

Great Ming 1341

Chapter 1341 The Jurchens Will Definitely Lose

For the first time, the officials in court truly understood what it meant to have core technology controlled by someone else, because the moment those blue-cap managers disappeared, their factories did not merely slow down but instead lost all ability to function, turning expensive facilities into silent and useless shells that could not even sustain basic operations.

Only then did the realization begin to settle in, slow at first and then all at once, that those managers had never truly belonged to them, and that what they believed to be aggressive poaching through high salaries was in fact a carefully orchestrated placement by Liang Shixian himself, who had deliberately allowed them to take these people away.

They thought they were exploiting talent.

He was exploiting their capital, their networks, and their hunger for profit.

They wanted money.

He wanted scale.

And now that the system had spread, the roles of master and tool had quietly reversed without anyone noticing until it was far too late.

"This cannot possibly be done by Liang Shixian alone," one official muttered, his voice carrying both frustration and unease as he tried to reconstruct the logic behind what had happened.

Another immediately followed, "There must be someone backing him, and the only possible answer is the Emperor."

At first, that explanation seemed natural, because power at that level usually flowed from the throne, yet the moment it was spoken aloud, doubt crept in from all directions, because the same officials who served Zhu Youjian daily also knew his limitations all too well.

"Do you truly believe His Majesty has this kind of foresight," a third official said with a dry laugh, unable to fully suppress his disdain.

"Then who is it," someone else asked, and that simple question exposed the most dangerous part of the situation, which was not the existence of the system itself but the fact that its true architect remained completely invisible.

For the first time, they were not merely facing a political opponent but a hidden force that operated beyond their understanding.

Silence lingered briefly before one official spoke again, this time with a more grounded tone.

"No matter who stands behind Liang Shixian, we have already learned one thing, and that is that technology cannot remain in another person's hands if we wish to survive in this new system."

That statement did not meet any opposition, because the lesson had been learned through loss rather than theory.

"But where do we get such knowledge," someone asked, voicing the practical difficulty that none of them could ignore.

"I have heard of something," another official said, lowering his voice slightly as if sharing a valuable secret, "in Kunshan of Southern Zhili, there is a man named Gu Yanwu who sold a large portion of his ancestral land to establish a school, and it is said that this school teaches not only classical texts but also practical knowledge such as astronomy, geography, and various unconventional studies."

This piece of information spread quickly among them, not because of its novelty but because it provided a possible path forward that aligned perfectly with their existing family structures.

One official immediately began outlining a plan, "We can send our collateral branch members to study there, because our main line will continue pursuing official careers while these side branches learn commerce and technical skills, and once they return, we will no longer depend on outsiders."

The others nodded in agreement, because this was a model that had sustained elite families for generations, where political power and economic strength reinforced each other in a stable cycle.

"This is a sound approach," another said, and within moments the decision spread across the group.

Soon after, a wave of collateral descendants from powerful families began traveling toward Luoyang, carrying with them expectations of strengthening their clans and reclaiming control over industry.

What none of them realized was that knowledge does not simply reinforce existing structures, because once new ideas take root, they often begin to reshape the very systems that gave birth to them, and these same individuals might one day become the force that fractures large clans into smaller, independent units.

While the court remained entangled in its struggle over industry and control, Lu Xiangsheng returned to the capital once more, and the news of Dorgon's death had already reached the city ahead of him, spreading rapidly and igniting a wave of excitement among the people.

For decades, the northern threat had pressed heavily upon them, shaping their fears and limiting their movement, yet now that balance appeared to have shifted, and confidence began to return in a way that could be seen not in speeches but in actions.

Refugees who had once crowded into the capital began to leave, returning to their villages with carts loaded with fertilizer, their faces carrying a mixture of relief and anticipation as they imagined the coming harvest.

At the same time, the rapid expansion of fertilizer factories, driven ironically by the same officials who had tried to resist the system, created competition that pushed prices downward, making these goods more accessible to ordinary farmers.

Industrial changes extended beyond agriculture, as improved mining and steel production increased the availability of tools, reducing costs and gradually replacing older methods of production.

For the common people, the change was immediate and tangible, and for the first time in years, life no longer felt like an endless struggle for survival.

During the next court session, Lu Xiangsheng stepped forward once again, and this time his presence carried not only authority but also momentum built from recent victories.

"Your Majesty," he said, his voice steady and filled with conviction, "Jinzhou has been reclaimed, and the enemy cavalry has been completely destroyed, so this is the best possible moment to advance into Liaodong and recover our lost territory."

He did not hesitate to call Shenyang by its original identity, emphasizing that it remained land belonging to the Ming despite being renamed Shengjing by the enemy, and his words struck directly at the core of imperial pride.

Zhu Youjian felt the pull of that argument immediately, because no emperor could tolerate the existence of a rival regime claiming sovereignty over his territory, and past rebellions had always been met with decisive force whenever possible.

Now, for the first time in years, he felt that such action might actually succeed.

"Lu Xiangsheng," he asked, his voice rising slightly with restrained excitement, "do you truly believe that victory is certain?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not hesitate, and his answer came with the weight of absolute certainty.

"Victory is certain."

That confidence resonated through the court, strengthening the momentum toward war, and for a brief moment it seemed as though the decision had already been made.

Yet just as the tide reached its peak, Gao Qiqian stepped forward and disrupted the flow.

"Your Majesty, this course of action is unwise," he said, his tone calm but firm, and his presence immediately shifted the atmosphere from momentum to resistance.

He argued that the nation had only just begun to recover from disaster, that internal stability remained fragile, and that launching a large-scale campaign at such a moment would place unnecessary strain on the state.

Lu Xiangsheng reacted instantly, rejecting the premise of the argument.

"This is not an external war," he said, his voice carrying both logic and force, "Shenyang is our land, and these so-called enemies are merely rebellious subjects, so how can reclaiming our own territory be considered an external campaign."

Gao Qiqian realized his earlier wording had been flawed, and he quickly adjusted his stance while maintaining his opposition.

"Even so," he continued, "these rebels have grown powerful over decades, and their strength should not be underestimated, so to attack their core immediately after a single victory would be reckless, and in my opinion, it would be wiser to pursue a policy of appeasement and consolidation."

At that moment, the court stood divided between two directions, one driven by momentum and opportunity, the other by caution and control, and beneath their arguments, the deeper system conflict continued to unfold, because war required industry, industry required stability, and power itself had already begun to interfere with both.

Chapter 1342 This System Is Not Good

Inside the imperial court, the tension had not cooled in the slightest.

Lu Xiangsheng looked at Gao Qiqian with an expression that mixed disbelief with faint disgust, as if he had just discovered that a man he once tolerated had quietly crossed a line he could no longer ignore.

"You argued for negotiation last time, and I could still write it off as poor judgment or a lack of strategic clarity," Lu Xiangsheng said, his voice steady but edged with something sharper beneath. "But now, with such overwhelming advantage and such a rare opportunity placed directly in our hands, you still insist on peace talks. That is no longer ignorance. That is something else entirely."

He paused for half a breath, then delivered the blow without softening it.

"Tell me honestly. Have you taken money from the enemy?"

For a single instant, Gao Qiqian's heart lurched violently in his chest.

Because he had.

Not long ago, when Dorgon had chased him like a hunting dog drives prey, he had fled in panic all the way to Shanhai Pass, hiding under the protection of Wu Sangui and refusing to step outside unless absolutely necessary. Then news arrived like a thunderclap. Lu Xiangsheng had annihilated Dorgon's forces and killed the man himself.

That should have been a moment of relief.

Instead, it filled Gao Qiqian with bitterness so thick he could almost taste it.

Such a massive merit, such a victory that would echo through the empire, and yet it had nothing to do with him. It all belonged to Lu Xiangsheng, that stubborn man who never gave him face.

Then, at the peak of that resentment, the Manchu agents found him.

They came quietly, respectfully, and most importantly, generously.

A heavy bundle of gold and jewels changed hands, along with a simple request. Speak for peace. Delay the war. Buy them time.

For Gao Qiqian, who already leaned toward negotiation, this was not even a dilemma. It was free money attached to something he already wanted to say.

So he took it.

And now, standing in the court, he let outrage flood his face as if insult alone could wash away guilt.

"You slander me!" he snapped, then immediately turned toward the throne, his expression collapsing into wounded loyalty as tears welled up on command.

"Your Majesty, I have served you since childhood. For decades I have lived only to ease your burdens. Every word I speak, every decision I make, is for you. And now he dares to accuse me of colluding with the enemy?"

His voice trembled just enough to sound convincing.

"How could I possibly do such a thing?"

On the dragon throne, Zhu Youjian visibly wavered.

He had grown up with Gao Qiqian at his side. Familiarity, in moments like this, outweighed logic far more easily than anyone liked to admit.

"Lu Xiangsheng," the emperor said, frowning, "this is the court, not a battlefield for reckless accusations. Gao Qiqian has served me loyally for years. You cannot simply accuse him without proof."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

Not because he doubted himself, but because he understood exactly what kind of wall he had just run into.

Behind Gao Qiqian's lowered sleeves, his eyes flickered with a trace of smug amusement that only Lu Xiangsheng caught.

You are still too inexperienced for this game.

The court shifted again.

Zhu Youjian's thoughts began to tangle, pulled in different directions by every voice around him.

"What Gao Qiqian says is not entirely without reason," he murmured. "We have only just recovered from drought. The rebellions have only recently been suppressed. The foundation of the state is still unstable. If we launch a full campaign now, the cost will be enormous..."

At that moment, Liang Shixian stepped forward calmly, his tone as steady as ever.

"Your Majesty, the recent expansion of factories has significantly increased revenue through value-added taxation. From a financial standpoint, the burden is manageable."

The emperor blinked.

"Is that so?"

Hope flickered again.

"If funding is sufficient, then perhaps..."

Before he could finish, Gao Qiqian moved again, smooth and precise.

"Your Majesty, the Liaodong Guanning army is still owed several years of back pay. When Zu Dashou rebelled, unpaid wages were one of the causes. If we ignore that again, the consequences could be severe."

The emperor stiffened.

That was not something he could dismiss.

Before the tension could settle, another voice cut in.

Cao Huachun stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, since the lifting of maritime restrictions, taxation on domestic and foreign trade has increased sharply. If we allocate part of that income to settle the arrears in one go, the army's morale can be stabilized."

For a moment, the emperor's eyes lit up again.

"That... makes sense."

Across the court, the gazes of the two eunuchs collided, silent but violent, like sparks striking flint.

Gao Qiqian did not speak, but his eyes carried a clear message.

So you have decided to oppose me.

Cao Huachun did not retreat. Whether out of principle or something deeper, he held his ground.

And just like that, the court descended into chaos once more.

Officials immediately split into factions, some praising decisive war, others advocating caution and recovery. Words twisted, arguments layered over arguments, each side sounding convincing enough to blur the truth.

In the end, Zhu Youjian's thoughts jammed like a broken gear.

"Court dismissed. We will discuss this another day."

And just like that, the decision dissolved into delay.

Elsewhere in the capital, inside the residence of Sun Chuanting, the atmosphere was far more relaxed.

Sun Chuanting sat comfortably, listening with a faint smile as Liang Shixian recounted everything that had just unfolded in court. Behind him sat Chen Qianhu, silent but attentive.

These three men formed the true core of Gao Village's presence in the capital. The blue hats and yellow hats handled technology, but politics and strategy rested here.

Liang Shixian shook his head with a soft laugh.

"The Heavenly Book of Dao Xuan Tianzun was right. This feudal system is a serious obstacle to progress. In the end, everything depends on a single decision from the emperor. And that emperor... listens more to eunuchs than to strategy."

He exhaled slowly.

"When two eunuchs clash, the entire court gets dragged into endless argument, and in the end, nothing gets decided. Military timing gets delayed for no reason at all."

Sun Chuanting chuckled.

"Delay will not save the Qing. Our industry and science are advancing faster than theirs. The longer they stall, the wider the gap becomes. There is no scenario where they reverse this through time alone."

Liang Shixian nodded.

"That is true. But if we can finish them sooner, we can turn our attention to the sea earlier. Dao Xuan Tianzun has already made it clear that the Age of Exploration has begun. The Great Ming is already behind. We cannot afford to waste time entangled with steppe raiders forever."

Sun Chuanting's expression turned thoughtful.

"At sea, we already have Shi Lang, Zheng Sen, and Yao Xingjuan operating. The Zheng family along the Fujian coast maintains good relations with us, and Shi Lang's brother has even boarded a Western ship to explore routes toward Europe. Preparations are already underway."

He paused, then added quietly,

"But this system... is still a problem."

They had both read the Heavenly Book. They both understood the flaw at its core.

Too much power rested in one man's hands.

If the emperor was wise, the state prospered.

If he was not, everything collapsed.

Sun Chuanting leaned forward slightly.

"Perhaps it is time we establish a structure where major decisions are no longer determined by a single voice."

Liang Shixian tilted his head, a faint grin forming.

"That sounds dangerously close to treason."

Sun Chuanting did not flinch.

"I am loyal to the Great Ming. I have no intention of overthrowing it. But if we allow reckless decisions to continue unchecked, the empire will collapse on its own. Someone has to step in and place limits, or we will forever remain trapped in this cycle of paralysis."

Outside, the capital buzzed with recovery, industry, and hope.

Inside that quiet room, however, something far more dangerous had just begun to take shape.

Chapter 1343 What Are You Really Planning?

They had only just reached the dangerous part of the discussion when the door guard hurried inside, his breathing controlled but his urgency impossible to hide.

The man looked like an ordinary servant, but in truth he was a disguised border soldier from Guyuan, one of the many unseen layers of protection surrounding the house.

"Lu Xiangsheng requests an audience."

Sun Chuanting smiled immediately, as if he had been expecting this all along.

"So he came again."

Liang Shixian leaned back casually, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp, always calculating, always observing the movement of people rather than their words.

"He is probably here to talk about border matters, or more precisely, to look for answers he cannot find on the court floor."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly.

"He should be confused right now, not the kind of confusion that comes from ignorance, but the kind that comes from seeing too much and understanding too little of the structure behind it."

Moments later, Lu Xiangsheng was escorted inside.

His face carried a clear trace of frustration, not anger, not fear, but something heavier, the discomfort of a man who had won a war yet could not explain how that victory had truly been achieved.

The moment he saw Sun Chuanting, he stepped forward and saluted, then gave a respectful nod toward Chen Qianhu, who sat quietly behind.

His gaze lingered for a fraction longer than necessary.

Not suspicion.

Something closer to unease.

"Liang Shixian, I did not expect to see you here."

Liang Shixian smiled faintly.

"I am an old acquaintance of Sun Chuanting, I came merely to talk."

Lu Xiangsheng let out a slow breath, as if organizing his thoughts.

"At court today, you spoke in support of my position regarding military funding, you said the funds are sufficient, I appreciate that."

Liang Shixian did not hesitate.

"I simply stated a fact, resources exist, therefore they should be acknowledged, whether they are used or not is a different matter."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded, but his expression remained heavy.

"If more officials could speak like that, the court would not be in such a state, but Gao Qiqian is not a man who forgets, those who opposed him today will be remembered, and later they will pay for it, you should be careful."

Liang Shixian let out a soft chuckle, completely unconcerned.

"I do not fear him."

Lu Xiangsheng studied him for a moment, then slowly turned toward Sun Chuanting.

"I came today because I have questions."

Sun Chuanting gestured lightly.

"Ask."

Lu Xiangsheng paused briefly, as if choosing where to begin.

"This campaign to Jinzhou, the pursuit of Dorgon, along the way I saw too many things that I cannot explain."

As he spoke, his eyes flicked once more toward Chen Qianhu.

He knew.

He was not a fool.

Chen Qianhu had personally killed Zu Dashou, yet took no credit and returned silently to this house as if nothing had happened.

The credit had fallen onto him instead.

The same pattern repeated during the pursuit of Dorgon.

He had been the one chasing.

Yet Dorgon had been crushed again and again by forces he never truly saw.

By the time the final result appeared, all that remained was a head placed neatly into his hands.

Victory had been delivered to him.

That feeling was deeply uncomfortable.

Very uncomfortable.

Sun Chuanting smiled calmly.

"What exactly did you find strange?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not hesitate this time.

"The ships."

His tone shifted, becoming serious.

"The fleet under Cao Wenzhao, ships without sails, without oars, yet moving faster than anything I have ever seen, I have only recently taken the position at the Ministry of War, I do not even know what kind of weapon this is, I hope you can explain."

Sun Chuanting did not answer with words.

He stood up, walked to the bookshelf, and casually pulled out a magazine before tossing it toward Lu Xiangsheng.

"Read."

Lu Xiangsheng caught it instinctively, glanced at the cover, then began flipping through.

"Naval Knowledge, Issue Twenty Four."

The first pages described Dutch sailing ships, their role in European waters, their dominance during the age of ocean expansion, the explanations were detailed and strangely structured, far beyond traditional military texts.

He read with interest for a moment before suddenly freezing.

"...Wait, this is not what I came here for."

He quickly flipped forward, skipping pages until he found what he was looking for.

There it was.

"River Sea Dual Use Vessel, Pingliao Class, length sixty two meters, minimum crew twenty, full capacity nine hundred personnel, capable of navigating both the Yellow River and the Yangtze, draft depth eight meters..."

His eyes widened.

"This is it, this is the one I rode."

He continued flipping, absorbing the descriptions, operational scenarios, deployment methods.

Everything was explained.

And yet, nothing was truly revealed.

It felt as though he understood everything.

And at the same time, understood nothing.

He looked up, still processing.

"I see, so that is how it works, then there is also another thing, the Shanxi troops used a strange small cannon, what exactly is that?"

Sun Chuanting stood again without hesitation, pulled out another magazine, flipped it open, and handed it over.

"Modern Weapons, Issue Seventeen."

Lu Xiangsheng looked down.

"Tianzun Demon Suppression Cannon, PJ 03 Model."

Below it were rows of specifications, length, width, ammunition type, firing range, logistical requirements, deployment notes.

Numbers, terms, systems.

He read everything.

And once again, the same feeling emerged.

He understood.

Yet he did not.

"So the range is this far, no wonder the artillery on Jinzhou's walls never had a chance to respond."

He exhaled slowly, then looked at the bookshelf behind Sun Chuanting.

"This collection... it is beyond anything I have seen."

Sun Chuanting spread his hands slightly, a faint smile on his face.

"You may read anything here if you wish."

Then his tone changed.

Completely.

"But these alone cannot save the Ming."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

"...What?"

Sun Chuanting's gaze sharpened, no longer casual, no longer conversational.

"Lu Xiangsheng, you have already felt it, have you not, victory in battle does not fix the foundation of a nation, the decay of this empire runs from the top downward, and from the bottom upward at the same time."

Those words struck directly into Lu Xiangsheng's mind.

The scene at court resurfaced instantly.

The argument with Gao Qiqian.

The emperor's hesitation.

The endless cycle of indecision.

He went silent.

Then finally let out a long breath.

"The emperor is being misled by eunuchs."

Liang Shixian spoke before Sun Chuanting could respond.

"So you believe the fault lies with the eunuchs, not the emperor."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"Is that not the case?"

Sun Chuanting smiled.

A slow, deliberate smile.

"If the emperor does not make mistakes, who gives the eunuchs the authority to act?"

That sentence landed like a hammer.

Lu Xiangsheng's expression changed instantly.

For generations, blame had always been shifted.

A tyrant king would be excused by blaming a concubine.

A weak emperor would be excused by blaming corrupt officials.

Now the same pattern repeated.

But if the ruler did not allow it, who could act?

If the ruler were truly capable, who would dare?

The answer formed in his mind before he could stop it.

The root of the problem was the throne itself.

His body stiffened.

"You... that is a dangerous line of thought."

His gaze swept across Sun Chuanting, Liang Shixian, and Chen Qianhu.

For the first time, suspicion fully surfaced.

"What exactly are you discussing here, this sounds dangerously close to treason."

Sun Chuanting did not flinch.

He smiled as calmly as before.

"Nothing of the sort."

He paused, then added with quiet certainty.

"We are discussing how to save the country."

Chapter 1344 Rule by Many

Lu Xiangsheng narrowed his eyes, suspicion written all over his face.

"So what exactly is this 'method to govern the nation'? Don't tell me it's some kind of rebellion plan."

Sun Chuanting did not answer directly. He stood up calmly, walked to the bookshelf, and pulled out another book, then tossed it over.

"Come, Lu Daren, take a look at this first."

Lu Xiangsheng caught it and glanced at the cover.

"On Collective Governance"

Author: Gu Yanwu

He opened the first page.

Two bold lines struck him like thunder.

"The rise and fall of the world is the responsibility of every individual."

Lu Xiangsheng's pupils shrank slightly.

"...What a line."

He kept reading.

"The ruler cannot govern the world alone. When one governs alone, punishments multiply. When many govern together, punishments fade... Power over the realm should be entrusted to the people of the realm..."

The more he read, the more complicated his expression became.

When he finished the entire book, he sat there in silence for a long time.

Because he understood it.

And that was exactly the problem.

Gu Yanwu was still a man of his era. He did not reject imperial authority outright. Instead, he praised it on one side, while quietly carving pieces away from it on the other, redistributing power to "the people."

It was contradictory.

If translated into plain words, it meant:

"I am loyal to the emperor, but I still want to pry power out of his hands and give it to others. Because if one man decides everything, disaster is inevitable."

Lu Xiangsheng's mind split into two warring halves.

Loyalty to the emperor.

And the undeniable truth that the emperor could be disastrously wrong.

Agreement and rejection clashed violently inside his head.

Praise and condemnation tangled together.

He almost wanted to applaud.

He almost wanted to arrest the author and have him executed.

After a long silence, he slowly closed the book and looked up.

"What... do the two of you think?"

Sun Chuanting smiled faintly.

"Let's not talk about loyalty or righteousness first. Let's talk about reality."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"...What reality?"

Sun Chuanting's tone turned calm, almost cold.

"The reality is this. For thousands of years, whenever an emperor performs poorly, the outcome is always the same."

"The dynasty collapses."

"The country falls."

Lu Xiangsheng's heart jolted violently.

But when he thought about it carefully...

It was true.

Everyone shouted loyalty.

But when an emperor failed badly enough, internal forces would inevitably try to replace him. At the same time, external enemies would seize the opportunity.

Internal chaos. External invasion.

Collapse.

Sun Chuanting continued, his voice steady.

"So what we need is a way to prevent the emperor from making catastrophic mistakes. Only then can the nation remain stable."

Lu Xiangsheng slowly nodded.

That made sense.

Sun Chuanting took one step closer.

"But the emperor stands above all. Every minister must obey him."

"So if the emperor issues a foolish decree..."

"Lu Daren, do you obey, or do you refuse?"

Lu Xiangsheng inhaled sharply.

Sun Chuanting did not wait for an answer.

"Last time the Jianzhou forces retreated, the emperor ordered Minister Zhang Fengyi to pursue them."

"But Zhang Fengyi only had a group of pampered capital troops. No combat capability at all. Pursuing would have meant walking straight into an ambush."

"So he pretended to pursue, but did not actually engage."

"Afterward, he was impeached for disobeying an imperial decree."

"And in the end, he had no choice but to take poison and kill himself."

Silence.

Everyone in court knew that story.

Was Zhang Fengyi wrong?

No.

Was he guilty?

Also no.

But he still died.

Because the emperor had spoken.

Disobedience meant death.

Even when the emperor was wrong.

Sun Chuanting flipped the book open to a page and placed it in front of Lu Xiangsheng.

"When one governs alone, punishments multiply. When many govern together, punishments fade."

"Zhang Fengyi's death is exactly this."

"If those who understood war had the authority to oppose that decree..."

"He would still be alive."

Lu Xiangsheng's hands trembled.

His voice dropped.

"...How many people have read this book?"

Sun Chuanting smiled.

"Too many to count."

"For years now, anyone educated in the northwest has read it."

Lu Xiangsheng's face changed instantly.

Sun Chuanting continued, calm as ever.

"Those who passed the provincial exams in Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan..."

"They have all read it."

"Many of them are now serving as magistrates, clerks, and officials across the country."

Boom.

That sentence hit harder than any weapon.

Spread across the entire country.

This was not an idea.

This was a network.

And the most terrifying part was not that it existed.

It was that it made sense.

Lu Xiangsheng could already see it.

These scholars would carry these ideas into governance, into policy, into every corner of the system.

Not loudly.

But constantly.

The world would change.

Inevitably.

He slammed his palm onto the table.

"Sun Daren!"

"If you do this... aren't you afraid the world will fall into chaos?"

Sun Chuanting smiled.

"Of course we are afraid."

"That is why we are doing things in order."

"First, eliminate the bandits."

"Then, deal with the Manchu."

"And only after that..."

"We solve the problem of governance."

He paused, then his tone sharpened.

"When that time comes, even if the court tears itself apart in political struggle..."

"There will be no internal rebels and no external enemies left to take advantage."

"The country will not fall."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

At that moment, everything finally connected.

The strange feeling he had at Jinzhou.

The sense that he was the only outsider.

Now he understood.

There was already a force pushing the entire nation toward collective governance.

But they were not reckless.

They were clearing all threats first.

Only then would they turn inward.

Safe.

Controlled.

Inevitable.

Lu Xiangsheng's expression darkened.

Then suddenly, he stepped forward and threw a punch straight at Sun Chuanting's face.

He was not just a scholar.

He was a battlefield commander.

This punch carried real force.

But Sun Chuanting moved just as fast.

He raised his palm and blocked.

Bang.

The impact echoed in the room.

Sun Chuanting did not even step back.

He smiled.

"Lu Daren, hitting me won't change anything."

"It has already begun."

Lu Xiangsheng's jaw tightened.

"I am loyal to the Ming."

"I cannot accept this."

Sun Chuanting looked straight into his eyes.

"I am also loyal to the Ming."

"But I am loyal to the country."

"Not to a single emperor."

"If the emperor fails..."

"Then we replace him."

He paused, then added calmly:

"Or we remove the position entirely."

"Why not let everyone govern together?"

Lu Xiangsheng exploded.

"Utter nonsense!"

He pulled back his fist and struck again.

This time, faster.

More force.

Sun Chuanting blocked again with his arm.

Bang.

Another clean stop.

Then he leaned slightly forward, voice low and precise.

"Admit it."

"For a moment just now..."

"You were tempted."

Chapter 1345 This Too Is Their People

Lu Xiangsheng threw out punch after punch, fast and heavy, the kind of blows that could break bones on a battlefield. Sun Chuanting met them head-on, blocking each strike with equal force. Fists collided, sleeves snapped in the air, boots scraped across the floor.

Two Ministers of War, fighting like street brawlers.

And somehow, still debating.

Every exchange of fists came with words. Every block came with an argument. Their bodies fought while their minds clashed even harder, a rare sight where true civil and military mastery fused into something almost absurd.

The two attendants who had followed Lu Xiangsheng inside could not hold back any longer. Seeing their master locked in combat, they leapt forward at the same time, rushing into the fray.

They did not get far.

A fist cut across their path like a horizontal iron bar.

They both froze.

In front of them stood Chen Qianhu, grinning widely, his expression somewhere between friendly and terrifying.

"Brothers, don't rush it," he said, voice relaxed, almost cheerful. "Let the learned gentlemen argue things out properly. We rough types shouldn't meddle in matters of the brain."

The two attendants recognized him instantly.

This was the monster who had personally cut down Zu Dashou at Jinzhou.

Rumors said he ate ten men a day and three thousand a year.

Their legs trembled, but loyalty pushed them forward anyway. With a shout, they charged.

Chen Qianhu did not even shift his stance.

Left fist.

One man dropped.

Right fist.

The other followed.

In the next moment, he planted one foot on each of them, pinning them to the ground like they were nothing more than sacks of grain.

"Lie still," he said with a grin. "Watch the show."

Meanwhile, the fight between Sun Chuanting and Lu Xiangsheng began to slow.

Their fists lost speed, their movements grew measured.

But their voices grew faster.

Lu Xiangsheng unleashed a torrent of arguments about loyalty, righteousness, and duty to the throne, words flowing like a flood.

Sun Chuanting answered with problem after problem, dragging out every rotten issue buried within the imperial system and throwing them directly in Lu Xiangsheng's face.

"Then solve this."

"And what about this?"

"And this?"

One by one, the questions piled up.

Lu Xiangsheng began to falter.

Because every problem Sun Chuanting raised had the same root.

Absolute imperial power.

And under that system, there were no real solutions.

"What if the emperor takes a minister's wife?" Sun Chuanting pressed.

It had happened before. Not once. Not twice. And every time, it ended the same way. Silence. No justice. No consequence.

"What if the emperor plays games with beacon fires just to amuse himself? How do you stop that?"

You could not.

The emperor was supreme. If he wanted to burn signal fires for entertainment, the entire court could only watch as authority eroded into farce.

"And what if the emperor favors traitors and scoundrels?"

Lu Xiangsheng had no answer.

Under a system where the emperor stood above all, any absurdity he committed became law, and any protest from ministers was meaningless unless the emperor himself chose to listen.

If the emperor had a conscience, perhaps he would restrain himself.

If he did not, then nothing could stop him.

The arguments crushed down on Lu Xiangsheng like a mountain.

His words ran dry.

His fists slowed.

And then, in a single opening, Sun Chuanting's punch landed.

Thud.

Lu Xiangsheng fell flat onto his back.

He did not get up.

Sprawled on the ground, arms spread wide, he stared at the ceiling and let out a long breath.

"Kill me."

Sun Chuanting blinked. "Why would I kill you?"

"I already know what you are doing," Lu Xiangsheng said hoarsely. "If you don't kill me, then as Minister of War, I become your greatest enemy."

Sun Chuanting laughed.

"Three thousand Tianxiong troops," he said lightly. "Do you really think that qualifies you to be our greatest enemy?"

If Lu Xiangsheng had not seen Jinzhou with his own eyes, he might have argued back with pride.

But he had seen it.

He had seen what these people could do.

Destroying his Tianxiong Army would be no harder than crushing Zu Dashou.

It would take nothing more than a casual turn of the hand.

Like the Buddha pressing down on Sun Wukong.

Lu Xiangsheng closed his eyes briefly and sighed.

"I am a loyal minister."

"So am I," Sun Chuanting replied calmly. "But my loyalty is to the Ming, not to an incompetent emperor."

"The moment you think like that," Lu Xiangsheng shot back, "you are already a rebel."

Sun Chuanting smiled. "You are thinking the same thing. You just refuse to admit it."

Silence.

Then Sun Chuanting waved a hand.

"Get up. We won't do anything to you. Walk out openly. If you want to call the Jinyiwei to arrest us, go ahead."

Lu Xiangsheng sat up abruptly, stunned.

"You're letting me go?"

"We are not villains," Sun Chuanting said. "We are searching for a way to save the country. I believe you are doing the same. So why wouldn't I let you go?"

"And if I really bring the Jinyiwei?"

Sun Chuanting shrugged.

"Then we'll kill them all."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

The answer was simple.

Brutal.

Terrifying.

It meant they already held complete confidence. No fear. No hesitation.

He said nothing more.

Climbing to his feet, he grabbed the books on the table. On Collective Governance, Naval Knowledge, Modern Weapons. Then he went to the shelf and pulled out another one, Armored Vehicle Appreciation, stuffing them all into his robes like a man afraid they might vanish if he hesitated.

Chen Qianhu lifted his feet, releasing the two attendants. They scrambled up and followed their master without a word.

The three of them walked out of Sun's residence.

No one stopped them.

Not a single guard.

They walked all the way out to the street, just like that.

Only then did Lu Xiangsheng begin to feel it.

Everything that had just happened felt unreal, like a dream.

He looked down at the books in his arms.

They were real.

Which meant everything else was real too.

He walked aimlessly through the capital streets, thoughts churning.

Should he report this to the court?

Should he not?

As he struggled, laughter suddenly drifted from the side.

He turned.

A few Jinyiwei officers in flying-fish uniforms were strolling along casually, chatting like ordinary men on a day off.

One of them grinned. "Mi Qianhu, you're finally back. You were sent to Xi'an to find Tang Prince Zhu Yujian, and you disappeared for so long without a word. We thought something happened to you."

Mi Qianhu chuckled. "What could happen? The prince was hard to find. We searched all over Shaanxi and found nothing, so we came back. I just don't know how I'll face the emperor now."

"Finding one fugitive in a world this big is no easy task," the other said. "The emperor won't punish you for that, will he?"

"Hopefully not."

As he spoke, Mi Qianhu suddenly paused.

He felt it.

A gaze.

That instinct, sharpened by years as a spy, let him sense eyes even in a crowd.

He turned.

And met Lu Xiangsheng's stare.

They stood a few steps apart, looking at each other.

Seconds passed.

Then Mi Qianhu smiled.

"This lord," he said politely, "do you have some instruction? You've been watching me for quite a while."

Lu Xiangsheng hesitated.

For a moment, he almost spoke.

Then he sighed.

"Nothing. Just looking."

Mi Qianhu's smile widened slightly.

"Oh. You've figured it out, then. Good. Good. Faster than I did. It took me a very long time."

He turned and walked away.

That one sentence hit Lu Xiangsheng like thunder.

His entire body stiffened.

Understanding crashed down on him in an instant.

"The Jinyiwei... are also theirs..."

His voice was barely a whisper.

"How many people do they actually have?"

Chapter 1346 Coming to Ask for a Transfer Order

Lu Xiangsheng had not slept for several nights, turning over again and again as thoughts churned endlessly in his mind.

Whenever exhaustion finally dulled his mind, he would grab those military magazines and read them over and over, staring at the advanced weapons described inside with a mixture of awe and dread. The joy came from knowing the nation now possessed such terrifying tools, yet the fear came just as

strongly because those same tools were in the hands of people who were clearly planning to overturn the Emperor himself.

He could not decide what he should do, and the more he thought, the deeper he sank into that helpless confusion.

Then, as if nothing had happened, it was time for court again.

Standing in the great hall, Lu Xiangsheng once more heard the endless arguing between the pro-war faction and the pro-peace faction, their voices colliding like waves crashing against each other without pause or resolution.

"Your Majesty, we must advance immediately and strike into Liaodong to reclaim our lost lands in one decisive campaign."

"Your Majesty, we must appease the Jian slaves, buy time, and stabilize the foundations of the state."

"Those advocating peace are ruining the country."

"Those advocating war are pushing Your Majesty straight into a pit of fire."

The arguments circled endlessly, and as they did, Zhu Youjian's mind swayed left and right like a reed in the wind.

Whenever the war faction spoke, he felt that war was the correct choice.

Whenever the peace faction spoke, he felt that peace was the wiser path.

An emperor without firm understanding was easily pulled in whichever direction the loudest voice happened to be speaking at the moment.

The shouting dragged on for over an hour before Zhu Youjian finally raised his hand and said, "We will stop here for today and discuss this again later."

"Again later?" Lu Xiangsheng could not hold back any longer. "Your Majesty, if we choose war, the opportunity will pass in an instant if we hesitate. If we choose peace, we must act quickly to stabilize the realm and adjust governance. If we keep delaying like this, neither war nor peace will be properly executed, and both military and civil affairs will remain stuck in limbo. Is this not harming the nation?"

Zhu Youjian waved his hand as if it were a simple matter. "Why not do both at once? Let the war faction prepare for battle while the peace faction focuses on building new factories and increasing tax revenue. Would that not be the best of both worlds?"

Lu Xiangsheng stared at him. "Then what are we even debating for? Isn't that exactly what we have always been doing?"

The entire court fell into an awkward silence, and strange expressions appeared on every official's face.

Yes, what exactly had they been arguing about all this time?

Lu Xiangsheng snorted coldly, flicked his sleeve, and left the court in anger.

When he returned to his residence, the frustration still burned in his chest, refusing to fade.

He was pacing back and forth, breathing heavily, when a servant hurried in to report, "Master, a letter has arrived from Cao Wenzhao, the commander of Jinzhou."

Lu Xiangsheng paused.

He already knew that Cao Wenzhao belonged to that hidden faction, the same group that was quietly reshaping everything behind the scenes. That made the letter even more puzzling.

Why send it to him?

Should it not have been sent to Sun Chuanting instead?

After all, the former Minister of War was the one truly controlling the situation at the front.

With that thought in mind, Lu Xiangsheng opened the letter.

Inside, Cao Wenzhao simply stated that he was about to begin an offensive against the Manchus and was informing the Ministry of War.

That was it.

Lu Xiangsheng let out a dry laugh. "This is not asking for approval. This is simply notifying the court after the decision has already been made."

The servant lowered his voice. "Master, Jinzhou has never really listened to the court anyway. In the past, they would not even bother to inform anyone before taking action. The fact that he sent a letter at all is already more respectful than before."

Lu Xiangsheng thought about it carefully and had to admit that it was true.

Zu Dashou had never obeyed the court's commands in the past, and the Pi Island forces had always operated outside central control as well.

"They can do whatever they want regardless," Lu Xiangsheng murmured. "So why bother informing me now? Do they still respect me? Why would they?"

Before he could dig deeper into that thought, another servant rushed in.

"Master, Wang Pu, the commander of Datong, requests an audience."

Lu Xiangsheng's heart skipped a beat.

Another one of them.

What did he want now?

Soon, Wang Pu entered, cupped his fists, and spoke respectfully. "Lord Lu, I have received intelligence from the front that the Jinzhou forces are about to launch a campaign into Liaodong. I would like to bring my troops to assist, so I have come to request a transfer order."

Lu Xiangsheng gave a cold laugh. "If I refuse to give you the order, will you not go?"

"I will go," Wang Pu replied without hesitation. "However, if I move my troops without authorization, it may alarm the officials in court. It would be better for everyone if I obtain a formal order from you."

Lu Xiangsheng understood immediately.

Whether he approved it or not, Wang Pu was going.

The only difference was whether the movement would appear orderly or chaotic.

If he refused, a border army moving on its own would terrify the civil officials.

If he agreed, everything would look proper and controlled.

"You people are going too far," Lu Xiangsheng said through gritted teeth.

Wang Pu sighed softly. "Lord Lu, I do not wish for things to be like this either, but please think about it carefully. If we do not act this way, when will the Manchus ever be dealt with? How long will it take for His Majesty to make a decision? Who can say?"

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

After a long pause, he let out a deep sigh and wrote the order, transferring Wang Pu to Jinzhou to assist in defense.

Even without a final decision between war and peace, as Minister of War, he still had the authority to deploy troops for defensive purposes, and the Emperor himself had said that preparations should continue on both fronts.

Wang Pu accepted the order and left.

Not long after, another servant rushed in again.

"Master, Hu Dawei, commander of Shanxi, requests an audience. He also wishes to obtain a transfer order to assist Jinzhou."

"Do not let him in," Lu Xiangsheng said tiredly, already writing another document. "Give him the order directly and send him on his way."

The servant hesitated. "He also plans to bring additional troops, including the garrison commanders Nan Feng from Pucheng and Wang Xiaohua from Pingyang."

"Let them go," Lu Xiangsheng said without even looking up.

No sooner had Hu Dawei been sent off than more names began to arrive.

"Hanzhong commander Zhao Guangyuan and Suiyan commander Shi Jian request orders."

"They are part of the same group too, aren't they? Let them go."

"Henan commander Gao Jie, Shangnan garrison commander Luo Xi..."

"Let them go."

Each name hit Lu Xiangsheng like a hammer strike.

"Anlu commander, Sichuan commander..."

Lu Xiangsheng finally realized something terrifying.

More than half of the Ming Empire's regional commanders were coming to request orders.

More than half.

These people were not scattered individuals.

They were a network.

A system.

A force moving in coordination.

His expression changed.

"No... I cannot just sit here and let them do whatever they want. I need to see this with my own eyes."

He rushed out of his residence and went straight to the imperial study, bowing deeply before Zhu Youjian.

"Your Majesty, the debate between war and peace will not reach a conclusion anytime soon. I request permission to personally lead troops to Jinzhou and guard the frontier for the Great Ming."

Zhu Youjian's face lit up with relief. "If you are willing to go, that would be excellent. I was worried whether Jinzhou could be held even after being reclaimed. With you there, it will surely be secure."

Lu Xiangsheng lowered his head, but his mind was no longer on the Emperor's words.

Because now, he finally understood something.

This was no longer about war or peace.

This was a system already in motion.

And he had just stepped into it.

Chapter 1347 What Are They Afraid Of?

The Emperor Zhu Youjian was in an unusually good mood when he dismissed Lu Xiangsheng.

Everything had gone smoothly. Too smoothly.

But the moment Lu Xiangsheng stepped out of the imperial study, Gao Qiqian slipped in like a shadow that had been waiting for its cue.

"Your Majesty... this matter cannot be handled carelessly."

Zhu Youjian paused, the smile on his face not yet fully gone. "Oh?"

Gao Qiqian lowered his voice, every word wrapped in quiet calculation.

"Jinzhou sits too close to the Jianzhou territory. For years, the garrison there has ignored court authority. Commanders come and go, yet every one of them turns into a wolf that refuses its leash. If Lu Xiangsheng goes there..."

He let the sentence hang just long enough.

"...what if he becomes another Yuan Chonghuan? Holding troops, building his own power, waiting for the right moment?"

The Emperor inhaled sharply.

That single thought was enough to crack open his earlier confidence.

"Yes... that is indeed a problem. What should be done?"

Gao Qiqian bowed slightly, as if reluctantly stepping forward to shoulder a burden.

"This is where your servant can ease Your Majesty's worries. I am willing to go as supervising eunuch, to personally oversee Lu Xiangsheng and ensure he makes no... unnecessary moves."

The Emperor's eyes lit up.

"If you are willing to go, then I have nothing to fear."

Gao Qiqian's lips curved faintly, but he pressed further.

"I only fear that Lu Xiangsheng may not submit to imperial authority, that he might remain stubborn and unyielding. Therefore... I dare ask Your Majesty for a Sword of Imperial Authority."

Zhu Youjian understood immediately.

"Granted. I will give you the sword, along with a sealed edict. If Lu Xiangsheng shows even the slightest sign of disloyalty, you may read the edict and execute him on the spot."

Gao Qiqian's heart surged with satisfaction.

So it is done.

With the sword in hand, how dare Lu Xiangsheng look down on me again?

He left the palace in high spirits, gathering a group of imperial guards. Of course, this was not some fantastical tale where palace experts possessed mystical arts. These were simply well-trained fighters, men skilled enough to kill efficiently.

Surrounded by them, Gao Qiqian also assembled several thousand pampered capital troops, the so-called young masters of the capital who had never truly seen hardship.

Then, with full confidence, he marched straight into the Tianxiong Army camp.

Lu Xiangsheng was in the middle of mobilizing troops when he saw him.

He frowned slightly. "What are you doing here?"

Gao Qiqian raised his chin, savoring the moment.

"By imperial decree, I am the supervising eunuch for this campaign. I will be going to Jinzhou... to keep watch."

He expected resistance. Perhaps even anger.

Instead, Lu Xiangsheng's expression turned... strange.

"You are coming to supervise the army?"

"Yes."

With a sharp motion, Gao Qiqian drew the Sword of Imperial Authority, letting its presence speak louder than words.

"Do you see this?"

Lu Xiangsheng stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Fine. If you want to supervise, then supervise."

He paused, then added with a tone that made the air feel subtly off balance:

"That is... very good."

Gao Qiqian blinked.

Something about that response did not feel right.

But before he could think further, Lu Xiangsheng had already turned away.

"Mobilize. We depart."

The army moved.

This time, they did not take the previous inland route. Instead, they advanced along Shanhai Pass, hugging the coastline.

The sea breeze was cool, the march smooth, and the mood among the capital troops was almost cheerful.

In their minds, this was not a campaign.

It was a trip.

The Jianzhou forces had just suffered defeat. There was no reason to expect another invasion so soon. They would arrive at Jinzhou, stay comfortably for a few days, collect merit, and return home.

A perfect arrangement.

War, in their understanding, had already ended.

When the army reached Shanhai Pass, they encountered another force passing through.

At its head stood a familiar figure.

Gao Jie.

And guarding the pass, personally inspecting the documents, was Wu Sangui.

Wu Sangui's gaze lingered on Gao Jie with open disdain.

"You? Reinforcing Jinzhou?"

Gao Jie tilted his head. "What, someone like me is not allowed?"

Wu Sangui snorted.

He had fought bandits since his youth, cutting them down with his own hands. To him, men like Gao Jie, former rebels who had accepted amnesty, were beneath contempt.

"Jianzhou soldiers are not so easy to deal with. Your kind... do not start crying when the fighting begins."

Gao Jie blinked.

Then, without hesitation, he opened his mouth.

"Waa... waa... waa..."

Behind him, the Henan militia instantly joined in, their exaggerated wailing echoing across the pass.

It sounded like a chorus of ghosts.

Wu Sangui's face darkened. "What are you doing?"

"You told us to cry. So we are crying."

The tension snapped tight.

Just as it was about to explode, Lu Xiangsheng rushed forward.

"Enough!"

Both men stopped.

They turned and saluted.

Lu Xiangsheng's voice was steady, but firm.

"We have finally gained some advantage against the Jianzhou forces. At this critical moment, all soldiers of the Ming must unite against the enemy, not fight among ourselves."

Wu Sangui's lip curled. "Bandits who accepted amnesty... are they worthy of being called soldiers?"

Gao Jie shot him a sideways glance.

"My men are more worthy than your feudal troops."

The argument flared again.

Lu Xiangsheng's expression hardened.

"Silence. Wu Sangui, you started this. He showed you valid orders. You open the gate and let him pass. There is no need for mockery."

Wu Sangui's jaw tightened, but he said nothing more.

Lu Xiangsheng waved his hand.

The army moved forward, passing through the gate, heading toward Jinzhou.

Behind them, Wu Sangui watched in silence, then let out a cold snort.

Gao Qiqian deliberately slowed his pace as he passed Wu Sangui.

Lowering his voice, he said quietly:

"This Lu Xiangsheng favors wild elements like Gao Jie. A man of noble background like you should not be compared to such... things."

Wu Sangui clasped his hands. "Thank you for speaking on my behalf."

Gao Qiqian smiled inwardly.

Another piece placed.

Another connection secured.

Not long after, they arrived near Jinzhou.

Or rather, what used to be Jinzhou.

This land had been fought over for years, a constant battleground between Ming and Jianzhou forces. War had stripped it bare. Fields lay abandoned, villages reduced to emptiness.

It was supposed to be desolation all the way to the city.

At least, that was what Gao Qiqian expected.

But then, Something appeared ahead.

A small frontier fort.

Around a hundred soldiers guarded it, and surrounding the fort... fields.

Freshly turned soil.

Land that had just begun to breathe again.

Farmers worked in silence, rebuilding something that war had erased.

Then they saw the army.

Everything changed instantly.

Tools dropped.

Voices rose in panic.

"The army is here! The army is here! Ming soldiers!"

They ran.

Not toward safety in the open.

But into the fort, as if fleeing from disaster.

Gao Qiqian frowned deeply.

"They speak the language of the Ming. They are clearly our people. Why do they fear Ming troops as if they were Jianzhou soldiers?"

The wind moved across the half-reclaimed fields.

The soil was loose.

The system had already begun its work here.

And yet, the people still ran.

Because in their world,

There was no difference between armies.

Only survival.

Chapter 1348 The Joke Went Too Far

Lu Xiangsheng did not answer immediately, yet the tightening of his expression revealed that he understood the implication all too well.

Before the silence could settle into something heavier, Gao Jie let out a low, mocking chuckle, his tone carrying that familiar edge of provocation that never quite crossed the line, yet always pressed against it.

"The reason is obvious if you think about it carefully. To these people, Ming soldiers are not much better than the Jianzhou ones. They must have suffered before, otherwise they would not run like that."

Gao Qiqian's face darkened instantly, as if the words themselves had offended the structure of authority he believed in.

"A former bandit remains a bandit in manners, even after accepting amnesty. Do you still think of yourself as an outlaw? What do you mean Ming troops are no better? You are Ming troops now, so watch your tongue."

Gao Jie merely smiled, the kind of smile that suggested he had no interest in arguing, not because he agreed, but because the argument itself was beneath his effort.

He said nothing more.

By then, the soldiers from the frontier fort had already approached, greeting Lu Xiangsheng with proper respect. One of them cast a quick glance at Gao Jie, a subtle acknowledgment passing between men who understood more than they said.

Then the soldier turned back and called toward the fort.

"Do not be afraid. These are the good Ming troops, not the bad ones."

Only then did the civilians slowly emerge, their movements cautious, their eyes still filled with hesitation as they returned to the fields.

Lu Xiangsheng watched them for a moment before speaking, his voice carrying both curiosity and concern.

"I was told that the civilians in Jinzhou had all been wiped out. Where did these people come from?"

A militia soldier stepped forward to answer.

"Most of the city's population was indeed destroyed, but some survived by hiding in the mountains for years, living like ghosts just to stay alive. Recently, we have been searching for them and bringing them back. We provide tools, seeds, and protection, and let them farm near the forts so they can rebuild their lives."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded slowly, the approval in his eyes genuine and unreserved.

"This is a righteous act."

Gao Qiqian, however, felt none of that sentiment.

In his mind, the people of Liaodong were nothing more than expendable debris scattered across a battlefield that had long lost its value in human terms. To invest effort into them felt like a waste of resources, a misallocation of power.

Yet he said nothing.

Not because he lacked the thought, but because he understood the consequences of speaking it aloud. Civil officials could destroy a man with words far more efficiently than soldiers could with blades, and he had no intention of becoming their next target.

So he remained silent, wearing the mask required of him.

The army continued forward, and soon the outline of Jinzhou appeared on the horizon.

The broken section of the city wall, once blasted apart, had already been repaired.

Lu Xiangsheng felt a flicker of surprise, though he kept it contained. Such speed usually came at the cost of quality, and hastily rebuilt walls often failed under real pressure.

But when he drew closer, that assumption collapsed.

The repaired section was solid, reinforced with a strange gray material that looked unremarkable at first glance, yet felt harder than stone itself. The structure held with an unnatural firmness, as if it had been designed to resist not just impact, but time.

The moat had also been restored. Thousands of sandbags that once clogged its flow had been removed, and the water now circled the city once again, completing the defensive system.

Jinzhou had returned.

Not as a ruin.

But as a fortress.

Inside the city, reconstruction was already underway.

Dilapidated houses were being repaired, fresh layers of paint spreading across surfaces that had long forgotten color. The air carried the thick scent of lacquer, sharp and almost intrusive, yet undeniably alive.

Civilians walked the streets again.

They were few, cautious, and still burdened by memory, yet they were there.

These were people who had lived through cycles of brutality, passed back and forth between Ming forces and Jianzhou troops, treated as resources rather than lives. Some had even witnessed Zu Dashou's forces resort to cannibalism under extreme conditions, turning civilians into sustenance.

Trust, once broken at that level, did not return easily.

And yet, somehow, Cao Wenzhao had managed to bring them back.

Gao Qiqian did not voice it, but a trace of surprise surfaced within him.

So the coastal commander is not merely a battlefield brute.

He can manage people as well.

Before that thought could settle, a surge of noise rose from the western side of the city.

A force was approaching.

At its head stood a general beneath a banner marked with the character "Xing."

What caught everyone's attention was not the banner.

It was the person beneath it.

A woman.

Her build was powerful, her presence commanding, her figure carrying a kind of raw strength that made comparison with ordinary men seem unnecessary.

Cao Wenzhao raised his hand in greeting, his tone relaxed.

"General Xing, you made it as well."

The woman laughed, her voice bold and unrestrained.

"How could I not come?"

That was Xing Honglang.

Before the moment could settle, another head popped out from behind her.

Old Nanfeng.

His previous troops had already gone ahead to the capital with Sun Chuanting, leaving him effectively without command. Instead of remaining idle, he had chosen to move with Xing Honglang's forces.

He waved toward the city, grinning broadly.

"I came too late. I heard there was a grand show here, something about Zu Dashou fighting another Zu Dashou. What a pity I missed it."

Laughter spread across the group.

Old Nanfeng scanned the surroundings again.

"Where is Chen Qianhu? Where are my people?"

Cao Wenzhao smiled.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun said Chen Qianhu would frighten the civilians, so he was told to remain in the capital."

Old Nanfeng snorted.

"What is so frightening about his face?"

That only made the laughter louder.

"You are the only one who does not fear him. He, on the other hand, is afraid of you. Everyone else finds him terrifying."

Gao Qiqian observed all of this with growing confusion.

He leaned slightly toward Lu Xiangsheng and spoke in a low voice.

"Is something wrong here? These people come from different regions, yet they behave as if they have known each other for years."

Lu Xiangsheng did not explain.

He simply spread his hands in a gesture that carried both resignation and meaning.

"You will soon realize that they have many 'fellow townsmen.'"

Gao Qiqian frowned.

He did not understand.

Not yet.

At that moment, another force arrived, almost overlapping with Xing Honglang's timing.

A banner bearing the character "Wang" came into view.

Cao Wenzhao laughed.

"Ah, Wang Xiaohua is here as well."

"Call me Bai Mao!"

The shout came immediately, sharp and full of urgency.

"Bai Mao!"

Xing Honglang raised her voice deliberately.

"Wang Xiaohua!"

Cao Bianjiao leaned out from the wall, joining in with open amusement.

"A warm welcome to Wang Xiaohua!"

Old Nanfeng could not resist.

"Xiaohua Wang!"

"Shut up!"

The man beneath the banner roared in frustration.

"My name is Bai Mao!"

Gao Qiqian blinked, then turned to Lu Xiangsheng.

"Who is that?"

"Pingyang garrison commander Wang Xiaohua. A very capable general. During the bandit suppression campaigns in Shanxi, he rarely lost a battle."

Gao Qiqian hesitated.

"A general of such ability... yet with a name like that?"

Lu Xiangsheng gave a faint, knowing look.

"Now you see why he is so agitated."

Wang Xiaohua clenched his fists, clearly on the verge of losing control.

"Do not call me that again. Call me Bai Mao."

"Wang Xiaohua."

Old Nanfeng said it again, as if inviting disaster.

The response came instantly.

Wang Xiaohua lunged forward with a punch, but Old Nan Feng moved faster, hooking his leg and sending him crashing to the ground. In the next moment, he sat directly on his back, grinning like a man who had just found a new source of entertainment.

"Wang Xiaohua. Wang Xiaohua."

Wang Xiaohua struggled, but the difference in strength was obvious.

He was completely suppressed.

Then a large hand reached in.

A bearded man stepped forward, grabbing Old Nan Feng's arm with firm control.

"That is enough."

Old Nan Feng reacted instinctively, pulling back with force, yet to his surprise, the other man did not budge at all.

Only then did he turn his head.

Wang Er.

Baishui Wang Er himself.

Recognition flashed, and Old Nan Feng immediately let go.

"Ah."

Wang Er laughed and gave him a light punch.

"Bai Mao is genuinely upset. You can joke, but do not push it too far."

Old Nan Feng waved his hand.

"Alright, alright, I understand."

Wang Er then turned to Wang Xiaohua, his tone shifting into something more measured.

"Listen carefully. The more you react, the more they will use it against you. If you stop caring about the name, if you treat it as nothing, then sooner or later no one will bother using it again."

Wang Xiaohua paused, still breathing heavily.

"Really?"

"Really. That is simply how people are. So be more at ease. Do not let something so small control you."

Chapter 1349 Gao Qiqian Finds Nothing to Do

Wang Er moved with the ease of someone long used to resolving conflict, reaching down and pulling Wang Xiaohua back to his feet in one smooth motion, restoring both his posture and his composure as if nothing had happened.

Wang Xiaohua steadied himself, and the frustration that had been boiling moments ago seemed to disperse almost instantly, replaced by a forced calm that he chose to maintain.

The others, who had been teasing him relentlessly just seconds earlier, now held back, their laughter reduced to quiet grins, as if an unspoken boundary had just been drawn and acknowledged.

Wang Xiaohua spread his hands in resignation, signaling that the matter would end there, and no one pushed further.

Gao Qiqian had been watching the entire scene with interest, enjoying the spectacle while it lasted, yet the moment it ended, his mood shifted with surprising speed.

His mind did not linger on camaraderie or discipline.

It turned, almost instinctively, toward profit.

He had not come here to watch soldiers joke with one another, nor to admire battlefield unity, but to secure both wealth and political leverage, and in war, wealth always followed supply.

Which meant one thing.

Grain.

"Speaking of which," Gao Qiqian said, his tone shifting into something more calculated, "with so many troops gathering in Jinzhou, how is military supply being handled?"

In any other region, such a question would have an obvious answer, as local officials would bear responsibility for provisioning the army, yet Jinzhou was not a normal place.

There were no functioning civil administrations here.

Only soldiers.

Lu Xiangsheng did not hesitate. He simply raised his hand and pointed toward a figure moving casually through the crowd, someone who looked entirely out of place in a military environment due to how unoccupied he appeared.

"The provisions are supplied by that merchant."

Gao Qiqian's interest ignited immediately.

Merchants meant money, and money meant opportunity.

In his experience, merchants never approached power empty-handed. They offered tribute willingly, sometimes eagerly, hoping to secure favor, protection, or access.

Power attracted wealth.

And he possessed power.

Turning slightly, he spoke to the young eunuch beside him.

"Xiao Guizi, go and summon that merchant."

The eunuch hurried off, carrying with him the authority he believed would not be refused.

He stopped in front of Li DaoXuan, lifting his chin with practiced arrogance.

"Hey, Gao Gonggong wants to speak with you. Go over and answer."

Li DaoXuan turned his head, glancing briefly toward Gao Qiqian in the distance, then shifted his gaze back, his expression calm, almost amused.

"It is only a few steps. If he wants to talk, he can walk over himself. Why send someone to summon me? Is putting on airs really that entertaining?"

The eunuch's face stiffened, his tone sharpening immediately.

"You merchant truly do not understand your place. Gao Gonggong speaking to you is an honor. Yet you respond with sarcasm?"

Li DaoXuan smiled faintly.

"Then I must apologize. I have always been very poor at accepting such honor."

The eunuch returned, visibly irritated.

"Gonggong, he refuses to come."

Gao Qiqian frowned, a trace of disbelief surfacing.

"Does he not know who I am?"

The eunuch hesitated.

"I... did not tell him."

Gao Qiqian's irritation deepened.

"Then go back and tell him."

The eunuch hurried off again, this time with greater urgency.

"You are fortunate today," he said upon returning to Li DaoXuan, his tone carrying forced restraint. "Gao Gonggong is in a good mood and will overlook your ignorance. Now listen carefully. That is Gao Qiqian, a favored figure before the Emperor, the supervising eunuch here in Jinzhou. When he calls for you, you go. If you please him, the benefits will be endless."

Li DaoXuan's expression shifted slightly, the amusement becoming more visible.

"So it is Gao Qiqian. The same eunuch who demands that everyone salute him like soldiers."

The eunuch's face changed immediately.

"Impudent!"

Li DaoXuan's smile did not fade.

"I have no interest in speaking with him. If I become annoyed, I might end up killing him."

That sentence carried no raised voice, no visible threat, and yet it struck with a weight that forced the eunuch to step back instinctively, his composure breaking for a moment.

"You are courting death," he said, though the confidence in his voice had already weakened.

Li DaoXuan did not respond further.

"Tell him not to bother me."

Then he turned and walked away.

When the eunuch reported back, Gao Qiqian's anger surged immediately.

"If there were a table here, I would overturn it myself," he muttered, his frustration barely contained.
"Take some men and bring him here."

The order had barely left his mouth when Lu Xiangsheng stepped forward, placing himself directly in the way.

"Gao Gonggong," he said, his tone calm but firm, "all military provisions in Jinzhou are supplied by him. If you act against him recklessly and the supplies stop, will you personally take responsibility for feeding the army?"

Gao Qiqian's expression darkened.

"You intend to protect him?"

Lu Xiangsheng let out a quiet breath.

"I am trying to save your life."

Gao Qiqian's anger sharpened into disbelief.

"Do not speak in riddles to frighten me. He is just a merchant. How could he possibly supply provisions for such a massive army? Do you take me for a fool?"

At that exact moment, movement appeared from the southern side of Jinzhou, the direction facing the sea.

A massive convoy approached.

Horse-drawn carts, one after another, stretching into the distance, each pulled by sturdy Mongolian horses, each loaded with supplies.

Grain.

Meat.

Preserved food in quantities that could sustain an army.

At the front of the convoy stood a familiar figure.

Zhuge Wangchan, the logistics leader of Gao Family Village.

He raised his voice as he approached.

"Brothers, the supplies have arrived!"

A soldier ran forward eagerly.

"Let me see what we have this time."

Zhuge Wangchan slapped his hand away lightly.

"Do not touch anything. Wait until General Cao signs off and distributes it properly."

The soldier grinned.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is watching. Do we still need to inspect and sign?"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed.

"Whether Tianzun is watching or not, the rules must be followed. Those are the rules he set."

Soon, Cao Bianjiao arrived to inspect the shipment.

He selected several carts at random, opening the sacks to check their contents.

Inside were high-quality grain, dried meat, cured meat, and even processed rations, all packed and preserved with care.

As the inspection continued, Gao Qiqian's gaze shifted.

Not toward authority.

But toward value.

This much supply, delivered in such quantity, represented wealth beyond immediate comprehension. Even skimming a small portion from it would yield enormous gain.

His earlier anger began to fade, replaced by calculation.

Fine.

For now, I will tolerate his insolence.

Once I have taken my share, I will deal with him later.

Over the following days, more forces gathered in Jinzhou.

Troops from Shaanxi, Anlu, Huguang, and even Sichuan arrived one after another, filling the city beyond its limits.

The city itself could no longer contain them.

Camps spread outside the walls, tents forming a vast expanse that stretched across the landscape.

From atop the city walls, the view was overwhelming.

An army.

A real army.

Gao Qiqian stood there, staring at the scale of it, his thoughts slowly turning uneasy.

Were they not supposed to be on the defensive?

The debate between war and negotiation had not yet been resolved in the court. The Emperor had not made a final decision.

And yet, here they were.

Forces gathered.

Supplies secured.

Everything aligned.

As if the decision had already been made.

He turned sharply toward Lu Xiangsheng.

"What exactly are you planning?"

His voice carried a new edge, one that mixed suspicion with authority.

"You may be the Minister of War, with command over the empire's forces, but deploying such a large number of troops to Jinzhou before the Emperor has decided to launch a campaign is excessive. If the court ultimately chooses negotiation, will all these troops simply return? The cost alone would be immense."

Lu Xiangsheng looked at him.

For a brief moment, something passed through his eyes.

A thought he chose not to speak.

You eunuchs are the ones who profit most from waste, and now you speak of cost.

But he did not say it.

Because explaining would change nothing.

Because the truth was far simpler.

These troops were not here because he ordered them.

They were here because something larger had already moved them into place.

He gave a cold snort.

And said nothing.

Gao Qiqian's expression hardened.

"Very well," he said, his voice low with restrained anger. "When we return to the capital, I will impeach you."

Chapter 1350 Who Actually Holds Power Here

Gao Qiqian had barely finished shouting when another army appeared in the distance, and this time the leading general did something completely unexpected the moment he caught sight of Jinzhou, he let out a howl and burst into tears like a man whose soul had been ripped open.

Gao Qiqian blinked, genuinely confused, and muttered, "What is going on now?"

From atop the city wall, Wang Er leaned forward and shouted, "General Zhao, what happened to you?"

The man rode straight into the city without acknowledging anyone, not even sparing Gao Qiqian a glance, then rushed up the stairs to the tower at full speed, his footsteps echoing with urgency and something heavier than mere haste.

That single act of being ignored made Gao Qiqian's expression turn cold at once, because nothing irritated him more than being treated as if he did not exist, a habit born from years of groveling that had twisted into arrogance the moment he gained power, leaving him constantly paranoid that others looked down on him.

He sneered quietly, "Another rude one. Fine. I will remember every single one of you who dares to slight me, and when I return to the capital, I will deal with you one by one."

Meanwhile, the man named Zhao had already reached the top of the tower, and he stood there looking left and right before suddenly breaking down completely, his voice trembling as it echoed across the walls.

"During the Battle of Ningjin, my father defended this very place. I was still a child then, standing right here beside him, playing around, completely unaware of how desperate the situation was..."

His voice cracked, then turned into a hoarse wail.

"Father... later... he sent me back home... and I did not even realize that was the last time I would ever see him..."

There are moments in life that pass without warning, moments that seem ordinary at the time, yet years later, when memory circles back like a blade, you realize that was the final meeting, the last shared breath between you and someone who mattered.

Zhao stood there crying uncontrollably, his grief raw and unfiltered.

Only then did Lu Xiangsheng understand, his gaze sharpening as recognition settled in.

"So it is him," he said quietly. "One of the Liaodong Three Heroes, Zhao Shuaijiao's son, Zhao Guangyuan."

Gao Qiqian froze for a moment, then forced a dismissive snort as he processed the name, though inwardly he had already begun tallying another grudge.

So this was Zhao Guangyuan, General of Hanzhong.

He dared to arrive in Jinzhou and run straight to the tower to cry instead of reporting to the supervising officer.

Fine.

Another name on the list.

While Gao Qiqian busied himself with silent vengeance, Zhao Guangyuan finally finished crying, wiped his face, and suddenly sprang to his feet with a ferocious energy that felt like a blade unsheathed.

He roared, "I am the last reinforcements, right? Now that I am here, we can begin the attack. Come on, brothers, let us go, let us march straight into Shengjing and avenge my father."

Wang Er walked up behind him, hooked an arm around his shoulders, and started dragging him down the tower like a man handling an overexcited bull.

"Stop talking nonsense. We are still waiting for equipment and supplies."

Zhao Guangyuan struggled, his voice rising again, "What are we waiting for? I do not want to wait. I want to attack now."

A dull thud rang out.

Wang Er knocked him flat with a single punch and continued dragging him away without ceremony.

That brief exchange, however, struck Gao Qiqian like a sudden flash of lightning, and for the first time, something clicked into place inside his mind.

He turned sharply toward Lu Xiangsheng, his voice tightening.

"You... Lu Xiangsheng... you even summoned Zhao Guangyuan. You never intended to just defend Jinzhou. You are planning a full counterattack against the Jurchens."

Lu Xiangsheng only smiled coldly and said nothing.

Gao Qiqian's voice rose, edged with anger and disbelief.

"The Emperor has not yet decided. The court is still debating war and peace, and yet you have already made your move. Tell me, if the Emperor orders a pacification instead, what will you do? Will you defy the imperial edict and attack anyway? Do you intend to ruin the Emperor's grand strategy?"

Lu Xiangsheng finally spoke, his tone calm yet immovable.

"The arrow is already on the string. It must be released. This matter is no longer in my hands, and it is not in the Emperor's hands either."

That answer snapped something inside Gao Qiqian.

His face twisted as he shouted, "Outrageous. This is rebellion. Guards, seize Lu Xiangsheng at once."

He turned, expecting immediate action.

No one moved.

The imperial guards stood there awkwardly, glancing sideways, because on both sides of them, Lu Xiangsheng's personal troops had already stepped forward, their expressions hard and their stance unmistakable.

If the guards made a move, the Tianxiong Army would respond instantly.

And everyone present knew exactly how that would end.

The imperial guards were few.

The Tianxiong Army was not.

As for the so called capital elite troops under Gao Qiqian, they would struggle to defeat even a single Tianxiong soldier three against one.

Gao Qiqian's lips trembled with anger.

"Fine. So this is how you want to play."

He suddenly turned and shouted toward Cao Wenzhao, his voice sharp with forced authority.

"General Cao, you are known for your loyalty. I hold the imperial sword. Seeing it is as seeing the Emperor himself. Come here immediately and arrest Lu Xiangsheng."

Cao Wenzhao blinked, scratching his head with exaggerated confusion.

"Arrest him? How exactly? Should I use my left hand or my right hand?"

Cao Bianjiao coughed beside him, barely holding back a grin.

"Uncle, that is not the point. The point is to arrest him. How you do it does not matter."

"Ah," Cao Wenzhao nodded slowly, as if enlightened.

Gao Qiqian felt a chill creep up his spine, because the tone was wrong, the rhythm was wrong, and the air itself seemed to shift as if everyone present was sharing a joke that excluded him.

Cao Wenzhao turned back, smiling widely.

"High Eunuch, why should I arrest Lord Lu?"

Gao Qiqian snapped, "He is plotting rebellion. He intends to ignore the imperial will and attack Liaodong regardless of the Emperor's decision."

Cao Wenzhao nodded thoughtfully.

"Oh, so it is about that."

Then he grinned.

"In that case, you misunderstood something."

Gao Qiqian narrowed his eyes.

"What did I misunderstand?"

Cao Wenzhao chuckled, his voice light yet carrying across the entire space.

"You did not misunderstand the situation. You misunderstood the person."

He pointed at himself.

"The one committing insubordination is not Lord Lu. It is me."

A voice rang out immediately.

"And me."

Wang Xiaohua, alias Bai Mao, stepped forward, pointing at himself with a fierce grin.

"And me."

Xing Honglang strode out without hesitation.

"And me."

Old Nanfeng followed, laughing.

One after another, like a revolving lantern of defiance, generals and commanders stepped forward, each pointing at themselves, each claiming the same crime without a trace of fear.

The air thickened.

Gao Qiqian's eyes darted from face to face, his confidence collapsing into something closer to panic.

"What is happening? What is going on here?"

Lu Xiangsheng let out a long breath and spread his hands.

"I already told you. The arrow is on the string. It must be released. This is no longer something I control."

He paused, then added quietly,

"I am not the one in charge."

Silence fell.

A strange, suffocating silence.

Then Gao Qiqian suddenly screamed, his voice shrill and cracking.

"If you are not in charge, then who is? Who is in charge here? Who exactly is in charge?"