat quietly touched the southern coastline near Jinzhou.

Ten soldiers jumped down from the boat.

All of them came from the Gao Village militia, the most elite reconnaissance squad.

The soldiers of Gao Village had always eaten well. Their nutrition was excellent, so none of them suffered from night blindness. Even in the dark, using the faint moonlight reflected from the sea, they could still make out shapes.

The scout captain whispered,

"Spread out. Search the entire coastline. Look for Zu Dashou's scouts. Before dawn arrives I want every enemy scout on this beach gone."

"Our fleet must be able to land without anyone noticing."

"Understood!"

The scouts replied quietly and vanished into the darkness.

Soon the ten men had scattered, creeping along the coastline and checking every possible hiding place.

Clearly Zu Dashou was not a god who could foresee everything. He had no idea anyone would choose such a strange time to attack Jinzhou.

There were no real scouts along the coast.

Only a lonely watchtower stood near the beach.

Inside were two elderly soldiers permanently stationed there, guarding a beacon tower.

The two old veterans saw nothing and knew nothing.

Before they even realized what was happening, the Gao Village scouts slipped behind them.

Thump. Thump.

Two quick blows to the back of the head.

By the time the old soldiers regained consciousness, they found themselves tied up like dumplings and tossed inside the cargo hold of a troop transport ship.

Dawn was just beginning to break.

The great fleet arrived.

The scout team stood along the shore waving torches toward the sea.

"No enemy scouts. Landing is safe."

Immediately dozens of shallow draft boats rushed toward the beach.

Soldiers from the Gao Village militia ran ashore silently.

An army of more than ten thousand men landed without a sound. Occasionally someone could not hold back a cough, but the moment it escaped their throat they instantly covered their mouth.

Seeing the discipline of Cao Wenzhao's army and the Shanxi Army, Lu Xiangsheng was stunned.

He glanced back at his own Tianxiong Army and suddenly felt they had been outshined.

That irritated him.

What was going on?

His Tianxiong Army was elite. He personally trained them. They had earned tremendous merit suppressing bandits in the Central Plains.

If they could not match the Guanning Cavalry, he could accept that.

But how could they lose to the Shanxi garrison troops?

Impossible. Absolutely impossible.

These Shanxi soldiers were abnormal. Completely abnormal.

Could it be that Hu Dawei was secretly a brilliant general?

While Lu Xiangsheng was still brooding over this question, the Pi Island garrison under Shen Shikui began disembarking.

Compared to the others, their discipline dropped noticeably.

Some soldiers could not resist whispering to each other.

Shen Shikui rushed over immediately. He dragged the two chatting soldiers out, forced them to kneel, and whipped them several times.

Only then did discipline settle down again.

Lu Xiangsheng turned his head once more and saw Chen Qianhu leading six hundred Guyuan Frontier Army soldiers ashore.

In his understanding, these men were the personal troops of Sun Chuanting.

But their quality was ridiculously high.

Better than the Shanxi troops. Better than the Guanning cavalry. Better than the Tianxiong Army. Even better than the Pi Island soldiers.

The six hundred men carried a fierce killing aura, yet they remained extraordinarily quiet.

Their movements were orderly and precise.

Chen Qianhu did not even need to give commands. The soldiers quickly formed a square formation on the beach.

No one spoke.

No confusion appeared.

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"Something is wrong. Something is definitely wrong."

Of course, he had no idea about their true background.

These six hundred soldiers had once served in the Guyuan Frontier Army, but they had also spent a long time undergoing labor reform in Gao Village.

While in prison they learned strict discipline. After release they trained with the Gao Village militia for years. Later they even studied at the Huangpu Military Academy.

Within the Gao Village militia, these six hundred men were among the absolute elite. Each of them could easily serve as a company commander or battalion commander.

Then suddenly—

Splash.

Another figure jumped off the ship.

It was Tianzun.

Though not the specialized naval combat version this time. That one remained aboard the ship. Li Dao Xuan had switched to a mass produced Tianzun body from inside the cabin.

Externally there was no visible difference.

Only the internal configuration had changed.

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"Master Li? You are also going to the battlefield?"

"You are not a soldier. This is not appropriate. Blades and arrows have no eyes. If something happens to you, it will be terrible. Our army still relies on your supplies."

Li Dao Xuan laughed.

"It is fine. Nothing will happen to me."

Then he pointed behind him.

"Besides, even a young lady is going."

Lu Xiangsheng followed the direction of his finger.

There he saw Zhou Daya, the Gao Village war correspondent.

A bright and lively young woman.

She had actually jumped off the ship as well and clearly intended to go with them.

Lu Xiangsheng gasped in shock.

"This girl looks delicate and soft. She is obviously not suited for war. Why is she going?"

Li Dao Xuan simply shrugged and said nothing.

Zhou Daya smiled sweetly at Lu Xiangsheng.

"Lord Lu, this humble woman wishes to record the full details of this battle."

"I am not skilled in combat, so I may become a burden. I hope Lord Lu will take good care of me."

"If a Jianzhou soldier tries to chop me, please rescue me."

As she finished speaking, she blinked her bright eyes at him, looking completely fragile.

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

This woman looked so delicate she seemed ready to faint in a strong breeze.

Yet the thing she wanted to do was extremely dangerous.

And although her words sounded timid, there was not the slightest trace of fear in her eyes.

So what exactly was she?

Brave?

Or not brave at all?

Chapter 1316 Not a Single Normal Person

The scouts had already departed ahead of the army.

The main force of more than ten thousand soldiers soon followed behind them and began moving.

The distance was forty li.

Not particularly far, but not exactly close either.

In this era, a fully armored infantry unit marching thirty li in a day was considered perfectly normal. Once the distance exceeded thirty li, the physical condition of the soldiers started to matter a great deal.

But this time the army needed to march forty li and immediately launch a surprise attack the moment they arrived.

That required extremely high endurance.

Lu Xiangsheng kept a careful eye on every unit marching beside him. If he sensed the soldiers becoming exhausted, he intended to cancel the risky operation immediately.

Leading the army at the very front was Cao Wenzhao and his Guanning Cavalry.

Many years ago Cao Wenzhao had served in Liaodong as a guerrilla general under Xiong Tingbi and Sun Chengzong. The core of his personal Household Troops had all fought in Liaodong before, so naturally he was the most familiar with the terrain.

After only one glance, Lu Xiangsheng already felt reassured.

Cao Wenzhao's troops marched in perfect formation with high morale.

Lu Xiangsheng was just about to praise them when Cao Wenzhao suddenly turned around and shouted to his soldiers.

"No time for breakfast today. Eat while we march."

The soldiers answered in unison.

They reached into their pockets and each pulled out a strange looking biscuit.

Every man took a small bite and then immediately stored the rest away without continuing.

Lu Xiangsheng stared in disbelief.

"General Cao, your soldiers are only eating that little bit? Can their bodies handle it?"

Cao Wenzhao chuckled.

"That small bite is already plenty. If they eat too much they will feel bloated."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"What do you mean plenty? That bite was tiny."

Cao Wenzhao grinned.

"This thing is called a compressed biscuit. It comes from the Immortal Realm."

"It was created by Dao Xuan Tianzun using immortal magic, compressing a huge amount of food into a small piece. That is why it is called compressed."

Lu Xiangsheng looked extremely skeptical.

Cao Wenzhao pulled out another piece and handed it to him.

"Here. Try one."

For the tiny people of this world it was a large block, but for Li Dao Xuan it was nothing more than a crumb from a modern biscuit.

He had simply bought compressed biscuits online. Once placed inside the box world, the biscuit became enormous, larger than a city gate. The people of Gao Village broke it apart and distributed small chunks to soldiers as rations.

Lu Xiangsheng carefully put the piece in his mouth and tasted it.

"Huh?"

"Not bad."

Cao Wenzhao smiled proudly.

"This one is red date flavor. My personal favorite. We also have sesame flavor, scallion oil flavor, and meat floss flavor. Which do you want?"

Lu Xiangsheng was speechless.

Marching rations only needed to keep soldiers from starving.

Yet this army had multiple flavors.

Was their supply situation really this relaxed?

Cao Wenzhao warned him.

"Do not eat too much or you will feel painfully bloated later."

Lu Xiangsheng snorted.

"Nonsense. I could eat a whole basin of this stuff."

Then he tossed the entire piece into his mouth.

"Such a tiny thing would not fill anyone. If the Jianzhou soldiers see us eating this little they will think we are poor."

"Bring ten more pieces. Ten for each man."

Cao Wenzhao immediately shook his head.

There was no way he would allow that. If someone ate too much and became incapacitated it would ruin the battle later that night.

At first Lu Xiangsheng felt nothing.

But a short time later the tiny biscuit inside his stomach began expanding.

"Hmm?"

"I feel strangely full."

"Why am I suddenly this full?"

Cao Wenzhao laughed.

"I told you already. It is food from the Immortal Realm."

"That little piece you ate equals about three bowls of rice."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

Cao Wenzhao then pulled out a few more biscuits and waved them playfully.

"Come on then. Ten pieces per man."

"That should equal roughly thirty bowls of rice each. Let us see if your Tianxiong Army can handle it."

Lu Xiangsheng hurriedly waved his hands.

"No no no. Impossible. One small piece per man is enough."

Soon the soldiers of the Tianxiong Army each received a small portion.

To modern people compressed biscuits were nothing special. They were merely edible.

But to the starving soldiers of the late Ming Dynasty, this was practically gourmet food.

They had eaten fried flour for so long that they were tired of it. Now they suddenly had flavored biscuits to choose from.

The soldiers happily munched while marching.

Within moments they finished their portions and even felt a little unsatisfied, but Cao Wenzhao refused to distribute more.

Otherwise someone might actually burst from overeating.

The army continued marching.

Step after step.

Dozens of li passed slowly during the long journey.

After half a day of marching, the quality of the troops finally began to reveal itself.

Lu Xiangsheng discovered something shocking.

The soldiers with the best stamina were actually the fierce looking Chen Qianhu and his six hundred men.

Second place went to the army he had initially looked down on the most.

The Shanxi Army.

Cao Wenzhao's Guanning Cavalry ranked third.

Meanwhile Lu Xiangsheng's proud Tianxiong Army and Shen Shikui's Pi Island Forces were tied for last place.

That was extremely embarrassing.

He had originally believed he was the hero arriving to save the situation.

But now it felt like he had merely come along to cheer from the sidelines.

What was going on?

"Lord Lu, do not look so gloomy. Smile a little."

Zhou Daya waved at him.

"Look over here. Right here."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"What are you doing?"

Zhou Daya smiled brightly.

"I am recording the entire process of the surprise attack on Jinzhou."

"Lord Lu, look this way. Smile. Yes, like that."

Lu Xiangsheng stood frozen for several seconds.

Then suddenly he realized something.

"Wait."

"You have been walking with us for dozens of li already."

"You are a woman. How are you still walking?"

Zhou Daya stuck out her tongue playfully.

"This little woman is not good at long walks either."

"But unlike the soldiers I am not wearing heavy armor. I am very light, so naturally it is easier."

Lu Xiangsheng did not accept that explanation.

"Even without armor, ordinary women cannot travel such long distances."

"You are very unusual."

Zhou Daya smiled innocently.

"I am just an ordinary girl."

Lu Xiangsheng absolutely did not believe her.

The more time he spent with these people, the more he realized that everyone around him was strangely abnormal.

Then suddenly he noticed something.

Wait.

There was one perfectly normal person.

Li Dao Xuan.

The man was not even walking.

He was lying on a wooden cart, sleeping peacefully while two horses pulled the cart forward.

The entire army only had two horses, and they were not being used by generals.

They were being used to pull his cart.

Everyone else marched on foot while this wealthy landowner lay there comfortably like a true country gentleman.

Strangely enough, compared with all the other bizarre people around him, this behavior suddenly felt completely normal.

While Lu Xiangsheng was still complaining silently, Zhou Daya had already run toward a soldier from the Tianxiong Army.

She smiled sweetly.

"Big brother soldier, may I interview you for a moment?"

The soldier blinked.

"Interview?"

"What is that?"

Zhou Daya clasped her hands behind her back.

"It is simple. I will ask a few questions, and you answer them just like you normally would."

Chapter 1317 What Do You Think?

With a few sweet "big brother soldier" and "this little sister," Zhou Daya had the Tianxiong Army soldier smiling like a fool in no time.

"Go ahead," he said happily. "Ask whatever you want."

Zhou Daya nodded.

"For this surprise attack operation, do you feel any pressure?"

The soldier scratched his head.

"A little. We are attacking a city after all. That is always difficult."

"I just hope I do not get hit by a stray arrow later."

Zhou Daya continued.

"Why did you join the Tianxiong Army?"

The soldier answered without hesitation.

"To eat."

"If you fight for the lord, you get food. The pay is pretty good too."

Zhou Daya nodded again.

"What do you think about the Qing?"

The soldier snorted.

"They are enemies. So we beat the hell out of them."

Zhou Daya tilted her head.

"You do not have any thoughts about national hatred or family revenge?"

The soldier looked confused.

"The lord says they are enemies, so we fight them."

"I do not really understand those big ideas."

Zhou Daya smiled politely.

"Thank you, big brother soldier."

Lu Xiangsheng stood nearby in silence.

Zhou Daya soon walked over to a Shanxi Army soldier.

"Big brother soldier, I would like to interview you."

This soldier reacted very differently.

The moment Zhou Daya looked at him, his eyes lit up.

"Am I going to be on television?"

Zhou Daya smiled sweetly.

"Maybe. It might also get cut during editing."

The soldier panicked.

"Do not cut me."

"I promise I will answer well."

Zhou Daya could not help laughing.

"The more standard your answer is, the more likely it will be cut."

"So remember. Answer honestly."

The soldier nodded firmly.

"Alright. Honest answers. I must get on television."

Zhou Daya asked her first question.

"For this surprise attack operation, do you feel any pressure?"

The soldier waved his hand dismissively.

"Pressure? What pressure?"

"We are just dealing with a bunch of country bumpkins. I would not even need thirty percent of my strength."

Zhou Daya asked again.

"Why did you join the army?"

The soldier grinned.

"Protect the country and defend our homes."

"If I do not fight, who will?"

"If none of us fight, who protects the common people?"

Hearing this, Lu Xiangsheng could not help letting out a quiet sound of surprise.

This soldier had far higher awareness than the men in his own Tianxiong Army.

Zhou Daya continued.

"What do you think about the Qing?"

The soldier answered calmly.

"They are savage barbarians who need to be civilized."

Lu Xiangsheng made another surprised sound.

This soldier did not speak like an illiterate peasant.

Zhou Daya asked her final question.

"What about national hatred and family revenge?"

The soldier grinned.

"With the Qing, it is not really national hatred."

"They are simply a group of minority rebels that grew up in Liaodong, which is still territory of the Great Ming."

"Calling it national hatred is giving them too much credit."

"In my opinion, when minority tribes rebel, we defeat them and then absorb them."

"Just like the tribes in Yunnan and Guizhou."

"They also rebel sometimes, but eventually they are subdued and become part of the Ming."

"But Western bandits are different."

The soldier's grin widened.

"Right now the Westerners are not very strong."

"But they are truly foreigners."

"Those are the real enemies."

"For them we must be ruthless."

"Beat them."

"Beat them hard."

"Beat them very hard."

"And after beating them we must not have any naive ideas about becoming one big family."

"We should keep beating them."

"Beat them once and it feels good."

"Beat them forever and it always feels good."

"We could beat them for hundreds of years and never get tired."

Zhou Daya blinked.

"Where did you learn that speech?"

The soldier grinned proudly.

"From the movie Blood Battle of Liaoluo Bay."

Lu Xiangsheng suddenly felt unwell.

A random ordinary soldier in the Shanxi Army could speak like this?

If he had not personally seen the man marching just now, he might have believed this was a scholar disguised as a soldier.

Some court officials did not even have such clear thinking.

Lu Xiangsheng stared at the soldier and fell into deep thought.

At that moment a loud shout came from the front of the army.

"We are close to Jinzhou."

"The enemy outpost has spotted us!"

Then the voice of Cao Wenzhao rang out.

"From this moment forward, assume combat readiness."

"Ten li remaining before Jinzhou."

"Increase speed."

"Move faster."

The order was immediately carried out.

The Guyuan Frontier Army, Guanning Cavalry, and Shanxi Army all accelerated their march at once.

Behind them, the Tianxiong Army and Pi Island Forces were completely shocked.

"We already marched thirty li."

"And they can still speed up?"

"So they were conserving energy earlier?"

"Good heavens."

Even Lu Xiangsheng was stunned.

These people had been marching comfortably the whole time.

At the front of the formation, Cao Bianjiao moved forward from the middle of the column.

He now stood at the very front.

This famous warrior always led charges personally.

Command duties were handled by his uncle Cao Wenzhao, so Cao Bianjiao only needed to focus on one thing.

Charging first.

The moment he moved to the front, it meant battle could begin at any time.

Far ahead in the distance, a column of smoke rose into the sky.

The Jinzhou outpost had already spotted the army and ignited a beacon signal.

The scouts at the front had failed to stop the alarm.

Normally, this would be the point where the army set up camp.

Ten li away from the enemy city was a common distance for Ming armies to establish a camp.

Sometimes five li was used, but that was considered too dangerous and vulnerable to sudden attacks.

However the Gao Village forces had no intention of stopping here.

If they camped overnight, Zu Dashou would have enough time to organize his defenses and even request reinforcements from the Qing.

So Cao Bianjiao continued forward without hesitation.

Lu Xiangsheng suddenly noticed something.

Just a moment ago Zhou Daya had been running around interviewing soldiers.

Now she had become serious.

She no longer bothered with interviews.

Instead she silently aimed a strange machine toward the marching army and slowly swept it across the formation.

Meanwhile the soldiers marched while eating.

Some opened bamboo containers filled with luncheon meat.

Others pulled small pieces of chocolate or sugar candy from their pockets and tossed them into their mouths to replenish energy.

Some soldiers even handed these strange foods to the men of the Tianxiong Army.

Soon the army passed the smoking outpost.

The enemy soldiers had already fled.

The place was empty.

Only the beacon tower continued releasing smoke into the sky.

No one bothered to extinguish it anymore.

Not far ahead lay a corpse.

Most likely one of the outpost soldiers who had been killed by the scouts sent by Cao Wenzhao during the retreat.

The army continued forward.

Before long another dead scout appeared.

Then another.

The advance scouting battle had already been fierce.

They were compressing the enemy's reconnaissance perimeter while expanding their own.

Finally, after marching a little longer, the army saw it.

Jinzhou City.

A city famous for being easy to defend and extremely difficult to attack.

Even the Qing dared not attempt a direct assault.

So they had simply allowed Zu Dashou, that famous political weather vane, to remain inside Jinzhou and sway whichever direction the wind blew.

Chapter 1318 This Is Not Emergency Evasion

Jinzhou City had clearly already received the warning from the beacon fire.

However, when the message arrived, the Gao Village army was already only ten li away. That meant the defenders had very little time to prepare.

Lu Xiangsheng immediately noticed the chaos on top of the city wall.

The Jinzhou Army under Zu Dashou was scrambling everywhere.

Soldiers ran across the walls while hurriedly putting on armor and clothing. Some of them had obviously just woken up. A few were even running around half naked as they tried to get dressed.

The city gates were being shut in a hurry.

The huge winch groaned loudly as it turned.

Two massive wooden gates slowly swung closed right in front of Lu Xiangsheng's eyes and slammed together with a thunderous bang.

Immediately afterward, a large group of laborers rushed forward and began piling prepared stones behind the gate, sealing the passageway completely.

At the same time, the drawbridge over the moat slowly lifted into the air.

A general soon appeared on the city wall.

He had a square, upright face.

It was Zu Dashou.

The moment he appeared, the Shanxi soldiers and the Guanning Cavalry all turned to look at Chen Qianhu.

They looked at Chen Qianhu.

Then they looked at Zu Dashou on the wall.

Then they looked back at Chen Qianhu again.

Left.

Right.

Left again.

After several rounds of comparison, the soldiers suddenly burst into loud laughter.

"Impossible."

"The one inside the city must be fake."

"That square face looks like a good person."

"The real Zu Dashou must be the one on our side."

"You can tell just by looking at his face."

Chen Qianhu exploded.

"Damn it."

"You bunch of bastards."

The soldiers immediately began shouting toward the city.

"Hey! Soldiers inside Jinzhou!"

"Your Zu Dashou is fake!"

"The real one is over here with us!"

"You picked the wrong boss!"

Everyone fell silent.

On the city wall, Zu Dashou was furious.

He assumed the enemy outside was playing some kind of psychological trick.

He quickly arranged several hundred soldiers behind him whose sole job was to shout insults.

They yelled toward the outside of the city.

"Which army are you?"

"Why are you attacking Jinzhou?"

"And what nonsense are you shouting about?"

The people from Gao Village did not bother replying.

They simply began deploying their forces.

Despite marching forty li earlier, the army showed no sign of fatigue.

The Guanning Cavalry at the front instantly formed an assault formation.

Shield soldiers stepped forward and formed the front line.

Their shields, made from aluminum alloy, flashed with a bright silver glow.

Behind them came the Guyuan Frontier Army, the Pi Island forces, and the Tianxiong Army under Lu Xiangsheng.

Meanwhile the Shanxi Army, which had performed so impressively earlier, moved to the very rear.

They spread out on the ground.

The soldiers began taking out small tube shaped launchers.

They placed strange little racks on the ground and positioned rocket like projectiles at an angle on the racks.

While the army from Gao Village silently formed its battle lines, Cao Wenzhao took out a metal speaking tube and handed it to Lu Xiangsheng.

"Lord Lu, our artillery is preparing."

"You can say a few words while we wait."

"Oh?"

Lu Xiangsheng nodded.

"I do have a few things to say."

He lifted the metal speaking tube and aimed it at Jinzhou.

"Zu Dashou."

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

Zu Dashou shouted back from the wall.

"So it is someone from the Great Ming."

"Why is the Ming attacking Jinzhou?"

"I am a general of the Ming."

"Jinzhou is also a Ming city."

"You suddenly come here to attack me. What kind of nonsense is this?"

Lu Xiangsheng's anger rose instantly.

"You still dare say you are a Ming general?"

"Then answer this."

"How did Dorgon's cavalry enter Beizhili?"

"Did they pass through Jinzhou?"

"Why did you not stop them?"

Zu Dashou fell silent.

He could not answer.

Because the truth was simple.

He had allowed them to pass.

Lu Xiangsheng continued coldly.

"For many years you have ruled Jinzhou like your personal territory."

"You ignore the imperial court and flirt with the Qing."

"You stand with both sides like a snake and a rat."

"You should know such behavior will bring consequences."

"Now I will give you one chance."

"Open the city gates and surrender immediately."

"Return to the Ming."

"The crimes you committed before may receive a lighter punishment."

"Otherwise I will treat you as someone who has completely betrayed the Ming."

"And I will show you no mercy."

Zu Dashou remained silent for several seconds.

Then he sighed.

"Do you know why I stopped obeying the court?"

"Does the court not know the reason?"

Lu Xiangsheng paused.

Of course he knew.

Everyone in the court knew.

Back then Zu Dashou had committed an offense.

Sun Chengzong wanted to execute him.

But Yuan Chonghuan spoke in his defense and saved his life.

Because of that, Zu Dashou had always been deeply grateful to Yuan Chonghuan and listened to him.

Later things changed.

For reasons known to everyone, Yuan Chonghuan was arrested.

Zu Dashou happened to be present at the time.

He was shocked, frightened, and furious.

His reaction was obvious.

Grand Secretary Cheng Jiming tried to persuade the Chongzhen Emperor to withdraw the order.

The emperor refused.

Yuan Chonghuan was thrown into prison.

Three days later Zu Dashou left camp with He Kegang and fifteen thousand Guanning soldiers.

They claimed they were leaving the pass to fight "Subudi," but in reality they were heading toward their own base outside the pass.

General Ma Shilong chased after them with an imperial edict and the imperial sword, urging Zu Dashou to return.

Zu Dashou replied:

"Evil ministers control the court and frame loyal men."

"Our army fights the enemy, yet the credit goes to Man Gui."

"And we are not even given proper rations."

"The soldiers are furious."

"If Yuan Chonghuan is pardoned, the traitorous ministers executed, and each soldier given five taels of silver, then we will return to the capital to fight the enemy."

Everyone knew what happened afterward.

Yuan Chonghuan was executed.

From that moment on, Zu Dashou stopped obeying the court.

He refused to return to the capital and became a wavering warlord in Liaodong.

Lu Xiangsheng did not know what to say.

At that moment, someone suddenly stood up from the handcart where he had been "sleeping."

It was Li Dao Xuan.

"You have your difficulties."

"I can accept that you refused the court's orders."

"I can even understand that you temporarily surrendered to the Jianzhou barbarians just to survive."

"You can call that emergency evasion."

"But killing He Kegang just to save your own life?"

"That I cannot accept."

Li Dao Xuan's values came from a later era.

In his worldview, if soldiers run out of ammunition and have no chance of winning, surrendering to survive is acceptable.

But emergency evasion has limits.

You can refuse to save someone.

You cannot kill someone to save yourself.

For example.

If a flood comes and you are on a small boat, you can refuse to let others climb aboard.

But you cannot push someone who is already on the boat into the water just to protect yourself.

Surrendering to survive is one thing.

Killing your own comrade before surrendering is another.

"After doing something like that, do not pretend you stand for justice."

Li Dao Xuan shouted loudly.

"I will count to three."

"If you open the city and surrender, your sentence will be reduced."

"If not, you will be shot on the spot."

"No more nonsense."

Lu Xiangsheng was speechless.

This village lord was fiercer than he was.

Li Dao Xuan raised a finger.

"One."

Every soldier except those from the Tianxiong Army shouted together.

"ONE!"

Zu Dashou's expression darkened.

He did not move.

"Two!"

Zu Dashou roared back angrily.

"Stop threatening me."

"Three!"

Li Dao Xuan immediately lay back down on the handcart and stopped talking.

At that moment Cao Wenzhao raised his command sword and swung it forward.

"Begin the siege."

Chapter 1319 Let Me Borrow Some of That

"Begin the siege!"

The moment those four words rang out, Lu Xiangsheng instinctively looked toward the shield soldiers at the very front of Cao Wenzhao's formation.

But something strange happened.

They did not move at all.

Not a single step.

Was the siege not starting?

Why were they still standing there?

Lu Xiangsheng was confused for a moment.

Then suddenly a thunderous boom erupted from the rear of the army.

BOOM!

Then another.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Continuous explosions echoed across the battlefield.

The Shanxi Army, under the command of Hu Dawei, had fired first.

This time the Shanxi Army had brought an enormous number of artillery units.

Four full artillery battalions.

To maintain speed during the rapid march, they had not brought the heavy cannons.

Instead they carried only small launch tubes.

Hundreds of them were arranged in dense rows.

The moment they fired, the shells flew toward Jinzhou's city walls like rain.

Jinzhou actually had cannons on its walls as well.

Smoothbore cannons.

But the distance was still too far for them to fire effectively.

Zu Dashou had never expected the enemy to open fire from such a distance.

Lu Xiangsheng turned around in shock.

"Huh?"

"The Shanxi garrison troops are using artillery?"

"What kind of strange cannons are those? They are so small."

Earlier he had seen the Shanxi soldiers placing small iron tubes on the ground, but he never imagined those were cannons.

Only now did he suddenly realize what they were.

A storm of shells screamed toward the city walls.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Explosions erupted everywhere.

The outer wall.

The moat.

The top of the wall.

Even inside the city a short distance from the wall.

Shells exploded continuously, sending deadly fragments in every direction.

The scene was terrifying.

Zu Dashou's soldiers had been caught completely unprepared.

Many of them had not even finished putting on their armor.

The enemy was still far away, and they had not even entered combat rhythm yet.

Then suddenly the bombardment began.

Screams filled the city walls.

Some soldiers were blown into the air.

Their bodies flew off the wall and landed on the narrow strip of land between the wall and the moat.

After rolling a few times, they tumbled into the moat and slowly sank beneath the water.

Lu Xiangsheng stared in disbelief.

"Such small cannons... yet such power?"

At the same time the artillery opened fire, Shen Shikui, the commander of the Pi Island forces, shouted at his troops.

"What are you standing there for?"

"Prepare soil and stones."

"Get ready to fill the moat!"

The Pi Island soldiers immediately responded.

Every one of them carried a sack.

While the artillery battalions continued firing, the soldiers took out shovels and began filling the sacks with dirt.

Mud.

Stones.

Anything they could grab went into the sacks.

This time the Pi Island forces had brought the largest number of troops.

Cao Wenzhao's Guanning Cavalry numbered only about two thousand.

The Tianxiong Army had three thousand.

The Shanxi Army had three thousand.

The Guyuan Frontier Army had only six hundred.

But the Pi Island forces had brought six thousand soldiers.

Six thousand men.

Each carrying one sack.

In an instant they prepared six thousand sacks of dirt and stones.

Lu Xiangsheng suddenly realized something strange.

He was the commander in chief.

But he seemed to be completely useless.

These armies came from different regions and different command structures.

Yet without his coordination they were already perfectly synchronized.

Everyone clearly knew their role.

Who would do what.

When to do it.

When had they planned all of this?

Why did he not know anything about it?

What exactly was his Tianxiong Army supposed to do?

A long line of question marks seemed to spin above his head.

Meanwhile the artillery continued roaring.

Soon the defensive structures on top of Jinzhou's walls were almost completely destroyed.

Artillery platforms were blown apart.

Giant crossbow machines caught fire.

The arquebusiers and archers hid behind the battlements, trembling.

But those battlements were only designed to block arrows and bullets from outside the wall.

They could not protect against shells falling from above.

The soldiers could only pray that the shrapnel would not hit them.

Meanwhile Zu Dashou had already been dragged away by his bodyguards.

He was hiding inside a stone shelter built into the wall.

There was no way for him to command the battle from the wall anymore.

When Cao Wenzhao saw that the city's defensive systems were almost paralyzed, he raised his command sword.

"Artillery cease fire."

"Guanning Cavalry."

"Pi Island forces."

"Advance."

The Shanxi artillerymen gradually stopped firing.

Especially the crews whose firing angles were shorter.

Their shells often landed in the moat area, so they were the first to stop.

Only the units firing at longer range continued shooting briefly.

The Guanning Cavalry began advancing.

Rows of aluminum alloy shields formed a long moving wall.

They slowly pushed forward.

The Pi Island soldiers followed closely behind them.

They crouched behind the shields while dragging their heavy sacks.

A few defenders appeared on the wall and fired arrows outward.

But the arrows could not penetrate the aluminum alloy shields.

To break such shields they would need cannons.

Unfortunately the cannons on the wall had already been destroyed during the earlier bombardment.

Zu Dashou's troops could only watch helplessly as the enemy approached the moat.

Then the shield formation opened slightly.

A group of arquebusiers stepped forward and fired wildly toward the wall.

BANG BANG BANG!

The defenders were forced to keep their heads down.

The Pi Island soldiers seized the opportunity.

They dragged their sacks forward and dumped them into one small section of the moat.

Six thousand sacks.

All poured into the same section.

Mud and stones sank rapidly into the water.

That section of the moat was instantly filled halfway.

"Retreat!"

Cao Wenzhao shouted.

"Pull back."

"We will do it again."

The Pi Island soldiers retreated first.

The shield formation withdrew with them.

Once they moved far enough away from the wall, the Shanxi Army shouted again.

"Fire!"

The second round of bombardment began.

Lu Xiangsheng watched the entire process with wide eyes.

For him as the commander in chief, this battle felt absurdly easy.

He had not issued a single command.

He was just watching the generals perform their roles perfectly.

Then he noticed something else.

Nearby stood a woman holding a strange machine, calmly pointing it toward the battlefield.

Even as explosions thundered ahead, she spoke leisurely into the device.

"Everyone can see that our army is currently attacking Jinzhou City."

"Because this is a surprise attack, our troops did not bring large siege equipment."

"All weapons used are portable individual weapons."

"So this battle will be somewhat difficult."

Lu Xiangsheng nearly choked.

Difficult?

She called this difficult?

This was the easiest siege he had ever witnessed.

And she said it was difficult?

Zhou Daya continued calmly.

"We cannot destroy the enemy within the time of a single meal like we usually do."

"So we must adopt repeated assaults to fill the moat."

Lu Xiangsheng's thoughts exploded.

Sieges always require repeated assaults.

Sometimes they last days.

Sometimes months.

Just how confident were these people that they expected to end a siege within the time of a single meal?

Meanwhile the Pi Island soldiers who had retreated began pulling out another set of sacks.

They started filling them with dirt and stones again.

Lu Xiangsheng cleared his throat.

Then he walked toward Shen Shikui.

"General Shen."

"Do you have any extra sacks?"

"Give some to my Tianxiong Army."

"My men can help fill the moat as well."

Chapter 1320 You Can Siege a City Like This?

Lu Xiangsheng shamelessly asked for sacks.

To his surprise, there really were extras.

The men under Shen Shikui were practically elders of the Beggar Sect. Every single one of them carried nine sacks on average.

If you wanted sacks from them, it was the easiest thing in the world.

In the blink of an eye, each soldier tossed one sack out.

Six thousand sacks landed in a pile.

That alone was enough for the Tianxiong Army to make two full trips.

Lu Xiangsheng immediately gave the order.

The Tianxiong Army joined the work of filling the moat.

They borrowed engineer shovels from the Pi Island forces, slammed the blades into the ground, and shouted as they worked.

"Heave!"

"Heave!"

Each shovel lifted a load of dirt and stones, which they stuffed into the burlap sacks. The mouths of the sacks were tied tight, then thrown over their shoulders.

Not bad.

This was actually pretty satisfying work.

Cao Wenzhao shouted loudly.

"Artillery cease fire!"

"Guanning Cavalry, advance!"

The second round of the moat filling operation began.

Inside the city, the soldiers under Zu Dashou saw what was happening.

Their eyes turned red.

They all understood the situation clearly.

Once the moat was filled, they were finished.

The enemy had come fully prepared.

If they could fill the moat so easily, then the city wall would probably not be much harder for them to break.

"Hold the line!"

"Defend it with your lives!"

The defenders shouted desperately.

Archers leaned out from the wall, drawing their bows.

Before they could even release their arrows, a gunshot rang out.

BANG!

One of the archers clutched his chest and fell backward.

Some defenders grabbed their arquebuses and three-barrel hand cannons, climbing onto the wall and firing without even aiming.

BANG!

There was one major weakness with firearms.

Bullets could not be fired in high arcs like arrows.

So the bullets flew straight ahead and struck the wall of aluminum alloy shields raised by the Guanning Cavalry.

CLANG!

The impact made the shield soldier's wrist go numb from the force.

He almost dropped the shield.

But the aluminum alloy shield was one centimeter thick.

A lead bullet from a smoothbore gun simply could not penetrate it.

The bullet left a small dent in the shield.

The lead flattened into a useless lump stuck to the metal surface.

The shield soldier roared loudly.

"Come on!"

"Come kill me if you can!"

"Hey! You bastards!"

Zu Dashou's soldiers stared in horror.

They had no idea what to do.

They turned their heads, looking for their commander.

Only then did they realize that Zu Dashou was still hiding inside the shelter tunnel built into the wall.

He did not dare come out to command the battle.

"Throw!"

The Pi Island forces and the Tianxiong Army threw their sacks into the moat together.

Nine thousand sacks of dirt and stones splashed into the water.

The small moat could no longer endure the humiliation.

It surrendered.

A rough pathway made of piled sacks appeared across the water.

"Shield soldiers, cover us!"

A squad of Shanxi Army engineers had somehow reached the very front of the battlefield.

Each of them carried a strange package on their backs.

A skull symbol was painted on every package.

Next to the symbol was a warning written personally by Xu Dafu, Director of the Firearms Bureau.

"Extremely Dangerous."

A group of Guanning Cavalry shield soldiers rushed forward and surrounded the engineers.

They raised shields not only in front but also above their heads.

The formation became a small cube made entirely of shields.

Protected inside that moving block of metal, the engineers ran across the makeshift path over the moat and rushed straight to the base of the city wall.

The defenders on the wall had no idea what they were planning.

But they were certain it could not be anything good.

They desperately tried to stop them.

Meanwhile nearly every firearm in the Guanning ranks was brought forward to cover the engineers.

Gunfire erupted in dense waves.

Bullets poured toward the wall.

The defenders could not even raise their heads.

There was simply no way for them to stop the advancing shield formation.

Finally the shield cube reached the base of the wall.

Under the protection of the shields, the engineer captain knelt down and dug a small pit into the mud beside the wall.

He placed the skull-marked package inside the pit.

The other engineers followed his example.

Each man dug a pit.

Each pit received one skull-marked package.

The engineer captain took a deep breath.

"Once we light the fuse, run."

"Run fast."

"Shield soldiers, drop the shields when we run. Carrying them will slow you down."

"If you keep holding them, you will die."

"Understood!"

The captain spoke again.

"I will count to three."

"When I reach three, everyone lights the fuse and runs."

"One."

"Two."

Every soldier already had a fire starter ready.

The captain shouted.

"Three!"

Every engineer lit the fuse at the same moment.

Then the previously disciplined formation completely collapsed.

Everyone shouted at the same time.

"RUN!"

The Guanning Cavalry threw away their heavy aluminum shields and bolted.

The engineers ran right behind them.

No one cared about formation anymore.

They simply ran for their lives.

They sprinted across the sack bridge over the moat and reached the other side.

The large group of arquebusiers who had been covering them saw the engineers return.

They stopped shooting instantly.

Then they turned around and ran as well.

Everyone was running.

It was as if that section of the city wall had suddenly become a terrifying beast.

Lu Xiangsheng stared in confusion.

"What are they doing?"

Inside the city, the defenders were just as baffled.

"What are they doing?"

At that moment...

BOOM!

A terrifying, heavy explosion erupted.

The skull-marked packages buried beneath that section of wall exploded almost simultaneously.

The power was enormous.

The effect was similar to modern controlled demolition used to collapse buildings.

The ground shook violently.

Black smoke and dust shot into the sky.

The defenders stationed on that section of wall were killed instantly by the shockwave.

The destructive force spread along the wall.

Soldiers everywhere were thrown off their feet.

Then, under Lu Xiangsheng's stunned gaze, the towering city wall collapsed.

A massive hole opened in the wall.

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

"How the hell can you siege a city like this?"

A moment later he quickly corrected himself.

"Wait. I am a civil official."

"I should not say things like that."

"The wall collapsed! Hahaha!"

Cao Bianjiao was overjoyed.

"Charge!"

This man loved being the first to climb into battle.

The moment he saw the breach, he rushed forward immediately.

The dust from the explosion had not even settled yet.

Yet he dared to charge straight into it.

That level of recklessness was truly extraordinary.

But after running only a few steps, Cao Bianjiao noticed someone beside him moving even faster.

He was startled.

Who was it?

Who was trying to steal his achievement again?

Last time he had nearly lost his life competing with monsters like Gao Chuwu, Zheng Dani, and Flat Rabbit just to claim the honor of the first assault.

Who was it this time?

He turned his head to look.

Then he sucked in a sharp breath.

Charging beside him was the ferocious Chen Qianhu, looking like a demon from ancient legends.

Chen Qianhu ran forward with terrifying momentum, his mouth wide open as he roared.

"Zu Dashou!"

"Come out!"

"My reputation was ruined because of you!"

"Today I will chop you into seventeen or eighteen pieces!"

A voice inside Cao Bianjiao's mind spoke immediately.

Do not compete with this man.

If he gets angry, he might eat you.

Even the brave Cao Bianjiao could not help slowing down slightly.

Chen Qianhu charged straight through the breach in the wall.

With a single swing of his blade, he cut down a soldier blocking his path.

Then he raised his head and roared.

"Who else?!"