

Great Ming 1351

Chapter 1351 Hang You From the City Walls

"Who is in charge here?"

The shrill voice of Gao Qiqian echoed across the walls of Jinzhou, sharp enough to cut through the noise of soldiers and steel alike, and after he shouted a few more times, a figure finally pushed through the crowd of onlookers, parting the soldiers as if they were reeds in water.

Li DaoXuan stepped forward with a relaxed grin, looking at him as if this whole scene was nothing more than light entertainment.

"I suppose I can barely count as someone in charge."

"It is you!" Gao Qiqian's face twisted with anger as recognition hit him. "So it was you all along!"

His mind spun rapidly, calculating, analyzing, trying to piece together the logic behind what he was seeing, because in his understanding, this man was nothing more than a merchant, so how could he possibly command so many troops unless there was only one answer.

Money.

It had to be money.

These soldiers had gone unpaid for years, and this merchant had taken advantage of that weakness, using wealth to buy their loyalty wholesale.

Yes, that must be it.

Gao Qiqian raised the imperial sword high, his voice trembling with forced authority. "You... you have quite the nerve."

Li DaoXuan spread his hands, his tone mockingly light. "My nerve is not that big. You waving that sword around is quite scary. I am trembling, you see."

"You are afraid, are you not?" Gao Qiqian suddenly felt a surge of confidence, because the sword in his hand represented imperial authority, and no matter how arrogant rebels might be, they should still fear the will of the Emperor.

That was what he believed.

Before that thought could fully settle, Li DaoXuan had already closed the distance in a single smooth motion.

Gao Qiqian jumped back slightly. "What are you doing?"

He wanted to swing the sword, but he hesitated, because if he struck first, the so-called rebels around him might respond instantly, and he would be the one to suffer the immediate consequences.

Even a eunuch understood the value of avoiding immediate losses.

His hand trembled slightly.

Then Li DaoXuan reached out and grabbed the blade.

Barehanded.

His palm closed around the sharp edge without hesitation, as if he were gripping nothing more dangerous than a wooden stick.

Gao Qiqian yelped in shock.

Was this man insane?

Did he not care about his own hand?

But there was no blood.

Not a single drop.

Before he could process that, Li DaoXuan applied a slight pull, and the imperial sword slipped cleanly out of Gao Qiqian's grip.

"You dare seize the imperial sword?" Gao Qiqian's voice cracked.

"I just want to see whether the Emperor's sword is actually sharp," Li DaoXuan said casually.

Then, without warning, he drove the blade straight into his own abdomen.

A dull, wet sound echoed.

The sword went in from the front and pierced out through his lower back.

Gao Qiqian nearly lost his mind.

"That was not me!" he shouted at the surrounding soldiers. "He stabbed himself! Do not misunderstand! Do not act rashly!"

But something was wrong.

Very wrong.

The soldiers did not react with fear or anger.

They were calm.

Some were even grinning, watching as if this were an amusing performance rather than a life-threatening incident.

Only Lu Xiangsheng's Tianxiong Army, Yang Guozhu's forces, and the pampered capital troops showed signs of shock, and the distinction was obvious, because those were the only forces not fully part of this system.

The atmosphere turned strange.

Li DaoXuan stood there with a sword through his body, smiling as if nothing had happened.

"Eunuch Gao, your imperial sword is not very impressive. It cannot even kill a man."

Gao Qiqian's lips trembled. "You... what... what kind of monster are you?"

Li DaoXuan only smiled.

Before he could respond, Lao Nan Feng stepped forward, his expression dark with irritation. "Watch your mouth. Who are you calling a monster? Say one more word and I will skin you alive."

When Lao Nan Feng truly got angry, even Chen Qianhu would crouch on the ground and shut up, and this single roar forced Gao Qiqian to stagger back three steps before barely regaining his footing.

With a smooth motion, Li DaoXuan pulled the sword out of his body.

The blade came free, clean and bright, without a trace of blood.

He tossed it back. "Take it."

Gao Qiqian caught it instinctively, still dazed, unable to understand why something so terrifying had just been returned so casually.

Li DaoXuan reached out and tapped his head, pressing his palm lightly against the top of it, and Gao Qiqian did not even dare to dodge.

"You may be a useless supervisory eunuch," Li DaoXuan said calmly, "but the system itself is not useless. The army must be supervised. An army is a machine of violence, and without oversight, it will become a disaster."

Gao Qiqian stood frozen.

"Watch over the Xuanfu troops, the capital garrison, and the imperial guards you brought," Li DaoXuan continued. "Do not let them harm the civilians who have only just returned to live in Jinzhou. If even one commoner is abused by your soldiers, it will be your responsibility, and I will deal with you personally."

Gao Qiqian stammered. "How can I control them? Those soldiers are all... rogues..."

"I do not listen to excuses," Li DaoXuan cut him off. "Fail, and I will hang you on the city wall to dry for a month."

Gao Qiqian's face turned pale instantly.

A month?

He would not even survive three days.

Li DaoXuan did not waste another word. He turned and disappeared back into the crowd, his tone shifting completely as he shouted.

"Kitchen team, where is the kitchen team? Logistics just delivered seafood. Make me a seafood feast."

A group of cooks rushed over, smiling brightly. "What flavor would you like today?"

"I am tired of spicy. Make it savory this time."

"Understood!"

They beamed with pride, because among all the low-ranking soldiers, they were the ones who interacted most frequently with Dao Xuan Tianzun, and that alone was a kind of glory.

Gao Qiqian stood there, his body trembling faintly.

The crowd slowly dispersed.

Lu Xiangsheng walked past him and patted his shoulder, preparing to leave, but Gao Qiqian suddenly felt a strange sense of shared fate, as if they were both trapped in the same situation, and hurried after him.

"Lord Lu," he whispered, "we are on the same rope now, held hostage by these rebels. We must work together if we want to return to the capital alive."

Lu Xiangsheng almost laughed.

Return to the capital?

What would that even change?

If the capital could control them, would they dare to launch a campaign against the Qing?

But he had no interest in explaining reality to a useless eunuch.

"You would be better off doing your job properly," he said flatly. "Especially your capital troops. Their discipline is worse than the so-called rebels. Give it a few days and they will start harassing civilians, and when that happens, I will be watching your corpse hanging from the city wall."

Gao Qiqian's courage dropped sharply.

Perhaps now was not the time to think about escape.

Perhaps now he really needed to control those useless troops first.

The small farce ended quickly.

Jinzhou continued its transition into full war preparation.

Reinforcements arrived from every direction, setting up camps in ordered formations, while supplies flowed in endlessly from the sea, cart after cart rolling into the city loaded with grain, weapons, gunpowder, and countless strange devices that Gao Qiqian could not even begin to understand.

Chapter 1352 Preparing for War

"Report!"

A lone rider came tearing through Jinzhou like a blade slicing through wind, his horse lathered in foam and breath coming out in harsh bursts, and before the guards could even finish shouting his arrival, he had already dismounted and rushed straight toward Lu Xiangsheng.

"My lord," the scout said, barely steadying his voice, "the Manchu have already learned that we are massing forces in Jinzhou, and they have completed their preparations for battle. Heavy troops have been deployed around Daling River City."

Daling River City.

The name alone carried weight, history, and a trace of something foul.

That was the city Zu Dashou had once handed over after killing He Kegang and surrendering, a decision soaked in blood and betrayal. Once upon a time it had stood in distant opposition to Jinzhou, the two cities forming a defensive pair across the land like interlocking blades. Now, it had become the forward bastion where Ming and Qing forces would clash head on.

The scout continued without pause, clearly aware that every second mattered.

"The Qing forces have dug an enormous number of trenches around the city. The ground is completely ruined. There are pits everywhere, low walls scattered across the field, small stone mounds every few steps, and large water-filled holes every few paces. The entire perimeter has been turned into a broken maze. It is impossible to form proper battle formations there."

Gao Qiqian, who had been standing nearby trying to look important, blinked in confusion as if his brain had tripped over itself.

"They dug the ground into ruin so even formations cannot be deployed? Then how are they planning to fight?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not share his confusion. Instead, he calmly pulled out a magazine with the title Armored Blitz Warfare printed across the cover, flipping through it with practiced familiarity before speaking in an even tone.

"It is obvious. The Manchu are preparing defenses against our armored units."

Gao Qiqian leaned over, squinting at the pages as if staring harder might magically produce understanding.

"And what exactly is that supposed to be?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not even bother to respond to that question. Explaining advanced warfare concepts to Gao Qiqian was like explaining mathematics to a brick. He turned back to the scout instead.

"What are they planning?"

The "they" in his question clearly referred to Li DaoXuan and his faction.

The scout lowered his voice instinctively.

"They have also sent out scouts to investigate the defenses around Daling River City. After confirming the layout, they have chosen not to act immediately. They are waiting."

"Waiting?" Lu Xiangsheng frowned. "Waiting for what?"

The scout shook his head.

"I do not know, my lord, but it is clear that they are waiting for something specific."

That answer only deepened the unease.

Lu Xiangsheng pulled out the stack of magazines he had obtained from Sun Chuanting and began flipping through them rapidly, scanning page after page filled with diagrams, weapon designs, and theoretical tactics. He searched for anything that might hint at the next move, anything that could explain what Li DaoXuan was preparing.

He found nothing.

The irritation built slowly, tightening like a knot in his chest.

Then, just as his patience was wearing thin, something else caught his attention.

Not far away, a group of soldiers approached Cao Wenzhao, bringing several local villagers with them.

"General Cao, we have brought some locals."

Cao Wenzhao's expression brightened immediately.

"Bring them forward."

The villagers stepped up respectfully, offering a quick bow before speaking.

"General, for at least the next two days, there will be no strong winds."

Cao Wenzhao's eyes sharpened.

"Are you certain? This cannot be wrong."

The villagers nodded with confidence born from experience.

"Our families have lived here for generations. Look at the clouds in the sky. They are gathering instead of dispersing, which means there is no wind at higher altitudes to scatter them. In weather like this, there is usually no strong wind for at least two days."

Cao Wenzhao's expression shifted into unmistakable satisfaction.

"Good."

He turned immediately to the nearby officers.

"Pass the order. The entire army prepares for battle."

The effect was immediate and dramatic.

Jinzhou, which had been resting moments ago, suddenly came alive like a machine switching from idle to full power. Soldiers poured out of barracks in waves, boots striking the ground in rapid rhythm. Bedding was folded with astonishing speed into neat, uniform blocks, and within moments, troops were already assembling in formation on the drill fields.

Platoon leaders began counting their men and reporting upward. Company commanders verified numbers and passed them along. Battalion leaders received the reports and relayed them further. The entire structure operated with clean, precise efficiency, each level feeding into the next without delay or confusion.

Order. Discipline. Control.

A complete system in motion.

In contrast, the Tianxiong Army, the Xuanfu troops, and the capital's so-called elite young masters stood there in visible confusion, caught off guard by the sudden shift. They did not know whether they should follow, hesitate, or simply watch.

So they did what uncertain men always do.

They looked at Lu Xiangsheng.

Lu Xiangsheng reacted quickly, raising his hand and issuing his own command.

"We may not understand their plan, but we cannot fall behind. Form up immediately."

That was enough.

The Tianxiong Army and Xuanfu troops snapped into action, rushing to align themselves properly, though their speed still lagged behind Gao Village's forces.

Only the capital troops remained a problem.

They moved slowly, awkwardly, fumbling with their armor as if dressing themselves for the first time. Even basic preparation seemed to require far too much effort.

Gao Qiqian saw this, and his heart dropped straight into his stomach.

This was bad.

Very bad.

If Li DaoXuan used this as an excuse, claiming that he had failed in his role as supervisor, then that earlier threat of being hung from the city wall for a month would no longer be a joke.

It would become reality.

Panic triggered action.

He rushed forward like a man trying to outrun his own fate and began shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Move faster, you useless idiots. If anyone delays the march and slows down allied forces, I will personally have him hung from the city wall for a month."

The Gao Village officers nearby watched this with amused expressions.

He had learned quickly.

Very quickly.

Crude, but effective.

At the very least, he now resembled something close to a proper military supervisor, which was already a vast improvement over his usual obsession with squeezing out profit wherever possible.

Before long, the army was ready.

The Guanning cavalry took the lead, eager and burning with the desire for revenge. Zhao Guangyuan marched at the head of the second formation, his urgency almost visible in the way he moved. Behind them came the main Gao Village force, organized, steady, and heavy with purpose. Finally, Lu Xiangsheng and Gao Qiqian followed with their combined troops.

A massive army began its advance toward Daling River City.

The ground trembled beneath the weight of it.

At the same time, inside Daling River City.

The Manchu general Ajige stood facing the southwest, his expression dark and tense.

Days earlier, intelligence had already confirmed that Ming forces were gathering in Jinzhou. Under normal circumstances, the Qing army would never allow such a buildup to proceed undisturbed. They would strike early, harass constantly, and disrupt formation before the enemy could fully assemble.

That had always been their way.

But the current reality was no longer the same.

After repeated defeats and heavy losses, their manpower had been reduced to the point where offensive strategy was no longer sustainable. What remained forced them into a defensive posture.

Ajige had no choice.

He could only hold the line at Daling River City and hope that the Ming army would hesitate, that the faction within the Ming court advocating peace would succeed in slowing the advance through bribes and negotiation.

But that hope had already collapsed.

The Ming army had come anyway.

From the city walls, Ajige could see them clearly.

Banners stretched across the horizon. Tens of thousands of soldiers advanced in a vast formation, spreading outward in a fan shape across the southwestern approach. It was not just an army.

It was pressure.

"...So they have come after all."

He drew in a slow breath, forcing calm into his body.

"We must hold. We must hold at all costs. If this line breaks, everything is finished."

Daling River City stood only about three hundred and fifty li from Shengjing. If the Ming army broke through here, nothing would stop them from driving straight toward the heart of Manchu power.

There would be no second chance.

Then, as he continued watching, something changed.

At the rear of the Ming formation, something large began to rise.

A balloon.

Slowly, steadily, expanding as heated air filled it.

"They are going to use that thing."

Ajige's heart tightened instantly.

Around him, the Eight Banners soldiers reacted the same way. Tension spread like a silent ripple. Many of them had already encountered these strange flying devices before, and stories about their destructive capability had spread wildly among the ranks, growing more exaggerated with each retelling.

Fear did not need logic.

It only needed memory.

As the balloon inflated, unease spread rapidly through the army.

Ajige knew he had to act immediately.

If morale broke now, the battle would be lost before it even began.

"Do not be afraid," he shouted, projecting authority into every word. "Do not be afraid. The Emperor has already studied that thing. It flies slowly and cannot carry much. Once it carries a man, there is little space left for explosives. It is not a serious threat."

Officers throughout the ranks immediately echoed him.

"Do not panic. It is only one balloon. One soldier. A few bombs at most. There is nothing to fear."

Their voices spread outward, reinforcing the message, stabilizing the line.

Chapter 1353 The Airborne Battalion Takes the Field

A swarm of balloons rose slowly from behind the formation, not drifting like harmless festival lanterns, but ascending with a deliberate, mechanical calm that carried the weight of intent. Heat shimmered beneath each envelope, the controlled burn of fuel lifting them skyward, turning air itself into a weaponized domain.

The Gao Family Village militia did not even bother to look surprised. To them, this was already folded into routine, another extension of the system's invisible hand. Even if some of them did not fully understand the bombing capability yet, they had long accepted one fundamental truth: anything that rose under the system's design was never for show. If it flew, it observed. If it observed, it would eventually kill.

But the troops under Lu Xiangsheng and Gao Qiqian were another matter entirely.

They stared upward, eyes stretched wide, expressions frozen somewhere between awe and unease, as if witnessing a myth being assembled in real time. The massive "sky lanterns" floated above them, yet these were no ceremonial lights drifting for wishes. Each bamboo basket carried a soldier. Each soldier stood inside with purpose. Each unit was controlled, measured, deliberate.

Lu Xiangsheng flipped through the magazines in his hands so fast the pages nearly tore apart, his brows tightening with each useless turn.

Nothing.

Not a single mention.

Not a single diagram.

His breath grew sharper, urgency creeping into his voice as he strode toward Cao Wenzhao.

"What exactly are those?" he demanded, lifting the worn publications like evidence. "Why is there nothing about them in here?"

Cao Wenzhao took the magazines, glanced at them briefly, then shook his head with something that resembled pity.

"Lu-daren, these are outdated."

"Outdated?" Lu Xiangsheng repeated, the word landing awkwardly, as if it belonged to a different era entirely.

Cao Wenzhao tapped the corner of a page. "Look closely. Every issue has a date. Year. Month. Issue number."

Lu Xiangsheng narrowed his eyes and examined it carefully.

Half a year old.

The realization did not arrive gently. It hit with the slow, grinding pressure of a system revealing its layers.

"So this means..." he muttered, "...everything I know is already six months behind?"

Cao Wenzhao smiled faintly, though there was no warmth in it.

"Not just six months. The magazine does not publish cutting-edge military technology immediately. Anything with strategic value is delayed, filtered, or withheld entirely. What you are holding is already at least a year behind reality."

A full year.

Lu Xiangsheng did not speak for a moment. In that silence, the battlefield shifted from a place of war into a place of realization. Information itself had become stratified. Knowledge was no longer shared equally. It was controlled, distributed, weaponized.

"I want the latest version," he said finally.

Cao Wenzhao did not even hesitate.

"Internal circulation only. Restricted to high-ranking officers."

The answer was clean. Absolute. Closed.

Lu Xiangsheng understood immediately.

He was outside the system.

Cao Wenzhao chuckled lightly, breaking the tension with a casual ease that felt almost cruel.

"Why bother reading at all? The battle is about to begin. Watching it unfold will teach you far more than any magazine ever could."

That... was undeniably true.

Lu Xiangsheng lifted his gaze again, locking onto the rising fleet of balloons. This time, he did not look confused.

He looked like a man bracing himself to understand something dangerous.

Above, the pilots began their reports.

"Sky Battalion Three, flight balloon, ready!"

"Sky Battalion Four, ready!"

"Sky Battalion Six, ready!"

"Sky Battalion Eight, heating malfunction, requesting withdrawal!"

"Sky Battalion Ten, all systems normal, ready!"

Voices echoed through the air, sharp, disciplined, each report snapping into place like components in a machine. This was no improvised force. This was the first mass-produced aerial unit of Gao Family Village, the first Air Battalion shaped not by tradition, but by selection criteria that bordered on ruthless.

Height controlled.

Weight optimized.

Psychological stability mandatory.

Fear of heights, absolute disqualification.

Survival capability, extreme.

Loyalty, beyond question.

Each soldier was not merely trained. They were filtered. Refined. Forged into something that could operate above the battlefield, isolated from support, fully aware that if they fell into enemy territory, they would be expected to survive, fight, and, if necessary, die without compromise.

Their value exceeded the balloons they rode by several hundred times.

"Upper air, no wind!"

"No wind confirmed!"

"Conditions stable, ready for ascent!"

"Release the ropes!"

Ground crews began loosening the tethers, their movements controlled and methodical. The balloons rose steadily, the ropes sliding free as the pilots hauled them up into their baskets, coiling them neatly.

Cao Wenzhao tilted his head back, lifted a metal megaphone, and called upward.

"Advance. We await your results."

He expected the battalion commander to respond immediately, to take command, to direct the formation forward.

Instead, the commander hesitated.

His gaze shifted.

Not forward.

Not downward.

But sideways.

Toward a nearby balloon.

A head suddenly popped up from its basket.

Li DaoXuan.

The reaction below was instantaneous, though silent. Shock rippled through the ranks like an invisible wave.

The Dao Xuan Tianzun himself... in the air?

Li DaoXuan leaned casually against the edge of the basket, grinning as if this were a leisure outing rather than the opening of an aerial bombardment doctrine.

"The pilot of Sky Battalion Seven fell sick," he called down cheerfully. "So I borrowed his balloon for a bit of fun."

Fun.

The word hung in the air, completely out of place, yet somehow perfectly aligned with his nature.

No one responded.

No one dared.

Li DaoXuan waved impatiently at the commander.

"Go on. Give the order. Ignore me. Right now, I am just Sky Battalion Seven. One of your soldiers."

No one believed that.

No one could.

But the command had been given.

And in this system, commands, once issued, were absolute.

The commander swallowed hard, lifted his megaphone, and forced his voice into steadiness.

"All units. Advance. Proceed toward the airspace above Dalinhe City."

Sky Battalion One began drifting forward.

Then the others followed, a slow-moving aerial formation crossing into enemy territory.

Except one.

Sky Battalion Seven wobbled.

It swayed left, then right, its movement lacking the clean precision of the others. It looked less like a weapon and more like a drunk trying to walk a straight line.

Li DaoXuan, quite obviously, had no formal training in piloting.

He was still figuring out which mechanism controlled altitude, which adjusted direction, and which one probably should not be touched too aggressively.

Fortunately, the system did not require perfection.

Hot air balloons were forgiving.

Had this been a high-speed jet, the Dao Xuan Tianzun might have reduced himself to a crater within seconds.

Below, the Qing Army looked up.

And fear took hold.

No command was needed.

No explanation required.

The moment those balloons filled the sky, instinct took over. Soldiers rushed into their prepared shelters, diving into trenches, squeezing into crude anti-air bunkers built from stone and packed earth.

Some were dug into trench walls.

Some were stacked from heavy rocks.

Crude, but not foolish.

Human ingenuity did not belong to one side alone.

Above them, the battalion commander's voice cut through the air.

"Position reached. Begin bombardment."

He lit the fuse.

And dropped the first bomb.

This was no longer the era of hand-thrown grenades. Those had been transitional tools. What fell now were purpose-built aerial munitions, designed specifically for vertical deployment.

Handles removed.

Explosive yield increased.

Casing enlarged.

These bombs could not be thrown far by hand, but from the sky, range was irrelevant.

The moment the first one fell, the rest followed.

Bombs poured downward in waves.

Before releasing them, the soldiers spoke, their voices carrying a strange mix of anger and memory.

"No civilians left in Daling River City."

"Zu Dashou already consumed them."

"I remember that story. Nearly broke me."

"Filth."

"Kill them all."

Then the sky answered.

Explosions detonated one after another, overlapping into a continuous roar that erased distinction between individual blasts. Fire, shockwaves, and debris merged into a single expanding field of destruction.

The trench network outside the city vanished into smoke.

Earth erupted.

Stone shattered.

Air itself seemed to tear apart under the repeated impacts.

From above, visibility collapsed. Thick black smoke rolled upward, swallowing the battlefield, turning the ground into an indistinct mass of darkness.

The pilots did not hesitate.

They did not pause.

They lit the fuses.

And dropped blindly into the smoke.

Precision was no longer required.

The system had already reached the stage where volume replaced accuracy.

Down below, fate decided the rest.

Whoever got hit died.

And whoever died... simply proved they had been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Chapter 1354 Out of Bombs Already?

The moment the bombardment began, Ajige understood something with brutal clarity, something no battlefield manual had ever taught him and no ancestor had ever warned him about.

He had lost command.

Not partially, not temporarily, but completely, violently, and irreversibly.

Smoke swallowed everything.

Black smoke from burning earth, white smoke from shattered charges, thick rolling dust thrown up by explosions that hammered the ground like a relentless industrial piston. The battlefield around Dalinghe did not merely shake, it convulsed, as if the land itself had been dragged into a mechanical rhythm of destruction.

Sound collapsed next.

Orders could no longer travel.

Ajige leaned toward his personal guard, mouth nearly pressed to the man's ear, shouting with every ounce of force he possessed, veins bulging, throat tearing.

Only then did the guard barely catch the words.

The man nodded, turned, and sprinted.

Three steps.

That was all he managed.

A flash, a thunderclap, and the man was gone, lifted into the air by an explosion that did not even bother to acknowledge his existence. Flesh, armor, dust, and fragments became indistinguishable components of the same expanding shockwave.

Ajige froze for half a breath, then forced himself to breathe again.

Orders were meaningless.

Transmission was impossible.

Command, in the classical sense, had ceased to exist.

He stood inside his reinforced shelter, surrounded by the dull roar of continuous detonations, and reached the only conclusion available to a commander who still retained a fragment of rationality.

Wait.

Endure.

Survive the phase.

The bombing did not come in a single wave.

It stretched.

Intermittent, irregular, relentless.

A bomb here, a bomb there, no rhythm to predict, no pattern to exploit, no cycle to interrupt. It was not a battle, it was consumption. A steady burning of resources from above, indifferent to efficiency, unconcerned with cost.

Somewhere far behind the frontline, Lu Xiangsheng watched.

At first, he tried to analyze.

He always did.

Every weapon he had seen before, iron war wagons, naval cannons, compact firearms, no matter how strange, no matter how advanced, he could still find an angle, a weakness, a theoretical countermeasure. Even if he could not win, he could imagine resistance.

But this...

This was not a weapon that engaged the enemy.

This was a system that ignored the enemy entirely.

He stared at the Sky Battalion drifting above Dalinghe, releasing destruction from a height no formation could reach, no arrow could touch, no discipline could stabilize.

His mind ran through scenario after scenario.

What if he stood in Ajige's position?

What would he do?

He calculated.

He reconsidered.

He searched for variables.

After a long silence, he exhaled slowly, the answer settling into him with cold certainty.

"Nothing," he said quietly. "Absolutely nothing."

Beside him, Gao Qiqian was already trembling, his body unable to conceal the fear that had bypassed reason entirely.

"This... this method... what kind of madness is this..." his voice cracked, eyes fixed on the sky. "If they... if they used this on the capital..."

Lu Xiangsheng did not look at him.

"The walls would be irrelevant," he said. "The Forbidden City included."

The statement did not carry emotion.

That made it worse.

Gao Qiqian's legs gave out beneath him, and he collapsed to the ground as if the foundation of his world had just been quietly removed.

Up above, Li DaoXuan was having a completely different experience.

He was not commanding.

He was not optimizing.

He was, quite literally, struggling.

His balloon drifted unevenly, swaying left and right like a drunk man trying to walk a straight line after too much wine. While the rest of the Sky Battalion had already entered efficient bombing patterns, Li DaoXuan was still figuring out which lever controlled direction and which valve adjusted altitude.

He carefully avoided colliding with friendly units, his attention divided between control mechanisms and spatial awareness, which, to his mild annoyance, turned out to be more complicated than expected.

Eventually, after a series of unstable adjustments, he drifted above the core zone of Dalinghe.

Below him, there was nothing.

Not in the meaningful sense.

Only smoke.

Endless, rolling smoke.

From this height, the battlefield had become an indistinct mass, a blurred canvas of black and gray, where individual targets no longer existed.

He paused.

Then frowned slightly.

This was boring.

There was no feedback.

No confirmation.

No sense of result.

If a single shot kills a visible enemy, the mind registers it, satisfaction forms instantly. But if one fires blindly into a fog and only learns later whether anything was achieved, the entire process becomes hollow.

No feedback loop.

No reward signal.

No sense of acquisition.

He even recalled, with mild amusement, how certain games exaggerated damage numbers just to enhance that feeling.

He looked down at the smoke again.

Then made a decision.

He would wait.

Below, the bombing gradually weakened.

Explosions became less frequent, then sporadic, then stopped altogether. The Sky Battalion had exhausted its current load. The thunder faded, leaving behind a battlefield filled with distant cries, wounded voices echoing through thinning smoke.

"Return!" the Sky Battalion commander ordered through a metal loudspeaker.

The formation began to withdraw.

One by one, the balloons drifted away from Dalinghe, their mission for this cycle complete.

Visibility slowly improved.

Smoke dispersed.

Shapes returned.

Ajige pushed open the entrance of his shelter and stepped outside, lifting his head to look toward the retreating balloons.

Through the haze, he saw them.

Bright, drifting, retreating.

A cold smile formed on his face.

"Out of explosives?" he muttered, voice regaining a trace of confidence. "I knew it. Such bombardment cannot be sustained. Your resources must be strained by now."

He let out a low laugh.

"My shelter still stands. Let us see how long you can continue."

What he did not see was directly above him.

One balloon remained.

Sky Battalion Seven.

Li DaoXuan had not left.

He hovered silently above a thinning patch of smoke, patient, waiting for clarity, waiting for that one moment where randomness would transform back into certainty.

Then he saw it.

A figure below.

Distinct.

Armored differently.

Presence unmistakable.

"Now this," he murmured, a hint of satisfaction returning, "this is what I call feedback."

He moved quickly.

Fuse lit.

Bomb released.

Below, Ajige had just finished speaking.

A soft sound landed near him.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just enough.

He turned his head.

Through the fading smoke, a faint spark burned on the ground a few meters away.

For half a second, nothing happened.

Then realization struck.

Bomb.

His body reacted before thought could form.

He lunged.

Full force.

Toward the shelter entrance.

The explosion came at the same instant.

A violent shockwave expanded outward, sweeping everything in its radius into motion. Soldiers nearby were lifted, thrown, erased by force rather than precision.

Ajige, mid-leap, was caught by the rear edge of the blast.

Instead of being torn apart, he was propelled.

Accelerated.

Thrown forward into the shelter with brutal efficiency, sliding across the ground until his head slammed against the inner wall with a dull, solid impact.

For a moment, everything went quiet.

He groaned, dazed, then turned his head back toward the entrance.

And froze.

The doorway was gone.

Collapsed.

Buried under loosened stone and falling earth.

His "shelter," reinforced with layers of mud and rock, had turned into a sealed chamber.

He scrambled forward, pushing, clawing, forcing against the debris.

Nothing moved.

Not even slightly.

The structure held.

From outside.

Not from within.

He was trapped.

Above, Li DaoXuan clenched his fist, a grin spreading across his face.

"Perfect," he said, thoroughly satisfied. "Direct hit. Full feedback."

The feeling was unmistakable.

It was no different from eliminating a boss target in a game, except this time, the system did not need to display numbers.

Reality itself confirmed the result.

He exhaled, content.

Now he could leave.

His balloon began drifting back toward the rear.

At that exact moment, far behind the lines, Cao Wenzhao issued the next command without hesitation.

"Artillery battalion," he said, voice steady, cold, precise.

"Open fire."

Chapter 1355 Shenyang Is Still Far Away

Ajige was trapped inside a pitch-black stone chamber, sealed in by thick walls and a collapsed entrance that refused to yield no matter how hard he pushed, and for the first time since taking command he felt something unfamiliar creeping into his chest, a suffocating loss of control that no amount of shouting could fix.

Outside, the soundscape shifted again.

The thunder of aerial bombs faded, replaced by a different rhythm, deeper, sharper, more structured, the unmistakable roar of artillery batteries firing in coordinated volleys, each shot followed by a high-pitched tearing whistle as shells cut through the air before slamming into the ground with violent precision.

Every nearby impact sent tremors through the stone chamber, dust drifting down from the ceiling in thin streams that settled onto Ajige's armor and shoulders, as if the earth itself was slowly burying him alive while he remained conscious inside it.

He could not see.

He could not command.

He could not even confirm whether his army still existed outside.

And that uncertainty was worse than fear.

Meanwhile, far beyond the shattered trenches, Gao Qiqian stood watching everything unfold with his own eyes, and unlike Ajige, he had no protection from the psychological weight of what he was witnessing.

The artillery battalion of Gao Family Village had begun systematic bombardment.

Not chaotic.

Not desperate.

Not reactive.

Systematic.

Rows of small cannons fired in rotation, covering the entire area around Dalinhe City in a dense, overlapping grid of destruction, each volley landing before the previous smoke had even fully cleared, creating a continuous cycle of explosion, dust, and shockwaves that erased any sense of stable terrain.

There were no civilians in the city.

That fact had already been confirmed.

Which meant there were no constraints.

The shells fell like rain that did not care about cost, did not care about conservation, did not care about anything except saturation of target zones.

One round ended, another began.

Then another.

And another.

Gao Qiqian swallowed hard as he watched the endless barrage, his voice trembling despite himself.

"This is too brutal... the enemy positions are already wiped out, there is nothing left visible, why are they still firing... is there really a need to keep going like this... should they not stop and conserve ammunition... should they not send infantry forward already?"

Beside him, Lu Xiangsheng flipped through one of the military magazines he had been obsessively studying, his fingers pausing on a particular page as his eyes sharpened with sudden clarity.

He turned the page outward and pointed.

"Read this."

Gao Qiqian leaned in.

The title was blunt, almost vulgar in its simplicity.

"When poor, use tactics and maneuver. When rich, bomb them to hell."

Lu Xiangsheng closed the magazine slowly, his voice calm, almost philosophical.

"If you have the resources, why would you risk soldiers' lives in close combat when you can erase uncertainty from a distance, every hidden trench, every unseen survivor, every possible counterattack... all of it can be reduced before a single infantryman steps forward."

Gao Qiqian hesitated.

"But what if there is no one left?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not even look at him.

"Then you are paying to guarantee that assumption is correct."

Gao Qiqian's lips twitched.

"How much money did that just cost?"

Lu Xiangsheng shot him a sideways glance filled with irritation.

"You only think about money."

Gao Qiqian replied instinctively, almost defensively.

"Because I know how poor the court is, I know how desperate the Emperor is for silver."

Lu Xiangsheng's expression turned sharp.

"And yet you still embezzle."

Gao Qiqian froze.

That was the problem with systems of accountability.

Once you understood them, they could always be turned back on you.

That was the real meaning of pressure.

The bombardment continued.

Smoke rose, dispersed, and rose again as fresh explosions replaced fading ones, the battlefield cycling through destruction in waves that seemed almost mechanical, as if the war itself had been industrialized into a repeating process.

Then, finally, a hand rose.

Li DaoXuan.

The signal was simple, but absolute.

"That is enough."

Cao Wenzhao immediately lifted his voice, amplified through a metal speaking cone.

"Cease fire!"

The order rippled through the ranks.

"Cease fire!"

"Cease fire!"

One by one, the cannons fell silent.

The battlefield, for the first time in a long while, stopped shaking.

And then the next phase began.

Zhao Guangyuan stepped forward, eyes burning with something far more personal than strategy.

"Allow me to lead the Hanzhong militia as the vanguard!"

Cao Wenzhao did not hesitate.

"Approved. Go."

Zhao Guangyuan's face lit up with savage determination as he drew his sword halfway, paused, then shoved it back into its sheath and instead pulled out a heavy chopping blade, the kind meant not for elegance but for ending lives decisively.

"My father... today I repay the debt."

Behind him, the militia murmured quietly.

"If Flat Rabbit sees this, he is going to be disappointed."

"He will start complaining about the decline of sword culture again."

"Something about how no one respects elegance anymore."

Far away, in another city preparing for its own operation, Flat Rabbit suddenly sneezed violently and looked up with a grin.

"Someone is thinking about me."

Back on the battlefield, Zhao Guangyuan charged.

His unit followed.

This was not the original Gao Family Village militia.

This was a force that had been reshaped, but not completely transformed.

They had discipline now.

They had structure.

But they had not lost their brutality.

Where the core militia sought to capture and convert labor, to feed the expanding industrial system with controlled manpower, Zhao Guangyuan and others like him still carried the instincts of the old world, where enemies were not assets but obstacles to be eliminated.

He entered the trenches like a storm.

A Qing soldier stumbled out of a dirt hole, dazed and disoriented from the bombardment, barely managing to lift his head before Zhao Guangyuan's blade came down in a clean arc that split his neck open, blood spraying into the dust.

"Father! Watch me! I will kill at least ten today!"

He moved forward without pause.

Around him, his men did the same.

One soldier leaped into a trench and brought his blade down on a man crouching with his back turned, the strike landing with such force that it split flesh and bone in a grotesque, decisive motion.

Another found a small dugout and leaned in, only to have a spear thrust out from inside, nearly piercing his face.

He recoiled, shouting.

"There are Qing soldiers hiding inside!"

Zhao Guangyuan roared back instantly.

"What do you think the grenades are for?"

The soldier froze for half a second, realization hitting him like a slap, before fumbling for a grenade, lighting it, and tossing it straight into the hole.

The explosion that followed was contained, brutal, efficient.

But even after all the bombardment, resistance still existed.

Trench warfare was never clean.

It was never easy.

Zhao Guangyuan cut down several enemies in quick succession, but in the chaos, a heavy hammer struck his back, the force bypassing his armor and driving straight into his body, knocking the air out of him as he staggered backward and coughed up blood.

He tried to push forward again.

He refused to stop.

Then a hand grabbed his shoulder.

Cao Bianjiao had arrived.

Without ceremony, he pulled Zhao Guangyuan back.

"Fall back and treat your wounds. I will take it from here."

Zhao Guangyuan struggled.

"I can still fight. I have not avenged my father yet."

Cao Bianjiao's voice turned cold.

"We have not even reached Shenyang yet. If you burn yourself out here, what exactly are you avenging?"

The words hit harder than the hammer.

Zhao Guangyuan finally stopped resisting.

He retreated.

Cao Bianjiao stepped forward, leading the Guan-Ning cavalry into the trenches, continuing the systematic clearing of remaining Qing forces hiding in dugouts and collapsed fortifications.

From behind, Lu Xiangsheng watched everything and issued his own order.

"Tianxiong Army, advance. Assist in clearing the battlefield. Drag out every surviving Qing soldier hiding in trenches and tunnels and eliminate them."

Nearby commanders nodded.

Wang Pu moved.

Yang Guozhu moved.

More forces poured in.

The battlefield shifted from bombardment to extraction.

From destruction to completion.

At the rear, Lao Nanfeng glanced at Bai Shui Wang Er and Xing Honglang with a casual grin.

"So, what about us?"

Wang Er shrugged.

"We are not here to compete for merit."

Xing Honglang nodded, her expression calm but sharp.

"Shenyang is still ahead. Why rush?"

Chapter 1356 This Has to Be the Private Treasury

The Qing Eight Banners forces, after being subjected to repeated saturation bombardment from both aerial units and artillery, had already lost more than just formation. Their command structure had disintegrated into fragments, their chain of response severed, their morale collapsing not in a single dramatic moment, but in layers, like a structure eaten hollow from within.

What remained was not an army in the traditional sense, but a collection of scattered survivors clinging to instinct.

And then came the fatal contradiction.

Cold weapon warfare demanded formation. Discipline. Cohesion. A line that held, a shape that moved, a structure that turned individual strength into collective force. But in order to defend against iron war wagons, firearms, and artillery, they had dug.

They dug desperately.

They tore apart the ground, carving trenches, pits, makeshift shelters, anti-blast holes, turning the battlefield into a broken landscape of uneven terrain and fractured earth.

In doing so, they had erased the very foundation of their own combat doctrine.

No formation could stand on such ground.

No charge could maintain cohesion.

No command could propagate across a shattered surface.

They had, with their own hands, strangled the method that once made them formidable.

The balance shifted.

Not gradually. Not subtly. But decisively.

And once that balance tipped, the outcome was no longer in question.

The trench fighting did not last long.

What followed was not a battle of equals, but a process of elimination.

The remaining Qing soldiers were swept away in segments. Those who leapt out in desperation, trying to resist with raw courage, were cut down within moments. Those who hid inside their makeshift "bomb shelters," hoping to outlast the storm, found themselves facing a different inevitability.

A grenade tossed inside.

A dull, contained explosion.

Silence.

Resistance, in any form, had become meaningless.

When the battlefield finally fell quiet, it did so not with peace, but with exhaustion.

Smoke lingered. Dust settled in uneven layers. The air still carried the burnt scent of explosives and scorched earth.

Ming soldiers spread across Dalinghe City, moving through ruins and trenches, clearing the battlefield while simultaneously searching for one man.

Aji Ge.

"Damn it... can't find him. Not even a corpse."

"He probably ran when the fighting started."

"What a waste. Not taking down the enemy commander... it feels incomplete."

"Yeah. That bastard led raids before. Did god knows how many atrocities. I wanted to kill him myself."

Their voices were casual, almost conversational, but their hands did not stop working.

They flipped corpses one by one, examining armor, checking insignia.

Most of them did not know Aji Ge's face. But rank had its symbols. Equipment had hierarchy. A commander could be identified, if not by face, then by what he wore.

"Here's one in general armor!"

"That's just a thousand-man commander. Not Aji Ge."

"Still counts, right? That's some merit."

"Who knows? Blown apart by artillery. No way to claim individual credit. This goes into collective merit, hahaha..."

Laughter broke out.

It was not cruelty. It was fatigue mixed with relief, the kind of laughter that comes after surviving overwhelming force.

At that moment, Lu Xiangsheng and Gao Qiqian stepped onto the battlefield.

Lu Xiangsheng moved steadily. His tall frame and disciplined physique allowed him to navigate the uneven terrain with controlled ease. The craters and trenches slowed him, but did not disrupt him.

Gao Qiqian, on the other hand, struggled.

Every step was uncertain. He stumbled repeatedly, nearly falling more than once, his robes gathering dust as his balance betrayed him.

"What kind of damned place is this? A broken hellhole," he muttered, irritation leaking into his voice.

Lu Xiangsheng shot him a glance, voice cold.

"This is Dalinghe City. Territory of the Ming. Calling it a hellhole... is that appropriate?"

Gao Qiqian snorted.

"Just because it belongs to the Ming doesn't mean it isn't a hellhole. Everything outside the capital is a hellhole."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

There was no point arguing.

Speaking with this eunuch did not produce understanding. It only raised blood pressure.

He turned away.

Distance, in this case, was wisdom.

Gao Qiqian wandered the battlefield with his entourage, two young eunuchs and several palace experts trailing behind him. From time to time, he would step on a corpse, curse, and move on, as if venting irritation onto the dead.

No one liked him.

The Gao Village militia kept their distance instinctively, creating a visible empty radius around him, as if he carried something contagious.

Gao Qiqian, however, did not mind.

In fact, he preferred it.

Isolation meant privacy.

And privacy, in war, often meant opportunity.

Then he stopped.

In front of a stone structure.

"Hmm?"

The building stood out. Solid. Reinforced. Its entrance partially buried under collapsed debris, stone and dirt sealing it shut.

"This doesn't look like an ordinary house," Gao Qiqian murmured.

A young eunuch leaned closer.

"Indeed. Not something common folk would build."

Gao Qiqian's eyes sharpened instantly.

"What kind of people build something like this?"

The answer came in a whisper.

"Rich people."

A slow grin spread across Gao Qiqian's face.

"Smart. This... must be a treasury."

Interest ignited immediately.

The surrounding eunuchs and palace guards closed in, their attention snapping into focus.

Gao Qiqian lowered his voice.

"Keep this quiet. If others find out, they'll split the loot. We take it ourselves. Afterwards, I'll make sure you get your share."

Excitement flickered across their faces.

"Understood!"

"Good."

He straightened, tone returning to casual indifference.

"Not now. We wait. I'll arrange it."

They dispersed instantly, pretending disinterest, but their eyes betrayed them, lingering on the stone structure.

The battlefield cleanup continued.

Bodies were stripped of usable equipment, armor removed, weapons collected. The dead, now reduced to logistics, were transported outside the city for mass burial.

War consumed not only lives, but resources.

Everything was processed.

Everything was reused.

By the time the sun dipped below the horizon, the work was finally complete.

Fatigue settled over the troops.

It was time to rest.

Gao Qiqian approached Cao Wenzhao.

"Everyone's settling down. Camps need to be assigned. I prefer to stay inside the city walls."

Cao Wenzhao glanced at him, assuming mere arrogance.

"Fine. Stay inside. Makes no difference to us."

The Gao Village militia carried advanced field gear. Comfortable tents. Feather-filled sleeping bags. Their operational flexibility rendered such distinctions meaningless.

City or field, it was all the same.

But for Gao Qiqian, it was everything.

His lips curled slightly.

"I'll take that section," he said, casually pointing.

"And my sleep is light. Tell your men not to disturb me."

Cao Wenzhao rolled his eyes.

"My men follow discipline. No one wanders at night, and no one trespasses into another unit's camp."

"Good."

The trap was set.

By nightfall, Gao Qiqian's personal camp was established directly beside the stone building.

Tents were arranged deliberately, blocking the entrance.

Cloth screens were erected.

Layers of soldiers were stationed outward, forming a perimeter.

The outer ring consisted of regular capital troops, unaware of the truth. They were ordered strictly to keep their distance at night, no matter what they heard.

A perfect isolation zone.

Night deepened.

Third watch.

The city fell into darkness.

Patrols moved only at the edges. Inside, each unit remained within its own controlled space.

Gao Qiqian stepped outside his tent, scanning the surroundings.

Satisfied, he let out a low chuckle.

"Time to begin."

His selected group gathered immediately.

Two eunuchs.

Six palace experts.

And himself.

Nine people.

No more.

Profit divided among too many became meaningless.

Nine was acceptable.

Barely.

He glanced at the sealed entrance, calculating.

If not for the need to break it open, he would not have shared even this much.

But labor had its price.

He leaned in, voice barely above a whisper.

"Start digging. Quietly. Not a sound."

Chapter 1357 Ajige, The Illusion of Control

The six imperial guards began their work with a level of care that bordered on absurd when compared to the violence they were trained to deliver, because instead of drawing blades or forming killing formations, they were now crouched in front of a sealed stone structure, carefully dismantling it piece by piece as if they were craftsmen rather than executioners.

The entrance of the stone house had long been buried under a deliberate pile of rubble composed of large rocks, packed soil, and compacted debris, and every movement required coordination, because even the slightest sound carried the risk of exposure within a military encampment that was already operating under heightened alert.

Each guard worked in silence, lifting heavy stones together with controlled breathing, slowly transferring them aside, then returning for the next layer, while smaller debris was removed using baskets and improvised tools, the entire process unfolding with a strange combination of discipline and greed.

They had removed their armor to maximize efficiency, leaving their bodies exposed to the cold air, their muscles straining under repeated effort, yet none of them complained, because the motivation driving them forward was not duty, but profit, and within that motivation, hardship became acceptable.

The two young eunuchs, lacking the strength of trained fighters, assisted by carrying smaller stones and loose soil, their movements clumsy but persistent, and for perhaps the first time in their lives, they experienced labor that demanded physical effort rather than positional authority.

Time passed without clear measure, because in that confined and focused activity, the outside world ceased to exist, replaced entirely by the immediate goal of reaching whatever lay behind the sealed structure.

Eventually, one of the guards lowered his voice and spoke with restrained excitement.

"We are close. This section feels hollow. There is space behind it."

The statement immediately shifted the energy of the group, because uncertainty had now been replaced by confirmation, and confirmation transformed effort into anticipation.

All six guards gathered around the identified section and coordinated their movement, carefully lifting the largest stone among the pile, applying equal force to prevent imbalance, then slowly setting it aside with controlled precision.

As the stone moved away, a dark opening was revealed.

The air inside was still, dense, and completely silent.

Greed surfaced instantly.

"So this is it," someone whispered. "The hidden treasury is open."

Gao Qiqian stepped forward without hesitation, holding a windproof lantern that had been prepared in advance, because unlike the guards, he had never doubted that there was something valuable hidden within.

He raised the lantern and directed its light into the darkness.

What the light revealed was not gold.

It was a face.

A face filled with hostility, compressed rage, and the kind of focus that only appeared in a man who had already accepted death.

Ajige stepped forward in the same instant, closing the distance with explosive force, and before the guards could process what they were seeing, his blade had already pierced through the chest of the nearest man, driving cleanly through unprotected flesh.

He withdrew the blade immediately and followed with a second strike, this time cutting across another guard's face, the force and angle ensuring that the victim never had the chance to react.

The lack of armor turned the ambush into slaughter.

The imperial guards, who had removed their protection for the sake of labor efficiency, had unknowingly converted themselves into the most vulnerable targets possible.

Shock lasted less than a moment.

Then survival instinct activated.

Gao Qiqian reacted first, his voice breaking into a panicked shout as he stumbled backward, abandoning any pretense of control.

"Damn it, retreat, retreat!"

The remaining guards instinctively turned toward where their weapons had been placed earlier, but that moment of hesitation created an opening that Ajige exploited without mercy.

He stepped forward again, cutting down another guard before the man could even reach his blade, then shifted his position to intercept the next, forcing close combat where unarmed resistance became meaningless.

One guard attempted to counterattack using a shovel, swinging it with desperate strength, but Ajige adjusted his body slightly, allowing the tool to pass by, then delivered a decisive strike that brought the man down instantly.

The confined space amplified the speed of death.

Gao Qiqian screamed for help, his voice rising into a sharp and continuous cry that spread beyond the immediate area, but outside the tent, the soldiers who heard it hesitated, because earlier instructions had explicitly forbidden interference regardless of noise.

The system of obedience, which had been designed to maintain order, now delayed response.

Inside, Gao Qiqian turned and ran.

Ajige followed without hesitation.

He already understood his situation with absolute clarity.

He was inside enemy territory, surrounded by hostile forces, with no viable escape route.

Survival was no longer the objective.

Exchange was.

If he was going to die, then the value of that death had to be maximized, and within his line of sight, Gao Qiqian represented the highest possible target.

Killing ordinary soldiers would not balance the scale.

Killing a high-ranking eunuch would.

"You will die with me," Ajige said, his voice steady despite the chaos.

Gao Qiqian could not respond with anything coherent, because his fear had already overridden his ability to maintain composure, and he could only scream for help as he ran through the camp, pushing aside fabric partitions and stumbling toward occupied tents.

A young eunuch tried to block Ajige's path, but the attempt ended instantly as the blade cut through him, and another guard rushed in from the side only to be struck down in the same motion, because Ajige no longer conserved energy or technique.

He had entered terminal combat.

At this point, his body began to operate under extreme stress response, pushing speed and strength beyond sustainable limits, trading longevity for immediate output, and every movement he made carried the singular purpose of advancing toward his chosen target.

Gao Qiqian burst into a tent occupied by capital troops and shouted for assistance, his voice breaking as he demanded protection.

The soldiers inside had just woken from sleep, their awareness incomplete, their equipment unprepared, and before they could fully understand the situation, Ajige had already entered behind him.

The first soldier lost his head before he could raise his arms.

The remaining three attempted to fight back with bare hands, but the disparity in combat readiness made the outcome inevitable, and within moments, all of them fell.

Gao Qiqian continued running.

He moved from one tent to another, repeating the same desperate call for help, and each time, more soldiers emerged, more confusion spread, and more bodies fell, because Ajige maintained relentless forward pressure, cutting through resistance without pause.

However, repetition began to change the environment.

The earlier order to ignore noise no longer aligned with the escalating pattern of screams and violence, and soldiers began to respond not as individuals, but as a collective.

More troops emerged.

This time, some carried weapons.

Spears.

Even without armor, the presence of reach-based weapons altered the engagement dynamic, because it introduced distance into a fight that Ajige had been controlling through proximity.

Within a short time, he was surrounded.

The encirclement formed quickly, driven by numbers rather than coordination, but it was sufficient.

Spears pointed inward from all directions, creating a layered barrier that restricted movement and reduced the advantage of individual skill.

Ajige felt the first strike enter his side.

The armor absorbed most of the impact, but the tip penetrated slightly, enough to draw blood and confirm that continued engagement would only accelerate his end.

He understood immediately.

There would be no further advancement.

No further exchange.

Only conclusion.

He let out a roar, not as an act of defiance, but as a final release of accumulated force, and in that moment, he made his last decision.

He threw his blade.

The motion was precise despite exhaustion, driven by focus rather than strength, and the weapon cut through the air, passing over the heads of multiple soldiers before reaching its target.

It struck Gao Qiqian in the chest.

The impact stopped him mid-movement.

He looked down at the blade embedded in his body, then lifted his head slowly, disbelief overtaking fear, because even at this moment, he had not expected to die.

Ajige laughed.

The sound carried both satisfaction and exhaustion, because the exchange had been completed.

In the next instant, the surrounding soldiers thrust their spears forward simultaneously, and multiple impacts drove into his body, overwhelming even his remaining strength.

His voice stopped.

His body followed.

Both men fell.

The battlefield, which had erupted into chaos, suddenly paused at the point of resolution, as if the system itself had reached a temporary equilibrium.

Then recognition spread.

Shock turned into alarm.

"The eunuch is dead."

The message propagated through the camp with increasing speed, because the death of Gao Qiqian was not an isolated event, but a disruption of command structure.

When the news finally reached Dao Xuan Tianzun, the reaction was neither surprise nor concern.

It was quiet acknowledgment.

"Those who accumulate wrongdoing inevitably create the conditions for their own destruction," he said calmly, as if observing a completed calculation rather than a human death.

Chapter 1358 The Emperor Must Surely Be Wise

The morning court in the capital had long since lost its function as a place of decision, and had instead stabilized into a predictable arena where positions were performed rather than resolved, because every session now revolved around the same unresolved contradiction between war and appeasement, and every official present had already chosen a side long before entering the hall.

The civil and military officials stood in clearly divided groups, not formally labeled, yet unmistakably aligned, and as soon as the session began, the arguments resumed with practiced intensity, as if each participant were fulfilling a required role within a repetitive structure that no longer produced new outcomes.

Voices rose and overlapped, logic was repeated in cycles, and rhetoric was deployed not to persuade, but to maintain presence, because in this environment, silence carried more risk than contradiction.

The pro-war faction pushed for immediate expansion of military operations, emphasizing momentum, opportunity, and the weakening state of the Qing Forces, while the pro-appeasement faction responded with arguments centered on resource limitations, logistical strain, and the long-term risks of overextension.

At the center of these opposing currents, two figures who once defined the conflict were now absent.

Cao Huachun no longer appeared in court, having withdrawn into the inner palace to manage imperial operations directly, where his influence could be exercised without the friction of public debate.

Gao Qiqian had been dispatched to Jinzhou as supervising authority, removing him physically from the arena while leaving behind a faction that continued to act in his name.

Their absence did not weaken the conflict.

It made it more abstract.

Because without central figures to anchor the arguments, the officials themselves became carriers of position rather than decision-makers, and the debate continued as a self-sustaining mechanism.

The noise built toward its usual peak, each side reinforcing its own logic, each argument layered upon previous arguments, forming a dense structure of repetition that gave the illusion of urgency without producing resolution.

Then the structure broke.

A eunuch rushed into the hall, his movement cutting across protocol with enough force to override ongoing speech, and his voice carried a clarity that immediately silenced the chamber.

"Eight hundred li urgent military report."

The phrase did not require explanation.

It triggered priority.

Every official turned toward him, because within the hierarchy of court operations, nothing outranked urgent military intelligence.

The eunuch advanced to the center, breathing heavily, but forcing his report into coherence.

"Several days ago, Supervising Eunuch Gao engaged the Qing general Ajige in direct combat at Dalinghe City."

The opening statement created immediate dissonance.

Because it contradicted expectation.

Because the court was still arguing whether to fight.

Yet the war had already advanced beyond discussion.

At the throne, Zhu Youjian felt a sharp shift in his expression, not yet grief, but irritation mixed with confusion, because from his perspective, the sequence was wrong.

The court had not concluded its debate.

Policy had not been finalized.

Yet action had already occurred.

"How did this battle conclude," he asked, his voice controlled, but edged.

The eunuch continued.

"Our forces achieved decisive victory, successfully defeating the Qing Forces and reclaiming Dalinghe City. During the engagement, Supervising Eunuch Gao personally entered combat, confronting the Qing general Ajige directly. Despite sustaining severe injuries, he continued fighting and ultimately perished together with the enemy commander."

The hall erupted.

Not in grief.

In calculation.

The officials present did not need to verify the narrative details, because the embellishment was obvious, yet irrelevant, while the core facts carried strategic weight that could not be ignored.

Ajige was dead.

Dalinghe City had been retaken.

These were not claims that could be fabricated, because the cost of false reporting at that level would be immediate and fatal.

At the throne, Zhu Youjian froze for a moment before the reality reached him, and when it did, it bypassed politics entirely.

"Gao Qiqian... is dead?"

The question was quiet, but it carried something the court had not expressed.

Attachment.

The eunuch delivering the report lowered his head.

"He died in service to the state."

That phrasing was formal.

The meaning was not.

Zhu Youjian's composure broke.

Tears fell without restraint, because Gao Qiqian was not merely an official within his system, but a companion from his earliest years, a figure who had remained close to him through isolation, uncertainty, and ascension, and in that personal context, the loss was immediate and absolute.

However, the court did not mirror this reaction.

No one wept.

Instead, voices rose again, but now their tone had shifted completely.

"Ajige is dead."

"Heaven favors the Great Ming."

"With Dalinghe recovered, the path toward Shengjing is open."

The focus had already moved.

From loss.

To opportunity.

One official stepped forward, his posture formal, but his timing precise.

"Your Majesty, this is the optimal moment to initiate a full counteroffensive against the Qing Forces."

The statement caused brief confusion among nearby officials, because the speaker had previously aligned with the pro-appeasement faction, yet after a short moment, understanding spread rapidly.

Alignment was not ideological.

It was adaptive.

Another official stepped forward.

"I concur. The current situation presents a rare strategic window that should not be wasted."

More voices followed.

Agreement multiplied.

Positions shifted.

Within moments, the division that had defined the court dissolved, replaced by a unified push toward war.

The mechanism was simple.

Gao Qiqian was dead.

His faction no longer had a center.

There was no longer any reason to maintain previous alignment.

The system of position had recalculated.

Zhu Youjian was still grieving when he noticed the shift, and the contrast between his emotional state and the court's behavior created a different kind of clarity.

He understood what had happened.

Not in detail.

But in principle.

The court had not changed its beliefs.

It had changed its incentives.

He looked at the officials before him and felt anger rise through grief, because what he saw was not loyalty, but opportunism presented as policy.

"You argued just moments ago that we lacked sufficient grain," he said, his voice tightening.

The official who had spoken earlier responded without hesitation.

"Resources can always be gathered if the need is urgent enough."

The answer was technically valid.

Which made it worse.

Because it revealed that previous arguments had not been constraints, but tools.

Zhu Youjian's anger crystallized.

He understood that he himself supported the idea of counterattack under different circumstances, but in this moment, the unanimity of the court did not feel like strength.

It felt like pressure.

It felt like manipulation.

And instinctively, he rejected it.

"Silence."

The word cut through the hall, restoring order instantly.

He stood, his expression hardened by the combination of grief and anger.

"First, Gao Qiqian's body will be returned and buried with full honors. As for war or appeasement, I will not discuss it now. Anyone who raises the matter again will be punished."

The decision did not resolve the issue.

It postponed it.

But in doing so, it reasserted control.

The court fell silent.

The session ended.

And just like that, the prolonged conflict between war and appeasement, which had dominated the court for so long, collapsed not through resolution, but through interruption.

Days later, Gao Qiqian's body was returned to the capital.

His expression at death had been one of shock and disbelief, but through careful preparation, it had been adjusted into a state of calm, because even in death, presentation remained part of the system.

Zhu Youjian mourned openly at the coffin, his grief displayed without restraint, and those closest to him responded with praise that reinforced his self-image.

"Your Majesty values loyalty and repays it with sincerity. Such virtue is rare among rulers."

The statements were predictable.

But effective.

Because within them, Zhu Youjian found confirmation of his identity, and in that confirmation, he distanced himself from the common judgment that emperors were inherently detached.

He believed himself different.

He believed himself just.

Three days later, that belief encountered resistance.

A scholar named Liu Maopao publicly criticized the emperor, accusing him of placing personal sentiment above state interest and delaying a critical military opportunity, framing his decision as weakness rather than restraint.

The statement spread rapidly through the capital, not because of its content alone, but because of its origin.

Chapter 1359 I Secured a Song for You

The capital had not calmed down. It had simply shifted its battlefield.

Rumors did not spread randomly. They moved like organized supply lines, flowing through teahouses, taverns, academies, and official residences, linking conversations into something larger than gossip. By the time the sun reached its peak, the name Liu Maopao had already circulated through every major district of the city, carried not by coincidence but by deliberate amplification.

People spoke in lowered voices, yet their words carried weight.

"Have you heard? That scholar Liu Maopao stood in front of the largest restaurant in the capital, waving a folding fan as if he owned the place, openly criticizing the court. He said the emperor delayed national affairs for personal grief and missed the opportunity to strike Shengjing."

"Of course I heard. The man must be tired of living. A mere xiukai daring to say such things in public, as if titles grant immunity from consequence. This is not courage. This is a death sentence written in his own hand."

Such conversations repeated everywhere, but what mattered was not the content. What mattered was consistency. Every retelling sharpened the accusation, refined the narrative, and aligned the emotional response. By the time the story reached the ears of the court, it no longer sounded like one man speaking. It sounded like the beginning of a consensus.

Inside the palace, Zhu Youjian felt the pressure immediately.

He had spoken clearly in the previous court session. No one was to mention the matter of war or peace again. His words had not been casual. They had been an assertion of authority, a line drawn to stabilize a court that had revealed its opportunistic nature too openly.

Now that line had been crossed.

If he ignored it, his authority weakened. If he enforced it, he would confirm the accusation. Either way, the system tightened around him.

"Where are the Jinyiwei?" he demanded, his voice striking the table with controlled anger. "Such a lawless individual still walks free. Why has he not been brought before me?"

Cao Huachun lowered his voice, careful and precise. "The Jinyiwei thousand-household officer Mi Qingli has already mobilized his most capable men. They are searching every corner of the capital. It should not take long."

The emperor said nothing more. Silence became his only defense, but even that silence carried tension. The court machinery had been activated, yet beneath the surface, another system was already operating faster, quieter, and far more efficiently.

In a modest residence tucked into an unremarkable street, Liu Maopao sat calmly with a cup of tea, as if the entire capital were not hunting him.

The door opened.

Mi Qingli stepped inside without ceremony and took a seat across from him. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes remained alert, measuring the space, the exits, and the man in front of him.

"This street is secure," he said. "I am personally responsible for searching every house here. No other Jinyiwei will interfere. For the next few days, you should not leave."

Liu Maopao smiled faintly, as if the warning were a courtesy rather than a necessity. "Do not worry. I will not create unnecessary trouble for the Shield Bureau."

Mi Qingli returned the smile, though his carried less warmth. He stood and turned to leave, but before he reached the door, Liu Maopao spoke again.

"Brother Mi, do you regret it?"

The question stopped him.

"Regret what?" he asked, though he already understood.

"Leaving the emperor. Joining Gaojiacun."

The room grew quieter, not because of the words themselves, but because of what they represented. Loyalty was no longer a simple axis. It had become layered, conditional, and subject to reinterpretation.

Mi Qingli did not turn around. He spoke with a long breath, each word weighed carefully.

"I am still loyal to the emperor. That has not changed. But I also understand something else now. He cannot win against your system. I joined not only to preserve my own life, but to ensure that when the time comes, I might still protect him."

Liu Maopao leaned forward slightly. "So if we decide to remove him, you will oppose us?"

"Yes."

The answer came without hesitation.

"If the emperor's life is threatened, I will stand against you, even if it costs me everything."

Liu Maopao raised his thumb in approval. "Loyal."

Mi Qingli shook his head. "Standing here, speaking with you like this, I have already failed that loyalty."

He left immediately after, his footsteps fading into the street. The moment he disappeared, the floor behind Liu Maopao shifted.

A concealed panel slid aside.

From beneath, Bin Sheng emerged, his movements efficient, practiced, part of a system that did not rely on chance. He gestured downward.

"Manager Liu, it is time. Staying here is no longer optimal. If Mi Qingli changes his mind, you will be captured."

Liu Maopao did not argue. He lifted his robe and descended into the tunnel, following Bin Sheng through a network that twisted beneath the city like hidden veins. Turns, narrow passages, vertical shafts. Each

segment served a purpose, not only for movement but for control. Entry points, exit points, redundancies.

They emerged from a well into a different compound entirely.

At a stone table in the courtyard sat Sun Chuanting and Chen Qianhu.

Liu Maopao greeted them with effortless familiarity. "Uncle Sun, Uncle Chen."

Sun Chuanting frowned immediately. "Still calling everyone uncle, I see."

Chen Qianhu reacted very differently. His eyes lit up with surprise. "You are not afraid of me?"

Liu Maopao laughed softly. "I know you. Hard on the outside, soft on the inside. A truly good man."

The effect was immediate and overwhelming.

Chen Qianhu's eyes filled with tears as if a dam had broken without warning. "Manager Liu... you... you understand me..."

Sun Chuanting watched the scene with a mix of amusement and disbelief. This was not accidental. Liu Maopao did not simply say what people wanted to hear. He invested effort into understanding what they lacked, then provided it with precision.

Recognition. Validation. Identity.

Then Liu Maopao spoke again.

"I brought you something from Dao Xuan Tianzun. A song."

Chen Qianhu blinked through his tears. "A song?"

"Yes. Have it recorded. Broadcast it through Gaoxin News. It might produce an interesting effect."

He began to recite.

"I may not look impressive, but I am gentle. My exterior is cold, but my heart burns with intensity..."

Chen Qianhu broke down completely, sobbing without restraint.

Sun Chuanting pressed his fingers to his temple, half laughing, half sighing. This was absurd on the surface, yet entirely consistent beneath it. Emotional leverage was still leverage. In a system war, even a song could become a tool.

"Enough," Sun Chuanting said finally. "Let us speak of the next step."

Liu Maopao's expression shifted. The warmth remained, but the calculation surfaced beneath it.

"The next step is expansion. Scholars across the provinces will begin criticizing the emperor. Not as isolated voices, but as a coordinated wave."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly. "Nationwide pressure."

"Yes. We did not need to move this early, but the emperor has created the opportunity himself. His recent decisions provide the perfect leverage point. This is not merely criticism. It is demonstration."

"Demonstration of what?"

"That a system where one man decides everything is fundamentally flawed."

Sun Chuanting exhaled, long and thoughtful. "I am still a loyal minister."

Liu Maopao tilted his head slightly. "Loyal to what?"

"The country," Sun Chuanting replied. "Not necessarily the court. Not necessarily the emperor."

The distinction settled heavily into the space between them.

"Emperors change," Sun Chuanting continued. "Dynasties fall. But the land remains. If loyalty is misplaced, then it becomes a weakness instead of a virtue."

Liu Maopao smiled. "Spoken like a headmaster."

Sun Chuanting raised an eyebrow. "No more 'uncle'?"

"This time, the title must match the respect."

Before the conversation could deepen further, noise erupted outside the compound walls.

Voices. Loud. Official.

"Jinyiwei conducting investigation. We are searching for a fugitive. All residences will be inspected."

Sun Chuanting stood without hesitation and walked out to meet them.

Moments later, his voice could be heard clearly.

"You are searching my residence?"

The Jinyiwei froze.

Recognition spread instantly.

"Minister Sun... we did not know..."

"You are diligent," Sun Chuanting said calmly. "Continue your work elsewhere."

There was no resistance. No suspicion. Only immediate compliance.

The Jinyiwei withdrew.

Inside the courtyard, Liu Maopao watched the exchange with quiet interest.

Chapter 1360 The Light of Chen Qianhu

"This is Gao Family News..."

The voice spread steadily through streets, courtyards, academies, and barracks, carried by devices that had long since become part of daily life. People paused out of habit more than curiosity, yet the habit itself had already begun to shape how they listened.

"Today's broadcast begins with the international situation. Not long ago, the British East India Company acquired a narrow strip of land along the Ebony Coast of the Indian Peninsula. They have been granted permission to establish trading agencies and warehouses."

The report continued without pause.

"Britain's strength in the Indian Ocean will soon increase significantly. The old maritime powers are being replaced. In the future, our navy will face competition with Britain upon the seas."

In inland cities, the words passed through the air and dispersed without resistance. Shopkeepers continued weighing grain. Carters argued over price. The ocean remained far away, its waves unable to reach these streets.

At the Zhoushan Maritime Academy, no one spoke for a moment after the report ended.

The cadets stood in front of the screen, their expressions tightening almost in unison.

Among them, Er'zhe suddenly clenched his fist.

"Let them come," he said, lifting his chin as if already standing on a deck facing open water. "I'll beat them until they crawl back across the sea."

Laughter broke out immediately.

"You still have a long way to go, Er'zhe."

"How am I far?" Er'zhe shot back without hesitation. "I can already swim like a fish. I can fight on a rocking deck. My boarding hook throws have improved a lot lately."

"You little brat, not bad."

"Of course," Er'zhe said, grinning wide. "The Mongol navy is waiting for me to revive it."

The group burst into laughter again, the sound echoing through the hall.

The screen shifted.

A new image appeared.

Gao Shan stood on a raised platform in Yan'an, his figure framed by rows of bookshelves behind him and a dense crowd of scholars below. His voice rang out without restraint.

"The emperor is a foolish ruler. A foolish ruler!"

The crowd responded instantly.

"The foolish ruler must step down!"

Their voices overlapped, rising and falling together until they became a single, unified wave.

The broadcast lowered the volume of the shouting, and the anchor's voice returned, calm and measured.

"In recent days, scholars across various regions have begun openly criticizing the Ming emperor, Zhu Youjian. They accuse him of placing personal emotion above state affairs, delaying military action at a critical moment."

The image continued to show the crowd, mouths open in synchronized chants.

"At present, the opportunity to launch a counteroffensive against the Qing is considered highly favorable. However, due to the emperor's personal decisions, no official within the court dares to propose such action. This has drawn widespread concern regarding its impact on the greater cause of national unification."

The words "national unification" passed through the hall.

Er'zhe's laughter disappeared.

He shifted his weight slightly, eyes still fixed on the screen, but his expression had already settled into something quieter. The others continued watching, some nodding, some whispering to each other, but no one paid him particular attention.

Good.

He kept his face relaxed, even letting out a small, absent-minded chuckle at something someone said beside him, though he had not heard it clearly.

Best not to speak about that.

He had learned that much already.

Better to let others argue. Better to let others decide. As long as no one turned and asked him directly, he could remain where he was, neither agreeing nor opposing, simply present.

The broadcast changed again.

The studio feed flickered, and a familiar figure stepped into view.

Gao Yiye appeared before the camera, smiling as if she had simply wandered in out of curiosity.

"It's been a while since I've shown up," she said lightly. "We have a special segment today. Our reporter in the capital has sent back a rather interesting interview. Let's take a look."

Interest sharpened immediately.

The scene cut to a courtyard in the capital.

A young female reporter sat across from a man whose presence alone made the air feel heavier.

Chen Qianhu.

"Commander Chen," the reporter began with a polite smile, "you recently killed Zu Dashou in Jinzhou—"

The image abruptly shifted.

The courtyard vanished, replaced by the battlefield at Jinzhou. Steel clashed. Figures collided. The sequence moved quickly, fragments of motion stitched together: fists, blades, blood, and then, in a final moment, Chen Qianhu's strike driving Zu Dashou to the ground.

The scene ended as abruptly as it had begun.

The broadcast returned to the courtyard.

Across cities, voices erupted.

"Zu Dashou!"

"That's the villain from that film!"

"Wait, didn't he kill a Ming general?"

"What are you talking about? Chen Qianhu killed him!"

"Then why did it look the other way around?"

"Which one is which?"

Laughter mixed with confusion, arguments breaking out in front of every screen. For a brief moment, people spoke over one another, trying to match what they had seen with what they thought they knew.

Then the noise gradually settled.

The reporter continued as if nothing unusual had happened.

"How did you feel, personally, after killing him?"

Chen Qianhu did not hesitate.

"I was very happy," he said plainly. "When I acted as Zu Dashou in that film, I already hated him. I often thought about killing him myself. I didn't expect that one day I would actually get the chance."

A few people in the crowd exchanged glances.

Some frowned.

Others laughed uncertainly.

"Please don't call me Zu Dashou anymore," Chen Qianhu added, turning slightly toward the camera. "I am Chen Qianhu. I may not look good, but I am a good person. I do good things. I want to become someone people like."

Silence followed his words.

Not complete silence, but the kind where people stopped speaking and simply listened.

Chen Qianhu scratched his head, suddenly looking a little unsure.

"I have a song I want to sing," he said. "Is there enough time? I heard Gao Family News schedules every minute very tightly."

The reporter smiled.

"The Heavenly Worthy has given you enough time for this segment."

A murmur spread through the audience.

That explained it.

Normally, the broadcast moved quickly, one report after another, never lingering. Now the pace had slowed, and no one changed the channel.

Chen Qianhu faced the camera again.

He took a breath.

"Every night, in the wilderness of my dreams, I am a proud giant..."

His voice was not smooth. It wavered slightly, catching on certain notes, but he did not stop.

"I am ugly, but I am gentle. My eyes may seem cold, but my heart burns..."

His eyes reddened.

"I am ugly, but I have music and beer. I may be a little humble, a little weak... but I never retreat..."

His voice broke.

He lowered his head, shoulders trembling as the song dissolved into quiet sobbing.

For a heartbeat, no one reacted.

Then the silence shattered.

"Chen Qianhu!"

"Chen Qianhu!"

Voices rose from every direction.

"He's... not what I thought..."

"I'm not scared of him anymore."

"He looks so pitiful..."

"I won't mock him again."

"Someone like him... wouldn't be so bad..."

The noise spread from one street to another, from one city to the next, echoing through markets and courtyards. People who had never met him spoke his name as if they had known him for years.

On the screen, Chen Qianhu was still wiping his eyes, trying to steady his breathing.

The reporter did not interrupt.

The camera did not cut away.

And across the land, more voices joined in, calling his name, their tone no longer cautious, no longer distant.

By the time the broadcast moved on, the man who had once been feared and misunderstood no longer stood in the same place in people's minds.