

## Great Ming 1331

### Chapter 1331 They Have Arrived

On the western coast of central Yizhou, the sea rolled in long, steady breaths, as if nothing in the world could disturb its rhythm, yet right beside that calm shoreline, change was already taking root in the most practical and stubborn way possible.

The ship Little Black No.1 was anchored quietly near the coast, its dark hull blending into the shadows of the trees, while groups of natives from the Kingdom of Dadu unloaded baskets filled with tools, carrying them into a dense patch of forest where the first outlines of a hidden settlement were beginning to take shape.

Under the direction of a man from Gao Family Village, the workers received their assignments with a seriousness that did not come from discipline, but from curiosity and hunger for something new, then they spread out to cut trees, move stones, and level the ground, slowly building what would become a supply village that could not yet exist in the open.

After the earthquake and the relief effort that followed, King Gan Zai Xia of Dadu had changed his stance in a way that surprised even himself, because he had seen something that did not fit into his old understanding of power, which was that the people from Gao Family Village helped without first demanding submission.

Because of that, he no longer rejected the teachings of Dao Xuan Tianzun, and he allowed his people to learn the language and customs of the Han, while also agreeing to let Yaoxingjuan establish a hidden supply base along the coast.

Of course, "along the coast" did not mean what it sounded like.

The village had to be buried inside the forest, hidden from sight, because Yaoxingjuan only had a single ship, and that ship was playing a dangerous game against the entire Dutch East India Company, which meant every move had to remain unpredictable, unseen, and just annoying enough to keep the enemy angry but not decisive.

If the village were built in the open, it would not be a village anymore, but a target.

So it hid.

And while it hid, it grew.

Yaoxingjuan paid the natives with food, a concept so simple that it felt almost magical to them, because for the first time, effort could be exchanged for certainty, and certainty was far more comfortable than chasing deer through endless hills.

One of the Gao villagers wearing a yellow hat was demonstrating how to use a saw, pulling it back and forth with practiced ease until a deep groove appeared in the wood, then handing it over to a strong native man.

The man held the saw carefully, his expression filled with awe, as if he had just been handed a piece of quiet power, then he hesitated for a moment before raising it toward his own neck, muttering something in his language that no one else understood.

The yellow hat froze for half a heartbeat, then immediately snatched the saw back.

"Not that," he said quickly, his voice firm but not angry, "this is for wood, not your head."

Nearby, a carpenter from Gao Family Village was teaching mortise and tenon joinery, drilling strange-looking holes into two pieces of wood before locking them together with a sharp click that felt almost magical in its precision.

The natives gathered around, turning the joint over in their hands again and again, their expressions shifting from confusion to realization, then to excitement, because this was something they could actually use, something that would make their homes stronger without needing anything beyond their own hands.

King Gan Zai Xia, Alami, walked past them slowly, his eyes lingering on the wooden structures, and while he did not understand advanced machinery or abstract theory, this kind of knowledge spoke directly to his world.

He could already imagine sturdier houses, safer villages, and fewer nights lost to storms.

That was enough.

He nodded toward Yaoxingjuan, then spoke in slightly awkward Han language.

"Xie... xie."

Yaoxingjuan did not correct him.

He simply smiled and returned the gesture, because meaning mattered more than pronunciation.

For a brief moment, his thoughts drifted back to the last time they met, when his hand had nearly reached for a gun, when he had almost chosen the simplest solution, which was to remove a problem with a single shot.

Dao Xuan Tianzun had stopped him then.

At the time, he had not fully agreed.

Now, looking at the growing village, at the cooperation, at the fragile but real trust forming between people who should have been enemies, he finally understood.

If they had taken the land by killing everyone on it, they would not be builders.

They would just be another version of the same invaders they claimed to oppose.

Gao Family Village wanted more than land.

They wanted people.

And that difference was everything.

His thoughts had only just settled when a sharp voice tore through the air from the deck of Little Black No.1.

"Dutch warships spotted!"

Everything changed in an instant.

The calm broke like glass.

The Gao villagers dropped their work and rushed toward the ship without hesitation, while Yaoxingjuan turned sharply to Alami and made a quick gesture.

"Hide your people."

Alami understood immediately.

He raised his vine staff and shouted commands in his own language, and within moments, the natives disappeared into the forest so completely that it felt as if they had never been there at all.

Little Black No.1 lifted anchor and pushed off from the shore.

It had barely cleared the beach when five Dutch warships appeared on the horizon, cutting through the waves with an aggressive certainty that came from numbers.

They had a name.

The Black Hunting Task Force.

The Dutch East India Company had finally grown tired of being harassed by a single ship that refused to fight fairly, so they sent five ships whose only purpose was to find and destroy it.

Nothing else mattered.

No trade.

No transport.

Just the hunt.

"There it is, the black ship!"

"Close in!"

"Sink it!"

Orders rang out across the Dutch fleet as they advanced in formation.

Five against one.

As always.

Below deck, the workers in the engine room of Little Black No.1 stripped off their shirts, their bodies already slick with sweat as they shoveled coal into the furnace with relentless rhythm, pushing the steam engine to its limit.

The paddle wheels churned violently, tearing through the water.

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

Cannons roared from both sides, and the sea erupted into thunder as smoke and flame swallowed the distance between hunter and prey.

From the forest, the natives watched in silence, their eyes wide, their hands clenched around weapons that meant nothing in this kind of battle.

They could fight on land.

They could hunt.

They could survive.

But this kind of war belonged to another world entirely.

Alami's expression tightened as he watched the lone black ship dance between five enemies.

"They are always outnumbered," he murmured, his voice heavy with concern, "this cannot continue forever."

One of the natives spoke quietly.

"If they lose... we lose them too."

No one answered.

Because there was no answer.

Out at sea, a Dutch commander shouted with growing excitement.

"This time we end it!"

"Second ship, flank left!"

"Third ship, flank right!"

"Cut off its escape!"

The five ships spread out, tightening the net.

On Little Black No.1, Yaoxingjuan stood at the helm, his voice sharp and decisive.

"Full speed west, break away from them!"

The ship surged forward.

And then, just as the tension reached its peak, something appeared on the western horizon.

A ship.

Not large.

In fact, slightly smaller than Little Black No.1.

But the moment it came into view, the atmosphere changed in a way that could not be explained by size alone.

Because it did not belong to this world's technology.

It was an immortal ship.

Yaomingjuan's eyes lit up instantly.

"The Wanli Sunshine has arrived," he said, his voice rising with unmistakable excitement, "that is Shi Lang's ship, and next to it... the Pingyi, Zheng Sen is here too."

He laughed, a deep, unrestrained sound that carried across the deck.

"Our reinforcements have finally arrived."

Then he slammed his hand forward.

"No need to run anymore."

"Helm, hard to starboard."

"We turn back."

His grin widened, sharp and fearless, as the black ship began to pivot toward the pursuing fleet instead of away from it.

"Today," he said, his voice filled with a dangerous confidence, "we teach them what iron really means."

Chapter 1332 The Advantage Is Ours

Two immortal ships cut across the sea at full speed, their hulls slicing through the waves with a confidence that did not belong to this era, as if the ocean itself had already acknowledged their right to dominate it.

Shi Lang's Wanli Sunshine stretched over sixty meters, long and steady, built not just for travel but for control, while beside it, Zheng Sen, now known as Zheng Chenggong, commanded the Pingyi, a ship of equal size that carried a very different temperament.

If one was calm, the other was sharp.

If one calculated, the other pressed forward.

Together, they formed something far more dangerous than either alone.

Both ships pushed their speed to the limit, charging straight into the battlefield without hesitation, without formation, without even the slightest hint of caution.

Because they did not need caution.

Not today.

On the Dutch fleet, the lookout was the first to notice them, and the moment his eyes locked onto the approaching silhouettes, his voice broke into a shout that carried real fear.

"Admiral, something is wrong, there are more strange ships approaching."

The Dutch admiral did not even lift his head at first, his attention still locked onto Little Black No.1, the ship that had been tormenting them for far too long.

"How strange can it be," he snapped, irritation thick in his voice, "the strangest ship I have ever seen is already right in front of us, sink that one and everything else becomes irrelevant."

"Sir, you need to look."

"I said I do not care."

"Please look."

There was a pause, just long enough for irritation to turn into curiosity, and then the admiral finally turned his head.

One glance.

That was all it took.

His expression froze.

"...what the hell is that."

The lookout did not hesitate.

"They are flying the same five-colored flag."

For a moment, the admiral said nothing.

Then he swore under his breath.

"Fine," he said, forcing his voice back into control, "even with two more ships, it is still five against three."

He raised his hand and shouted.

"The advantage is ours."

"Five against three, how do we lose?"

"Advance and fire."

Confidence returned to the fleet like a reflex, because numbers were simple, and simple things were easy to believe in.

Then everything stopped being simple.

The two incoming ships did not charge blindly into the chaos, but instead executed a sharp, controlled turn, aligning themselves with Little Black No.1 in a single, clean formation.

A line.

A perfect line.

The line of battle.

Panels along their sides snapped open in rapid succession, revealing rows of cannon ports, and from those ports extended long, gleaming barrels of stainless steel, their polished surfaces catching the light like something alive.

These were not ordinary cannons.

They did not leak.

They did not crack.

They did not explode in the hands of their users.

They were precise.

Reliable.

Unforgiving.

On three different ships, three voices rose at the same time.

"Fire."

The sea exploded.

Nearly forty cannons roared in unison, a coordinated strike that did not scatter, did not hesitate, but converged with brutal intent onto the leading Dutch warship.

Water columns erupted around it as solid shot slammed into the hull, punching clean holes through thick wood as if it were nothing more than damp paper, while explosive shells burst across the deck, tearing through crews with a violence that did not care about armor or courage.

Sailors were thrown aside.

Gunners collapsed mid-action.

The boarding troops waiting on deck were shattered before they even had the chance to move.

For a moment, the ship simply endured.

Then it began to fail.

"Adjust formation," the Dutch admiral roared, his earlier confidence cracking under the weight of reality, "turn the hull, form a line, return fire."

Orders spread, and the Dutch ships attempted to reorganize, but formation was not something you simply declared into existence.

It belonged to whoever controlled speed.

And they did not.

At the front, Yaoxingjuan was already moving.

He turned first.

Sharp.

Precise.

The kind of maneuver that came from years of fighting unfair battles and surviving them.

Behind him, Shi Lang and Zheng Chenggong followed, not as followers, but as learners who understood exactly what was being demonstrated.

Positioning.

Control.

Dominance.

The formation shifted again, and before the Dutch fleet could stabilize, the second volley came.

"Fire."

Another forty shells tore across the sea.

Another ship took the blow.

Another layer of order collapsed.

Only now did the Dutch admiral fully understand the situation.

"We cannot win a cannon exchange," he said, his voice tight, controlled, but no longer confident, "close the distance."

"We board them."

"We have numbers."

That decision carried weight.

Because boarding combat was not like artillery.

There was no retreat once it began.

No repositioning.

No second attempt.

Once ships locked together, the outcome would be decided in blood.

"If we commit, there is no turning back," one officer said quietly.

The admiral's response came instantly.

"There is no turning back for them."

"Forward."

The Dutch ships surged ahead.

On the other side, Zheng Chenggong saw it immediately.

"They are coming in for boarding."

Shi Lang did not hesitate.

"Then we meet them head on."

Yaoxingjuan grinned, a familiar wild edge returning to his expression as he raised his voice.

"Brothers, grab your blades."

A Gao Family Village sailor popped up beside him, looking both amused and slightly exasperated.

"Maybe not immediately," he said, holding up a firearm, "we have better options now."

Yaoxingjuan blinked once.

Then laughed.

"Right," he said, shaking his head, "old habits."

He turned, his voice rising again.

"Bring out the new toys."

In the forest, the natives who had been watching the battle finally relaxed when they saw the situation shift from five against one to three against five, because even without understanding the details, they could feel the pressure ease.

Then they saw the ships closing.

Fast.

Too fast.

Alami's expression tightened again.

"This is bad," he said quietly, "three against five, in close combat, they will be outnumbered."

A warrior beside him spoke.

"Should we help them."

Alami shot him a look.

"How."

The warrior hesitated.

"...swim."

No one laughed.

Because no one could.

On the sea, the ships drew closer.

Decks filled with soldiers.

On the Dutch side, two types stood ready.

Black slave warriors, shields in one hand, blades in the other, prepared to storm across enemy decks, and behind them, white musketeers, weapons raised, calculating distance, waiting for the perfect moment to unleash a coordinated volley.

They were experienced.

They were disciplined.

They knew exactly how this should go.

Then everything went wrong.

Before they had even reached effective range, gunfire erupted from the opposing ships.

Sharp.

Rapid.

Continuous.

Not the slow, measured volleys they expected.

But something else entirely.

One of the musketeers barely had time to register the sound before pain tore through his chest and he collapsed, his shot never fired.

The front line of boarding troops staggered as bullets tore into them, disrupting their advance before it had even begun.

"This is impossible," the Dutch admiral shouted, anger rising again, "what weapons are those."

"Return fire."

Muskets lifted.

Shots fired.

But the distance was still wrong.

Their bullets scattered uselessly across the sea.

"Grenades."

Shi Lang's voice cut cleanly through the chaos as he stepped forward and hurled a small object across the gap between ships.

Chapter 1333 I Am Not Afraid

The Dutch soldiers turned their heads toward the strange object that had landed on their deck, still trying to figure out what it was, when a thunderous explosion erupted with a deafening boom, instantly blasting another group of black slave soldiers off their feet.

Shi Lang pumped his fist with a grin. "Oh yes!"

Zheng Sen, not to be outdone, quickly grabbed a grenade of his own, lit the fuse, and hurled it with all his strength toward the enemy ship. Unfortunately, being able to throw sixty meters was clearly not a universal skill. His grenade arced through the air with determination, only to fall short at around fifty meters before plopping into the sea and vanishing beneath the waves with a series of helpless bubbles.

"Damn it!" Zheng Sen slapped his thigh in frustration, nearly breaking it in the process.

Still, a commander's throwing distance did not determine the outcome of a battle. What mattered was the collective. Behind him, dozens of sailors raised their arms in unison, and a storm of grenades flew across the gap between ships. They struck the enemy deck with a chaotic rhythm, metal clanging against wood in a rapid chorus.

It was like pearls of all sizes scattering onto a jade plate.

Then the plate shattered.

Explosions chained together in rapid succession, tearing across the deck, sending bodies flying in every direction. Some spun wildly in the air, others tumbled overboard, while weapons and shields scattered like discarded toys. If this were a staged performance, this would be the moment for dramatic slow motion.

Naturally, someone was already thinking along those lines.

On board the Wanli Sunshine, the war correspondent girl shouted over the noise, "When you edit this later, slow down the part where they get blown into the air. Make it dramatic, got it?"

The trainee reporter nodded frantically. "Got it! Whoa, an arrow just flew over my head!"

"Pathetic," the reporter girl snapped. "You are embarrassing the entire Journalism Division. Remember this. Our department was personally trained by Dao Xuan Tianzun. We do not panic. We do not flinch. If you disgrace yourself, how will you face him?"

As if the battlefield itself had a sense of humor, a musket fired from the Dutch side at that exact moment. The bullet whistled through the air and struck the flagpole beside her, just a few centimeters away. The pole trembled violently, and the Five-Colored Banner fluttered wildly.

Her face turned pale.

Yet she stiffened her neck and forced out, "I am not afraid. Not at all."

By this point, the combined suppression of muskets and grenades had already crushed the Dutch deck. Hardly anyone remained standing. Those who were still alive had taken cover wherever they could, abandoning any semblance of formation as the ships continued to close the distance.

That was when Yao Xingjuan's men made their move.

Grappling hooks shot out through the air, iron claws biting into the enemy ship's rigging with sharp metallic snaps. In an instant, several ropes stretched tight between the vessels, forming crude but effective bridges.

Then came the charge.

Veteran pirates surged forward, gripping ropes with one hand and clutching curved blades in the other, their voices rising in wild, fearless cries as they swung across the gap.

"We're boarding!"

"Get up there!"

"Move, you dogs!"

"Stop calling us pirates, we are militia now!"

But their blood still remembered the sea.

These men were hardened by countless battles, each one accustomed to living with death hanging just a breath away. Fear was a luxury long abandoned. If they were not dead, then they were merely scratched.

The first pirate landed on the Dutch deck, only to be ambushed by a black slave soldier who had been playing dead. The man sprang up and slashed downward with his blade.

There was a dull thud.

The strike failed to penetrate.

The pirate grinned, baring his teeth. The Jiangnan rattan armor he wore absorbed the blow effortlessly, its lightweight structure providing both protection and buoyancy. It would not drag him to the bottom if he fell into the sea. Instead, it would keep him afloat like a lifeline.

He retaliated instantly, cutting the attacker down.

Another enemy rushed forward, a white Dutch soldier wielding a curved blade. The two clashed, steel ringing against steel as they exchanged blows. After several strikes, the pirate landed a clean hit, only to feel his blade slide uselessly aside.

He paused in surprise.

Looking closer, he saw the torn fabric of the man's coat revealing chainmail beneath.

So that was it.

"Damn you," the pirate muttered, immediately adjusting his approach.

They fought their way toward the edge of the deck, blows echoing between them. Then, with a sudden feint, the pirate shifted his weight and drove his foot forward, kicking the Dutch soldier clean overboard.

The man splashed into the sea, his armor dragging him down.

The pirate leaned over the railing, laughing loudly. "Let's see how well you swim in that!"

The soldier struggled briefly before disappearing beneath the surface.

By the time the second wave of Gao Family Village sailors boarded, the battle was already tipping beyond recovery for the Dutch. Their deck had been shattered by continuous ranged suppression, their forces scattered and disorganized. No defensive line could be formed.

Control of the deck was lost in moments.

Grenades were tossed into the ship's interior, explosions echoing below as screams followed.

The remaining Dutch ships attempted to close in, but each one met the same fate. Muskets opened fire first, tearing into their ranks, followed immediately by grenades that cleared whatever resistance remained.

Five ships against three might have seemed like an advantage on paper, but numbers alone could not compensate for the overwhelming difference in systems.

Speed, positioning, and technology had already decided the outcome.

The Dutch line collapsed.

What followed was nothing more than cleanup.

By the time the sun dipped toward the horizon, the battle had ended.

Yao Xingjuan stood once more on the beach, watching as Alami, the ruler of the Dadu Kingdom, emerged from the forest with his people. Their eyes widened at the sight before them.

Three strange, powerful ships rested along the shore.

Five more lay captured.

Cheers erupted from the crowd.

Alami spoke excitedly in his own language, his meaning clear even if his words were not. Joy needed no translation.

Yao Xingjuan had his men bring out several barrels of bread taken from the Dutch ships. The hard, brick-like loaves were unappealing to the refined tastes of Gao Family Village, but to others, they were treasure.

He handed them over.

"These are yours."

Alami's face lit up with gratitude. Food was food, and this was more than enough.

Yao Xingjuan gestured toward the sea, then toward the forest, speaking slowly, making sure the meaning carried through.

"Our reinforcements have arrived. We no longer need to hide."

He pointed toward the shoreline.

"The supply port will be built there."

After much gesturing and repeated attempts at communication, the message was finally understood.

Alami raised his staff and shouted commands.

The people moved at once.

From the forest, they carried out tools, wood, and stone, bringing everything to the open coastline.

This time, there was no need to conceal their presence.

The first true base of Gao Family Village on Yizhou Island began its construction under the setting sun.

Chapter 1334 Do Not Underestimate the Ming Army

Dorgon's situation had become... uncomfortable in a very practical, very immediate sense.

This raid had never been meant as a full invasion. He had brought only a thousand cavalry, far too few to take cities or hold territory. The goal had always been harassment, nothing more than a sharp thorn stabbed into Ming lands to force them to divert attention away from the Mongols.

Against someone like Gao Qiqian, that had worked beautifully. The eunuch had collapsed at the first sign of pressure, crying and fleeing in panic, turning what should have been a minor skirmish into a farce.

But the moment Dorgon ran into real commanders like Yang Guozhu of Xuanfu or Wang Pu of Datong, the game changed entirely. Those men did not panic, did not scatter, and did not give him easy openings. They held firm, forcing him to withdraw again and again.

Then came the worst development.

Lu Xiangsheng's Tianxiong Army returned from Jinzhou and joined the hunt.

At that point, every competent Ming general reached the same conclusion. Dorgon did not have enough troops. He was not a vanguard for a larger force. There was no Hong Taiji behind him ready to descend with overwhelming strength.

He was alone.

Reports flooded back to the capital, and finally, Zhu Youjian understood.

"Wang Pu, stop guarding my estates," the emperor ordered, rare clarity cutting through his usual hesitation. "Join Lu Xiangsheng and pursue Dorgon."

"And Gao Qiqian," he added with visible irritation, "you will advance as well."

Thus, four forces began to converge from different directions, tightening the net.

Dorgon's space to maneuver shrank, then shrank again.

By the time he reached the northern outskirts of Yongping Prefecture, he was already feeling the pressure closing in.

He camped near the edge of a forest, keeping a wary eye on the fortified city to the south. Yongping was a stronghold. With only a thousand men, attacking it was out of the question.

Yet the irony was obvious.

The Ming troops inside the city did not dare come out.

Years of being beaten by Qing forces had left them deeply cautious. Even facing only a thousand cavalry, they preferred to hide behind walls rather than risk open battle.

Dorgon stared at the city for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

A deputy approached. "Commander, what now?"

Dorgon exhaled slowly. "We cannot operate in North Zhili any longer. Lu Xiangsheng, Yang Guozhu, Wang Pu, and that useless Gao Qiqian are all closing in. We have no room left to maneuver."

"So we retreat?" the deputy asked.

"We retreat," Dorgon confirmed. "Back to Shengjing."

"Which route?"

Dorgon spread out a map.

"To the east lies Shanhai Pass, guarded by Wu Sangui. That path is closed. If we approach, he will intercept, and once we are pinned, the pursuing forces will catch up. That would be the end."

The deputy nodded grimly.

Dorgon's finger moved across the map. "We go through Qinglong, then Jianchang, then circle north of Jinzhou. Zu Dashou is unlikely to intercept us."

Qinglong was manageable, little more than a neglected garrison. But Jianchang...

That was another matter entirely.

It had once belonged to the Ming, but over time it had effectively become Mongol grazing land. In other words, foreign territory.

And worse.

Dorgon's expression darkened slightly.

The memory of the Great Iron Cart lingered like a bad dream.

The deputy hesitated. "If we encounter that... thing... in Jianchang?"

Dorgon rolled his eyes. "Then we run."

He tapped the map with a finger. "It is powerful, but not fast over short distances compared to cavalry. We outrun it, find rough terrain, cross narrow streams or ravines. It cannot follow everywhere."

The deputy relaxed slightly.

"As long as we reach Jinzhou, we are safe," Dorgon concluded. "So keep moving."

Before they could proceed further, a scout rushed in.

"Commander, Ming reinforcements have arrived at Yongping."

Dorgon immediately climbed a nearby slope and looked south. In the distance, a Ming force approached the city, a large banner with the character "Gao" fluttering above them.

Gao Qiqian's troops.

Dorgon let out a cold laugh. "The most useless army of all has arrived."

He mounted his horse in one smooth motion. "We scare them."

The cavalry assembled in moments.

"One charge," Dorgon ordered.

The thousand riders surged forward like a wave.

Meanwhile, Gao Qiqian was leading his pampered capital troops toward Yongping, relaxed and cheerful, expecting nothing more than a safe entry into the city.

Then came the thunder of hooves.

He turned his head.

And his soul nearly left his body.

Qing cavalry were charging straight at him.

His first instinct was to retreat into Yongping, but one glance told him the truth. The enemy was faster. They would cut him off before he reached the gates.

"Retreat south!" he screamed.

And just like that, Gao Qiqian performed another flawless demonstration of tactical withdrawal without combat.

From the walls, the Yongping defenders stared in disbelief. They had been preparing to open the gates and coordinate a pincer attack, but before the gates even moved, their supposed ally had already fled.

"What the hell?" the city commander muttered.

Gao Qiqian did not stop. He fled south at full speed, sparks practically flying behind him, then veered east, and finally dashed straight into Shanhai Pass to seek protection under Wu Sangui.

Dorgon pursued briefly, cutting down a few stragglers, his confidence rising again.

Then he saw another force approaching from the west.

Lu Xiangsheng.

Inside Yongping, a soldier asked, "General, more reinforcements have arrived. Should we prepare to sortie again?"

The commander rolled his eyes. "Let them do whatever they want. We hold the city. Those court officials are useless."

He had barely finished speaking when the Tianxiong Army roared forward like a storm, charging directly at Dorgon's forces.

Dorgon's expression changed instantly.

"Damn it. It is Lu Xiangsheng. Run!"

The situation flipped in an instant.

Moments ago, Qing cavalry had been chasing Ming troops. Now Ming troops were chasing Qing cavalry.

The Yongping commander stood there, stunned, before letting out a long sigh. "Times change. Do not underestimate the Ming army."

"Should we still go out?" a subordinate asked.

"Of course we go out," he snapped. "Open the gates!"

But by the time they moved, it was already too late.

Dorgon's cavalry had vanished into the northern mountains, moving with astonishing speed along the narrow paths toward Qinglong County.

"Damn it, they got away," the commander muttered with regret.

But Lu Xiangsheng, watching the direction of their escape, showed a faint smile.

"They are heading to Qinglong," he said calmly. "Next comes Jianchang, and after that, Jinzhou."

His gaze sharpened.

"We continue the pursuit. When we reach Jinzhou, we join with Cao Wenzhao and strike from both sides."

He paused, then added with quiet certainty.

"Let us see where Dorgon can run then."

## Chapter 1335 I Will Never Die Here

Qinglong was nothing more than a small county town, surrounded by a scattering of tiny frontier forts that looked more like abandoned sheds than military defenses.

For years, Qing troops and Mongol riders had been sweeping across this place again and again, like someone mindlessly grinding the same map in a game. After being trampled so many times, most of the forts were already deserted. The garrison soldiers had long since lost any will to fight. The moment they sensed even the slightest disturbance, they would hide inside the county walls together with the magistrate, trembling like leaves in the wind.

So when Dorgon arrived, nothing changed.

The gates shut. No one came out.

He passed through Qinglong as if he owned the road.

Ahead of him lay the Mongol pasturelands of Jianchang.

Dorgon turned his head slightly. "Is Lu Xiangsheng still behind us?"

"He is," the deputy replied. "Yang Guozhu from Xuanfu and Wang Pu from Datong have joined him. Their forces are combined now, around nine thousand strong. They are still chasing us. Fortunately, they are infantry, so they are slower. There is still distance between us."

Dorgon let out a breath. "Good. Then listen carefully. We are about to cross Jianchang. That is Mongol territory. If we encounter those iron beasts, do not engage. Run east. Run with everything you have. Do not stop. Do not fight."

The soldiers answered in unison, "Understood!"

But after the shout, a heavy silence lingered.

Just a few years ago, they had been the ones riding over the Mongols, treating tribes like the Khalkha, Khorchin, and Tumed as if they were obedient hounds. A command to go east meant east, a command to go west meant west.

And now?

Now they had to sneak through Mongol lands like thieves, afraid of encountering those terrifying iron machines.

It was humiliating.

But humiliation did not win battles.

Strength did.

"Move!"

At Dorgon's command, the cavalry surged forward onto the grasslands.

The plains stretched endlessly. Herds of cattle and sheep dotted the land, and Mongol herders rode lazily among them.

The moment they saw a large cavalry force approaching, the herders panicked, abandoning their flocks as they galloped away shouting, "Qing troops! A lot of Qing troops!"

Under normal circumstances, Dorgon would have smiled at such a sight. Free livestock, easy spoils, a chance to return home with full bellies and good stories.

Now he did not even glance at them.

All he wanted was to get back to Shengjing alive.

The cavalry thundered past the scattered sheep, racing eastward.

Behind them, the herders spread the alarm. Mongol riders quickly mobilized, light cavalry pouring out from their camps and cutting diagonally toward Dorgon's path. At the same time, messengers were sent to inform the armored cavalry unit stationed in Jianchang by Gao Village.

In terms of horsemanship, the Qing troops were never superior to the Mongols. Everything they knew had originally been learned from them.

It did not take long before the Mongol riders caught up.

They stayed at a distance, neither too close nor too far, trailing like wolves testing their prey. They had fewer numbers, so they did not dare charge directly, but shadowing was more than enough.

Dorgon glanced back, irritation flashing across his face. "Those damn Mongols are sticking to us."

"I will go deal with them," the deputy offered.

"Do not," Dorgon snapped. "You cannot catch them on the grassland. You will waste time chasing ghosts. Ignore them. As long as they do not come close, leave them be."

The cavalry continued forward.

Then, from the northern plains, a deep mechanical roar rolled across the land.

Dorgon's heart sank.

"Damn it. Run! Do not engage. Run!"

The entire force burst into full speed.

Behind them, the Mongol riders cheered. "The armored cavalry is here. Now we can actually work."

They drew their bows in one smooth motion.

The masters of mounted archery had arrived.

The Mongol riders accelerated, closing the gap in an instant. Arrows flew.

A Qing soldier at the rear cried out as an arrow pierced his back, falling from his horse.

"I got one. The horse is mine!" a Mongol rider laughed.

Another arrow flew. Another soldier dropped.

"That one is mine!"

They were not even trying to wipe out the enemy.

They were looting horses.

Dorgon's jaw tightened so hard it felt like his teeth would crack, but he had no choice. The iron beasts were approaching from the north. Turning back now would be suicide.

"Run!"

The Qing cavalry pushed themselves to the limit. One by one, soldiers at the rear were picked off by arrows.

Then the armored cavalry closed in.

Gunfire erupted.

A shot rang out, and another rider fell.

More shots followed.

The iron beasts advanced steadily, firing as they moved.

Dorgon gritted his teeth. "Unbelievable... this is just unbelievable..."

It turned into a race against death.

Like characters in a nightmare that refused to end, the Qing soldiers kept running, and one after another, they fell. No one looked back. No one stopped.

The hunters behind them were merciless.

The Mongol riders and the armored cavalry had become the reapers of this battlefield.

Dorgon felt his entire body burning. His mind screamed as adrenaline flooded every vein.

Bullets whistled past his head. Arrows brushed past his shoulders.

A single thought roared inside him.

I will not die.

I carry the Mandate of Heaven.

I am destined to rule.

I will not die here.

And somehow, as if the heavens themselves were listening, he broke through.

The bullets did not claim him.

The arrows did not stop him.

With barely five hundred riders left, he burst out of Jianchang.

Ahead, a narrow river appeared.

He urged his horse forward with all his strength. The horse leaped, clearing the water in a single bound. Even the legendary leap of Liu Bei's mount over Tanxi would pale in comparison.

He landed on the other side and did not dare slow down.

Bullets could still cross the river.

He kept riding.

Behind him, the pursuers halted at the riverbank.

"Jinzhou... that is Jinzhou ahead!"

"We made it!"

The surviving riders cheered weakly.

Dorgon finally exhaled, his entire body loosening at once.

"We are alive."

A faint smile crept onto his face.

"Jinzhou belongs to Zu Dashou. He may be ambiguous in his loyalties, but he will not dare attack us."

"We are safe now."

Chapter 1336 This Is Fun

Lu Xiangsheng led his pursuing force to the edge of Jianchang.

Ahead of them stretched open grassland.

On paper, this land still belonged to the Ming. In reality, it was a Mongol pasture, something Lu Xiangsheng understood very clearly.

He frowned slightly as he studied the horizon.

"Dorgon has already entered the Jianchang pasture. This is Mongol territory. If we continue the pursuit, we must be prepared to deal with them at any moment."

Truthfully, he did not consider the Mongols a major threat anymore.

Since taking office as Governor-General of Xuanda, he had opened horse markets at Hukou and maintained steady trade with the Mongols. He had even formed a personal friendship with a tribal leader named Qitan.

But Lu Xiangsheng also knew one thing very well.

The Mongols were not a unified state.

They were a collection of tribes, each with its own will, its own interests, and its own decisions. Being friends with Qitan did not mean the Mongols of Jianchang would treat him the same way.

They might welcome him.

Or they might shoot arrows first and ask questions later.

Just as he was weighing the risks, a massive cloud of dust rose ahead.

A cavalry force appeared.

The sheer scale of it made Lu Xiangsheng's heart tighten for a moment. He was just about to issue orders for battle when a familiar voice rang out from the front.

"Lord Lu, long time no see!"

Lu Xiangsheng focused his gaze and then blinked in surprise.

"Qitan?"

The Mongol leader rode forward, grinning.

Lu Xiangsheng could not hide his astonishment.

"Weren't you north of Xuanfu? Why are you here?"

Qitan laughed.

"Our Great Khan Eje issued a call to arms against the Qing. All tribes were summoned. I have been operating in this region recently. Yesterday, we heard that Dorgon passed through here. Then we received word that you would be pursuing him through this route, so the Khan's envoy Zhebu sent me to assist you."

Lu Xiangsheng froze for a brief moment.

His route... was known to the Mongols?

His movements had been predicted this accurately?

For a man used to controlling information, this realization was unsettling.

Qitan did not care about his confusion. He waved his hand.

"I brought horses."

Behind him, Mongol riders led forward spare mounts.

The Mongols always traveled with multiple horses per rider, so Lu Xiangsheng had not paid it much attention earlier. Now he realized the intention.

They had come to supply his army.

A strange feeling rose in his chest.

Not quite gratitude, not quite disbelief, but something close to both.

His nine thousand troops quickly began mounting up. Within a short time, seven to eight thousand men were on horseback.

But they still lacked over a thousand mounts.

The formation stalled for a moment.

Then, from the northern grasslands, a deep rumbling sound rolled in.

Everyone turned.

A fleet of iron beasts approached.

Steam transport trucks.

They came in formation, stopping neatly in front of Lu Xiangsheng's army.

Qitan grinned.

"Transport vehicles are here. The rest of your men can ride those."

Lu Xiangsheng stared.

For the first time in a long while, the composed commander looked completely shaken.

What kind of weapon... was this?

Not just him. The Tianxiong Army soldiers, Yang Guozhu, and the rest of the officers all stood there in stunned silence.

Only Wang Pu remained calm.

He had long since been in quiet contact with Gaocun's people, drinking, exchanging favors, and watching Dao Xuan Tianzun operas like a regular patron.

He knew exactly what these machines were.

The remaining thousand soldiers climbed into the cargo beds.

They looked around with disbelief.

"This thing can carry us?"

"There are twenty people here. How does it even move?"

Before anyone could answer, the engine roared to life.

Black smoke burst out.

The soldiers coughed violently.

The driver laughed, tossing coal into the boiler.

"Hold onto the rails, brothers. We're moving."

The trucks lurched forward.

The grassland was far from smooth, and these early machines had no comfort to speak of. The faster they went, the more violently they bounced.

The soldiers in the back howled.

"Ahhh!"

"Whoa!"

"Hey this is actually fun!"

It felt like riding a chaotic amusement ride. Instead of fear, excitement took over.

Soon, the mounted soldiers grew jealous.

"Why do they get to ride that thing while we're stuck on horses?"

"I want a turn too!"

Even Lu Xiangsheng felt tempted.

He sat on his horse, watching the bouncing trucks with a strange longing.

But he was the Minister of War.

He could not lose face like that.

He endured.

At least for a moment.

Then one of the trucks pulled up beside him.

The driver leaned out with a grin.

"Lord Lu, the cab has room for one more. My gunner got locked up for breaking regulations, so the seat is empty. Want to try?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not hesitate.

He dismounted instantly and leapt onto the truck with surprising agility.

The position was meant for a heavy firearm operator. There was no machine gun yet, only a large-caliber musket mounted in place.

Lu Xiangsheng grabbed it, turning it left and right, aiming at imaginary targets.

A grin crept onto his face.

This... felt good.

The mixed force of Mongol cavalry and steam transports surged forward, cutting across Jianchang at high speed, heading straight for Jinzhou.

---

The sun dipped low, painting the sky blood red.

Dorgon and his remaining five hundred riders moved slowly eastward.

The mad sprint across Jianchang had drained them completely. Both men and horses were on the verge of collapse.

They could not run anymore.

If they did, they would die without the enemy even lifting a weapon.

Dorgon rode in silence.

Behind him, hooves thundered.

A scout rushed up, face pale.

"Commander, bad news. Lu Xiangsheng has caught up again."

Dorgon's eyes widened.

"What? He has infantry. How could he possibly catch us?"

The scout swallowed.

"The Mongols gave them horses. And... those iron vehicles. They crossed Jianchang at full speed. They are already inside Jinzhou now, advancing on foot behind us."

Dorgon cursed under his breath.

"Damn it. Damn it all."

He tightened his grip on the reins.

"Everyone, gather your strength. We move faster again."

The chase was not over.

Not even close.

Chapter 1337 Lord Lu Sees Through Everything

Dorgon was exhausted to the bone, yet he still forced himself forward, because stopping meant death and only movement kept the illusion of survival alive.

His cavalry looked even worse.

The horses dragged their hooves as if molten lead had been poured into their legs, while the riders swayed on their backs with half-closed eyes, barely conscious and held upright only by habit and fear.

This was no longer a retreat in the normal sense.

This was survival stretched to its absolute limit.

Dorgon kept speaking, not because he believed his own words, but because silence would crush whatever little will they had left.

"Hold on a bit longer. Once we pass Jinzhou, we are home."

The words drifted through the wind, weak yet necessary, like a lie everyone agreed to believe.

Then something appeared ahead.

A small border fort stood quietly in the distance.

These forts were scattered all along the Ming frontier, remnants of the system built by Zhu Yuanzhang to lock down the Nine Borders and hold the empire together through sheer structure and discipline.

Time, however, had hollowed them out.

Most had become decorations, empty shells fading into the landscape, standing only because no one had bothered to tear them down.

Dorgon knew this.

He knew that around Jinzhou, most of these forts had long been abandoned, with Zu Dashou pulling all troops into the main city and playing his usual balancing game between survival and betrayal.

So Dorgon did not slow down.

He intended to pass by casually, like stepping around a useless rock on the road.

Then everything changed.

Heads appeared on the wall.

Not one or two, but a whole line of them, popping up almost in unison.

Shouts erupted from within the fort.

Soldiers ran into position.

Weapons were raised.

Formations locked into place with an efficiency that did not belong to a decayed outpost.

A moment later, the beacon tower ignited, sending a thick column of smoke straight into the sky.

Dorgon stared, his mind refusing to process what he was seeing.

"What the hell is this."

Behind him, the remaining five hundred cavalry echoed the same disbelief.

"What the hell is this."

Anger replaced confusion almost instantly.

"Zu Dashou, are you insane? If you are sick, go find a doctor instead of playing games here."

A Ming officer stepped forward on the wall and shouted back without hesitation.

"Zu Dashou is already dead under our blades. This land now belongs to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Dorgon's thoughts stalled.

For a brief moment, nothing made sense.

Then he saw the soldiers on the wall raise their firearms in perfect coordination, each barrel aligning directly with him as if guided by a single will.

They did not fire.

They simply aimed.

The message was clear.

Come closer if you dare.

Dorgon felt his chest tighten, not from fear alone, but from the crushing realization that the world around him had shifted without his knowledge.

Yet retreat was impossible.

Behind him, Lu Xiangsheng was closing in.

Ahead of him, this fort blocked the only path home.

He had no choice.

"Charge. We go around it."

He drove his heels into his horse and surged forward, forcing momentum back into his collapsing force.

The cavalry followed immediately, not out of confidence, but because stopping would kill them faster.

They did not seek to fight.

They only wanted to slip past.

However, a border fort existed precisely to deny passage.

The ground around it was filled with obstacles, deer antlers, barricades, wooden spikes, fences, and random debris arranged in a chaotic yet effective pattern.

Dorgon's horse twisted and leaped, barely maintaining balance as it navigated the nightmare terrain.

Then the command came from above.

"Fire."

Gunshots exploded across the field.

The air filled with the sound of impact and the sharp cries of men being struck down.

One by one, riders fell from their horses, their bodies hitting the ground and disappearing beneath the chaos.

Dorgon felt the pressure of bullets slicing through the air above his head, each passing shot a reminder of how thin the line between life and death had become.

He gritted his teeth and pushed forward harder.

Fear no longer mattered.

Only movement mattered.

The defenders were few in number, barely a hundred men, and they could not sustain continuous fire.

After several volleys, Dorgon's force broke through.

When they regrouped on the other side, a quick count revealed the cost.

Another hundred gone.

Four hundred remained.

Dorgon did not allow himself to dwell on it.

"Keep moving."

Then he saw the horizon.

Smoke columns rising everywhere.

Beacon after beacon igniting across the landscape.

The entire defensive network around Jinzhou was activating.

This was no longer a scattered resistance.

This was a system closing in.

Dorgon's eyes hardened.

"Then we keep going."

Not long after, another fort appeared ahead.

Dorgon prepared to repeat the same maneuver.

But this time, something stood in front of it.

An army.

Fully formed.

Waiting.

A single banner rose above them, its character clear even from a distance.

Cao.

At the front stood Cao Bianjiao, mounted and steady, holding his spear with casual confidence, his gaze fixed on Dorgon as if watching prey that had already been cornered.

He spoke loudly, his tone almost amused.

"If I shoot you, it would not feel like a proper victory, so today I will kill you with this spear instead. Do you dare to face me."

Dorgon's vision turned red as rage burned away the last of his restraint.

"Shut up and die."

He drew his spear and charged.

Cao Bianjiao laughed and spurred his horse forward as well.

The distance between them vanished in an instant.

Their spears collided with a sharp, ringing impact.

Cao Bianjiao remained completely stable, his posture unchanged.

Dorgon's body shook violently, nearly thrown off balance.

Under normal circumstances, he would never have been this weak, but exhaustion had hollowed him out completely.

Cao Bianjiao shook his head slightly.

"So this is Dorgon."

There was disappointment in his voice.

Dorgon roared and charged again, forcing his failing body to respond one last time.

They crossed paths once more.

This time, Cao Bianjiao struck cleanly.

The spear hit Dorgon square in the chest.

The armor held, but the force drove him backward, throwing him off his horse and onto the ground.

The moment he fell, everything was decided.

Cao Bianjiao did not hesitate.

He rode forward and thrust downward.

The spear pierced through Dorgon's face, breaking through bone and ending everything in a single, decisive motion.

Blood scattered across the ground as the helmet flew off and rolled away.

Cao Bianjiao pulled back his weapon and exhaled lightly.

"This was not very interesting."

He raised his hand.

The army surged forward, swallowing the remaining four hundred cavalry without resistance.

The battle ended as quickly as it had begun.

The next day at noon, Lu Xiangsheng arrived with his infantry.

As they approached the fort, they saw a head hanging above the gate, swaying gently in the wind.

It was Dorgon.

Lu Xiangsheng stopped and stared for a moment before breaking into a rare smile.

"Which general is stationed here."

"I am."

Cao Bianjiao stepped forward and cupped his hands respectfully.

"Minister Lu, your strategy was flawless. The encirclement was perfect, and I merely followed your arrangement to complete the task."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked, clearly caught off guard.

"I do not recall making such an arrangement."

Cao Bianjiao smiled calmly.

"You are the Minister of War. All movements of the army fall under your command."

Lu Xiangsheng opened his mouth, then closed it again, unsure whether to argue or accept the logic.

It sounded correct.

Yet something about it felt completely wrong.

Cao Bianjiao removed the head from the gate, placed it into a box, and handed it over.

"Please take this back to the capital. With this, the voices advocating peace will lose their footing, and the pro-war faction will gain the upper hand."

Lu Xiangsheng's eyes sharpened instantly.

He understood.

This was not just a victory on the battlefield.

This was leverage.

"This time, the direction of the war can finally be decided."

And with that, the balance of the entire system shifted quietly, setting the stage for everything that would follow.

Chapter 1338 This One You Do NOT Mess With

Shengjing.

The news of Dorgon's death tore through the palace like a blade carried by the wind, reaching the inner court far faster than any official report could ever manage.

Hong Taiji listened without interrupting. His face darkened as the final words were spoken, and when the messenger withdrew, he let out a long, controlled breath that carried more calculation than grief.

The situation had shifted.

He was not a mediocre ruler who reacted blindly to battlefield losses. He was a strategist who saw patterns where others saw chaos, and right now the pattern in front of him was tightening like a noose.

If Zhu Youjian were to analyze this situation, he might still hesitate or misjudge the direction. Hong Taiji did not have that luxury, nor did he make those mistakes.

He remained silent for a long time, brows furrowed, mind moving rapidly through layers of military pressure, supply constraints, and future capability.

Finally, he spoke.

"From today onward, we shift to strategic contraction and defense. All offensive campaigns are suspended. We hold our territory and stabilize our lines."

He paused, then turned slightly.

"Fan Wencheng."

Fan Wencheng stepped forward immediately, bowing. "Your Majesty."

Hong Taiji's gaze sharpened.

"Send people to establish private contact with the Ming court. We will pursue negotiations. Stall for time until our iron war machines are completed."

There was no hesitation in his tone, and more importantly, no shame.

In the Ming court, officials obsessed over appearances, disguising negotiations as 'pacification' to preserve face. Hong Taiji had no such weakness. He called it exactly what it was, a delay tactic.

Fan Wencheng nodded with full understanding.

"The Ming court has many who favor peace. Among them, the grand eunuch Gao Qiqian is a particularly useful entry point. I will arrange contact through him."

Hong Taiji gave a short acknowledgment.

"Do it."

Fan Wencheng withdrew.

The hall returned to silence as Hong Taiji looked out the window, eyes fixed on the distant sky, his thoughts still moving.

Then, suddenly, his expression shifted.

"...Damn it."

He frowned slightly.

"I forgot to assign a codename to the operation."

For a brief moment, the tension of war strategy collided with something absurdly trivial, and then the moment passed.

---

Near the imperial estates of Shuntian Prefecture, a small fertilizer plant was running at full capacity.

Not far from it, a newly constructed steam engine workshop had begun operations, its structure still smelling of fresh timber and hot iron.

Inside, a group of blue-hatted technicians from Gao Family Village were guiding newly recruited craftsmen through the basics of industrial work.

"This section needs to be monitored carefully. The technical parameters here are critical, so do not make adjustments casually."

One of the craftsmen scratched his head awkwardly.

"I cannot read."

The technician did not show even a hint of frustration.

"That is not a problem. We use Arabic numerals to simplify measurement. Look here, this is one, this is two, and this is three."

He demonstrated patiently, guiding the man step by step while others gathered around, watching and learning.

The atmosphere was active, almost lively, filled with the sound of instruction, confusion, and gradual understanding.

Then the main gate burst open.

An official stormed in, voice loud and sharp.

"Hey! What is going on here? How dare your factory poach government craftsmen like this?"

Everyone turned at once.

The Prefect of Shuntian had arrived.

Although technically just a prefect, his authority in the capital was immense. He could argue face to face with provincial governors without losing ground, and very few people dared to provoke him.

Liang Shixian, serving as the deputy prefect, was naturally a rank below him.

Seeing his superior, Liang Shixian stepped forward with a polite smile.

"Prefect, we are not poaching anyone. We simply posted recruitment notices. The craftsmen came here of their own accord."

The prefect's expression darkened.

"Your notices are the problem. The wages you offer are absurdly high. Are you hiring blacksmiths or raising fathers? My government workshops have been emptied. Every rotating craftsman paid their exemption fee and ran off, and now the master artisans come to me daily complaining that they cannot complete their assigned tasks."

Liang Shixian maintained his composure.

"Rotational craftsmen have always been allowed to pay the fee and leave. That is established policy. Surely this does not violate any rules, so there is no need to direct your frustration at me."

The prefect snorted.

"That would be tolerable if it were only rotational workers. Even the registered resident craftsmen are fleeing. They abandon their household registration and become unregistered drifters. Do you think I cannot see what is happening? I suspect your factory is hiding a large number of illegal craftsmen."

The moment those words landed, several workers nearby went pale.

They were exactly that.

Runaway craftsmen who had abandoned their status for higher wages, hiding inside the factory, working day and night without stepping outside.

They had believed that with Liang Shixian backing the operation, no officials would dare investigate.

They had not expected the prefect himself to come.

If caught, they would not simply be fined. They would be sent into military servitude.

Fear spread through them instantly.

The prefect's eyes swept across the room, sharp and practiced, picking out nervous faces with ease.

He pointed.

"You, you, and you. And you as well. You are unregistered, are you not?"

The accused craftsmen immediately ducked their heads, some even crouching behind tables as if that might make them invisible.

The prefect let out a cold laugh and prepared to order their arrest.

At that exact moment, the door to the reception room opened.

A man stepped out casually.

The prefect turned to look, and his expression froze.

It was the Grand Secretary, He Fengsheng.

"...Ah?"

He Fengsheng smiled lightly, as if he had just wandered into the situation by accident.

"What is all this commotion? This factory belongs to me."

That single sentence hit harder than any official decree.

The prefect was instantly stuck between authority and reality.

The factory had been funded by Liang Shixian, but on paper it was registered under He Fengsheng's name. In the capital, that distinction meant everything.

Without a powerful patron, a small official could be crushed at any moment. With one, even a questionable enterprise became untouchable.

And He Fengsheng, despite his reputation for avoiding trouble, was still the Grand Secretary.

That title alone carried weight that the prefect could not casually challenge.

Seeing the situation stabilize, He Fengsheng gestured calmly.

"Come, come, let us have some tea."

The prefect had no real choice. He followed inside and sat down.

Tea was poured, a fragrant Bi Luo Chun steaming gently between them.

Only after a sip did He Fengsheng speak again, his tone unhurried.

"You know me. I have no interest in stirring trouble. This small factory is nothing more than a way to earn a little silver."

The prefect remained silent, watching carefully.

He Fengsheng continued.

"Every coin this factory earns includes a tax. I assume you do not understand what a value-added tax is, so let me simplify it. For every product sold, a portion goes directly to the national treasury."

The prefect inhaled sharply.

"To the treasury?"

He Fengsheng nodded.

"Yes. To the treasury. This factory is earning money for the Emperor."

The implication landed instantly.

Offending He Fengsheng might be manageable. Offending the flow of money into the treasury was not.

That meant provoking the Ministry of Revenue, and beyond that, provoking the Emperor himself.

The Emperor was known for being ruthless in matters of finance. Even trusted officials could be dismissed, punished, and exiled without hesitation.

The prefect's attitude shifted almost immediately.

"I see. In that case, there is no issue. These craftsmen are serving the state regardless of where they work. We can consider them transferred from the government workshops. There is no need to call them runaways."

Outside the room, the craftsmen who had been listening secretly let out a collective breath, relief washing over them as the system bent just enough to let them survive.

## Chapter 1339 "A Small Favor"

In the capital, the nobles and high officials had recently become obsessed with a single topic, and that topic had nothing to do with war, borders, or court intrigue, but everything to do with one thing.

Factories.

More specifically, how to build them, how to run them, and how to make absurd amounts of money from them.

Liang Shixian's fertilizer plant had already become a legend.

It did not merely make money, it printed money in a way that made even seasoned officials feel their hearts itch with greed, and what shocked everyone even more was that Liang Shixian had chosen to withdraw at the peak and sell the entire operation.

The buyer who took over continued to earn at the same explosive rate, which only proved that the system itself worked, not just the man.

That was when the capital truly lost its composure.

Everyone wanted in.

Soon after, Liang Shixian released the technical knowledge behind the fertilizer process. Most officials could not understand a single line of the chemistry involved, but they did not need to, because understanding was not required to profit.

All they needed to do was invest money and hire the right people.

Specifically, a blue-hatted technician.

What followed was not recruitment, but plunder.

Officials began offering absurdly high salaries, pulling technicians out of the original factory one by one until the place was practically emptied. With those technicians in hand, new fertilizer plants began appearing across the region.

Each official naturally built within their own sphere of influence.

Those rooted in Tianjin established factories in Tianjin, those based in Baoding expanded into Baoding, and so on, each carving out territory like cautious predators who understood that stepping into another's domain would trigger unnecessary conflict.

Most respected this invisible boundary, because cooperation brought stable profit, and stability was far more valuable than reckless expansion.

Of course, there were always exceptions.

When territories overlapped, the marketplace turned into a battlefield, and those clashes were just as brutal as any military engagement, only fought with silver instead of steel.

Fertilizer plants began to sprout everywhere, spreading like spring grass after rain.

Just when the first wave stabilized, Liang Shixian made another move.

He introduced a steam engine factory.

At first, the officials had no idea what a steam engine even was, and they treated it as some strange curiosity, but that ignorance did not last long. As steam-powered textile machines began rolling out of the factory in large numbers, and as new-style textile workshops started appearing, realization hit them all at once.

This was not just another product.

This was a foundation.

Officials from the south, especially those with Jiangnan backgrounds, reacted first. Their commercial instincts were sharper, their experience deeper, and they immediately purchased large quantities of steam textile machines, loaded them onto ships, and transported them back south to establish full-scale textile operations.

By the time northern officials finally understood what was happening, the supply had already been exhausted.

They could not buy machines anymore.

So they adapted.

If producing textiles made money, then producing the machines that produced textiles would make even more money, and it would also eliminate the need to deal with distribution and retail.

That realization shifted the battlefield upstream.

Soon, the same ruthless hiring frenzy that had emptied the fertilizer plants swept into the steam engine factories. Blue-hatted technicians from Gao Family Village became the most valuable resource in the entire system.

A technician might barely settle into a workshop before another offer arrived with even higher pay, pulling him away again.

Factories modeled after Gao Family Village began spreading into every industry imaginable, each one reinforcing the system, each one expanding its reach.

And through all of this, one rule remained untouched.

Taxes.

Every factory paid the value-added tax.

The rule had been established at the very beginning, and once it existed, anyone who entered the system had no choice but to accept it. Refusing to pay meant being excluded entirely.

At this moment, inside a restaurant in the Eight Great Alleys of the capital, a group of officials gathered around a large table, and at the head of that table sat He Fengsheng.

They raised their cups one after another, offering him toasts with exaggerated respect.

Finally, one official set his cup down and smiled.

"Lord He, we invited you here today because we wish to discuss something with you."

He Fengsheng blinked slowly.

"If it is a major matter, I cannot help. If it is a minor matter, you do not need my help."

The officials quickly waved their hands.

"Please do not refuse yet. At least hear us out first."

He Fengsheng sighed.

"Fine, what is it?"

One of them leaned in slightly and lowered his voice.

"All of us here have recently established new factories, and as you know, these factories are extremely profitable. However, there is a problem with the rules governing them."

He Fengsheng raised an eyebrow.

"What problem?"

"The problem," the official said with a bitter smile, "is that these factories require us to pay value-added tax. You understand our situation. When have people like us ever paid taxes before? Now that we have entered this new system, we are forced to hand over a portion of our profits. It is rather unpleasant."

He Fengsheng immediately understood.

They wanted to abolish the tax.

He leaned back slightly.

"And what do you expect me to do?"

The officials smiled.

"You are the Grand Secretary. If you take the lead and revise the rules, this tax can be removed. After all, you also own a steam engine factory. You must find this tax equally frustrating."

He Fengsheng did indeed own such a factory, transferred to him by Liang Shixian, and he was indeed paying the tax, and yes, it did sting a little.

But none of that mattered.

He knew exactly how dangerous his position was.

During this reign, Grand Secretaries were replaced as frequently as lanterns in a festival. Some were merely dismissed, while others ended up in prison, and the line between the two outcomes was thinner than anyone liked to admit.

Sitting in that seat felt like sitting over a burning brazier.

One careless move, and he would be finished.

He Fengsheng shook his head vigorously.

"I cannot handle this. Absolutely cannot."

The officials pressed him.

"You are the Grand Secretary. What could possibly be beyond your authority?"

He Fengsheng did not bother arguing further. He simply stood up and fled, abandoning the table, the food, and the wine, leaving behind a group of stunned officials.

They stared at each other in disbelief.

They had never seen a Grand Secretary run away from responsibility so decisively.

After a moment, they began whispering among themselves.

"He may not help us, but he clearly will not oppose us either."

"That is right. He is practically a decoration."

"In that case, we proceed without him."

"Yes. We take this to court."

"Tomorrow's morning assembly. We present the issue forcefully."

"I already have the argument prepared. We say that the court must not compete with the people for profit, and that excessive taxation will ultimately burden the commoners."

"That sounds convincing."

"We overwhelm the Emperor with numbers."

"As long as enough voices speak at once, he will yield."

The plan solidified quickly.

They would attack together.

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The next morning arrived.

Zhu Youjian had spent most of the night reviewing memorials, sleeping barely two hours before taking his seat on the throne. His posture slumped slightly, his energy drained, his voice lacking strength.

"If there are matters to report, speak. If not, the court is dismissed."

Immediately, an official stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, regarding the recent fertilizer and steam textile factories, I have something to report."

Another voice followed.

"And I as well."

"And I."

One after another, officials stepped out, filling the hall with momentum before the Emperor could even react.

Then the main speaker began.

He laid out the argument in full, speaking of burdens on the people, of the dangers of excessive taxation, of the principle that the state should not compete with its citizens for profit.

Others followed, reinforcing the narrative, layering pressure with every sentence.

Within moments, Zhu Youjian felt his head swell with confusion.

He turned instinctively toward He Fengsheng.

These factories had originated under the Grand Secretary's influence. Surely he would step forward to defend them.

But when Zhu Youjian looked, he found He Fengsheng standing there with eyes half-closed, posture calm, as if he had entered a state of meditation, completely detached from the chaos around him.

Zhu Youjian froze.

Then panic flickered.

He quickly shifted his gaze.

Liang Shixian.

Their eyes met.

Liang Shixian smiled faintly, adjusted his robes with deliberate calm, and stepped forward into the storm.

Chapter 1340 Keep Paying Taxes

The moment Liang Shixian stepped forward, the entire court shifted.

It was not subtle.

Every pair of eyes locked onto him as if an invisible signal had just been triggered, because everyone in that hall knew exactly who the real problem was, and it was not the Emperor, not the tax policy, not even the factories themselves, but this one man who had started everything from nothing and then calmly set the rules of the game.

He had built the first fertilizer plant.

He had proposed the value-added tax.

He had willingly earned less money just to force the entire system to pay the state.

In the eyes of the officials, this was not normal behavior, this was madness, the kind of madness that only existed in loyalists who did not understand how the world actually worked.

Or worse, the kind of madness that came from someone who understood the world too well and decided to break it anyway.

In an instant, the officials mentally repositioned themselves.

Not as colleagues.

Not as neutral observers.

But as enemies.

They were already preparing arguments, counterarguments, rhetorical traps, and if necessary, even physical confrontation, because the Ming court had never been a place of pure words and calm reasoning, and a fistfight in front of the throne would not even rank among the strangest things that had happened there.

Liang Shixian, however, stood there as if none of it mattered, his expression relaxed, almost amused.

"Gentlemen," he said, smiling lightly, "you claim that this tax policy is competing with the people for profit, but what you are actually doing is competing with the state treasury."

A chorus erupted immediately.

"I am not!"

"That is not what we mean!"

"You are twisting our words!"

Liang Shixian waved a hand as if brushing away dust, his tone casual but his words sharp enough to cut through the noise.

"There is no need to argue further. Even if I explain it, you will deny it, and each of you will continue pretending to be loyal officials while calculating your own private gains."

On the throne, Zhu Youjian nearly teared up.

That line had landed exactly where it needed to, and it felt like someone had finally said out loud what he himself had been thinking but could never articulate in front of these thick-skinned men.

However, everyone in the hall also knew that truth alone would not win this battle.

Logic did not defeat men who had already decided on their positions.

Liang Shixian raised a hand and pointed directly at one of the officials in the front row.

"I know you," he said calmly. "You paid a high salary to poach a blue-hat technical director from my factory. His surname is Zheng. With his help, you built a fertilizer plant in Tianjin."

The official did not look embarrassed.

On the contrary, he looked proud.

"That is correct," he replied with a smirk. "He was underpaid with you, so I offered him ten taels a month and he came to me. If you are unhappy, you are welcome to offer him more and take him back."

Liang Shixian chuckled.

"Do you believe that if I say a single word, he will resign from your factory and return to mine?"

The official almost laughed out loud.

He had seen the man's loyalty with his own eyes, had seen him work tirelessly to establish the factory, had watched him accept the salary with gratitude.

There was no way such a person would walk away just because someone said a sentence.

"I would very much like to see you try," he said coldly.

Liang Shixian turned and pointed at another official.

"And you," he continued, "you hired a technician surnamed Li from my side and built a steam textile machinery plant."

"That is right," the second official replied without hesitation. "I have money, so I hire talent."

Liang Shixian nodded, as if agreeing.

"He became your chief manager, handled your steel supply chain, and brought a technical team to solve your engineering problems."

The official smiled wider, thinking this was praise.

"He is indeed capable, which only proves you failed to retain him."

Liang Shixian's smile deepened, and for a brief moment, something almost playful flickered in his eyes.

"Have you ever considered," he said, "that he was not poached by you, but sent there by me?"

That sentence landed like a stone in water.

The official froze for a fraction of a second, then immediately dismissed it.

"Impossible," he said. "He came for the salary."

Liang Shixian laughed, not loudly, but enough to make the tension shift.

"Believe whatever you like."

Then, without warning, he turned toward the throne and bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, I propose that five days from now, if these officials still oppose the value-added tax, we should abolish it entirely."

Zhu Youjian nearly jumped from his seat.

"What are you saying? That cannot be done!"

Liang Shixian looked up, blinking once, his expression calm and almost reassuring.

"In five days, they will change their minds."

The officials erupted again, voices overlapping, dismissive, confident, even mocking.

"Ridiculous!"

"Nonsense!"

"Delusional!"

Liang Shixian did not argue further.

Instead, he offered a simple suggestion.

"When you return home today, you might want to check your factories," he said lightly. "Make sure your technical managers are still there, because without them, your factories will not run."

The officials scoffed.

They did not believe him.

Not truly.

Yet even as they dismissed his words, something small and uncomfortable settled in the back of their minds.

The court session ended.

The officials dispersed.

One of them, who had established a factory in Shuntian Prefecture, had barely stepped into his residence when a servant rushed forward, breathless.

"Master, something terrible has happened. The manager of the new factory has resigned."

The official froze.

"What do you mean, resigned?"

"He left without explanation, returned all the money, and walked away."

Panic surged instantly.

The factory was new, the technology unfamiliar, the entire operation dependent on that one man who understood how everything worked.

Without him, the factory was nothing more than a pile of equipment.

"Take me there," he said immediately, rushing out.

As he reached the street, he saw another official running out of the house across from him, equally frantic.

Their eyes met.

No words were needed.

Both understood.

Their managers were gone.

More officials appeared along the street, one after another, all moving in the same direction, all wearing the same expression of disbelief and rising fear.

"What is happening?"

"My manager left during the court session."

"Mine too."

"How did Liang Shixian do this?"

"He was still arguing with us in court, so how did our people resign at the same time?"

The questions had no answers.

They rushed to their factories and found letters.

Simple letters.

"I am returning home for personal matters. I will come back in five days."

Five days.

The same number Liang Shixian had mentioned.

Understanding dawned all at once.

This was not coincidence.

This was control.

If they backed down in court after five days, the managers would return and everything would resume.

If they continued to resist, the managers would never come back, and their factories would collapse before they could even stabilize.

"Damn it!"

Curses filled the air, loud and unrestrained, but anger did not solve their problem.