

Great Ming 1361

Chapter 1361 What Must Be Overturned Is the System

Dalinghe City.

After Gao Qiqian's death, the capital's pampered young troops who had once followed him were quietly reassigned under the command of Lu Xiangsheng. No ceremony marked the shift. Orders simply changed hands, and the soldiers adjusted with surprising ease, as if authority itself mattered more than the man holding it.

Lu Xiangsheng spent several days reviewing the battle reports.

The results unsettled him.

The earlier assault on Dalinghe had been loud enough to shake the heavens. Explosions chained one after another, smoke swallowing the skyline, the kind of spectacle that should have demanded a heavy price in blood.

But the casualty lists told a different story.

Almost none.

The real losses had come later, during the final resistance led by Ajige, when distance collapsed and the fight turned into something personal, something that no amount of preparation could completely suppress.

Lu Xiangsheng set the report down, exhaled slowly, then let out a low hum under his breath, half song, half sigh.

"Ajige... capable in both offense and defense... truly a reliable fierce general..."

Before he could finish, footsteps approached.

Yang Guozhu, General of Xuanfu, hurried over. Even surrounded by forces he still instinctively regarded as rebels, he lowered his voice out of habit when speaking to the Minister of War.

"Lord Lu," he said, "shouldn't we advance now? This is a rare opportunity. A chance to strike straight toward Shenyang. Why has the army stopped here? We've been sitting in this city for days."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded slowly.

"I also believe this is a rare opportunity," he replied. "If they could eliminate Ajige and take Dalinghe so easily, advancing toward Shenyang should not be difficult. Yet they have chosen to remain here. I find it... puzzling as well."

Yang Guozhu leaned closer.

"Then perhaps you should ask them. They may be rebels, but they respect you. They're willing to speak with you. It's completely different from how they treated Gao Qiqian."

Lu Xiangsheng could not deny that.

It was a strange feeling.

Men who showed no regard for imperial authority, who ignored the weight of the throne itself, somehow treated him with a measure of respect that felt both genuine and inexplicable.

He let out a quiet breath.

"Very well," he said. "I will ask."

He walked across the camp until he found the man everyone called "Master Li."

Li DaoXuan was seated casually, a bowl in hand, thoroughly enjoying a steaming dish of pork stewed with vermicelli. He ate with visible satisfaction, as if the ongoing campaign were nothing more than an extended journey with good food along the way.

"Traveling all the way to Liaodong and not eating the local cuisine would be a waste," Li DaoXuan said between bites. "What's the point of going somewhere new if you insist on eating the same food as back home?"

He shook his head as if recalling something distasteful.

"Some people travel and still hunt down their hometown dishes. Completely backwards behavior."

Lu Xiangsheng paused for a moment, unsure how to respond, then decided to ignore the comment entirely.

"Master Li," he said, "there is something I wish to discuss."

Li DaoXuan gestured to the seat across from him.

"Sit. Let's talk while eating. Discussing matters at the table is one of our great traditions."

Lu Xiangsheng sat, though not without hesitation.

"After taking Dalinghe City, our forces suffered almost no losses," he began. "With such momentum, we could press forward immediately toward Shenyang. Why has the army remained here for so long?"

Li DaoXuan swallowed his food, then smiled.

"I'm waiting for an opportunity."

"An opportunity?" Lu Xiangsheng frowned slightly. "Even ordinary civilians who know nothing of warfare can see that this is the best moment to attack Shenyang."

Li DaoXuan shook his head.

"That kind of opportunity is for dealing with the Qing," he said. "For me, the Qing are only a military problem. And military problems are the easiest to solve."

Lu Xiangsheng felt a faint unease rise in his chest.

"Then what opportunity are you waiting for?"

Li DaoXuan set down his bowl.

"I'm waiting for the right moment to change how people think."

Lu Xiangsheng's brows drew together.

"I don't understand."

Li DaoXuan looked at him, the smile still there, but quieter now.

"Tell me," he said, "if even ordinary people can see that this is the best time to attack Shenyang, what happens when someone uses their authority to stop that attack?"

Lu Xiangsheng froze for a brief moment, then his expression shifted.

"You mean... if the Emperor suppresses this opportunity, it will cause dissatisfaction?"

Li DaoXuan nodded.

"Zhu Youjian does not take criticism well," he said. "The more people say he is wrong, the more he will insist on being right."

Lu Xiangsheng felt his heartbeat quicken.

"And then you take advantage of that dissatisfaction to overthrow him? That is the opportunity you are waiting for?"

Li DaoXuan laughed softly.

"Overthrowing an emperor is easy," he said. "I could do it at any time. But it would not change anything."

Lu Xiangsheng said nothing.

"I am not trying to remove a person," Li DaoXuan continued. "I am trying to remove the idea that one person should decide everything."

The words settled heavily between them.

"If the system remains the same," Li DaoXuan said, his tone turning serious, "then replacing the emperor changes nothing. It only gives the illusion of change."

Lu Xiangsheng's fingers tightened slightly against his sleeve.

He understood.

Too quickly.

Too clearly.

This was not the first time he had heard such thoughts. Sun Chuanting had once spoken of similar ideas, of governance shared rather than concentrated, of shifting away from a single will controlling the fate of all.

At the time, Lu Xiangsheng had listened.

Now, he felt it pressing against him.

Everything he had learned since childhood told him that loyalty to the emperor was absolute.

Yet everything before his eyes told him something else.

If the emperor was wrong, and that error harmed the state, then what did loyalty truly mean?

His thoughts tangled together, pulling in opposite directions.

Loyalty... or the greater good?

He lowered his gaze, unable to answer even himself.

...

At the same time, in the imperial study of the capital.

"Your Majesty!"

A young eunuch rushed in, breathless.

"Your Majesty, something terrible has happened. In Luoyang, Henan, a large group of scholars has jointly submitted a petition, urging Your Majesty to immediately order an attack on Shenyang. They say the opportunity must not be wasted."

Before the emperor could respond, another eunuch rushed in.

"Your Majesty, in Puzhou, Shanxi, the streets are filled with scholars openly criticizing the throne."

Another followed.

"Your Majesty, reports are coming in from multiple regions..."

Messages arrived one after another, piling up like falling snow.

Across the country, voices were rising.

In contrast, the capital itself remained quiet.

The officials of the court did not speak.

No one stepped forward.

No one offered advice.

Only one scholar, Liu Maopao, had made a brief statement before disappearing without a trace.

Beyond that, there was nothing.

Silence.

Zhu Youjian slammed his hand against the table.

"Outrageous!" he shouted. "A group of rebellious fools dares to call me a foolish ruler. This is treason. This is defiance of the throne. They have a death wish!"

Chapter 1362 Our Agenda

Cao Huachun stood quietly at the side, listening from beginning to end without interrupting, his posture relaxed yet attentive, as if he had already decided that today was not a day for him to speak.

Zhu Youjian slowly turned his gaze toward him, his expression carrying a trace of dissatisfaction mixed with curiosity.

"Old Cao, you used to be firmly in favor of war. Back when Gao Qiqian was still alive, the two of you argued endlessly, day after day, as if neither of you could stand the other's opinion. So why is it that recently, you have suddenly gone silent instead?"

Cao Huachun lowered his eyes slightly, his thoughts moving faster than his expression.

I have stayed by your side for so many years, how could I not understand your temperament by now? At a time like this, speaking less is the safest path, because the more I say, the more likely I am to step into trouble and make unnecessary enemies.

He steadied his breathing, his gaze settling calmly as if he were meditating, to the point that he almost looked like he might start chanting a Buddhist scripture at any moment.

With a composed tone, he replied, "This old servant's understanding is shallow, far beneath Your Majesty's foresight. All matters should naturally be decided by Your Majesty alone."

That answer immediately eased Zhu Youjian's mood.

Yes, this was how things should be. Cao Huachun was dependable, unlike those so-called officials outside who dared to criticize him without restraint, calling him a foolish ruler and accusing him of delaying military opportunities, even going so far as to claim that he was ruining the nation.

The more Zhu Youjian thought about it, the more indignant he felt.

Am I truly a ruler who brings harm to his country? That is simply absurd.

For more than ten years since ascending the throne, he had governed diligently, working tirelessly without rest, saving countless civilians during the great drought, suppressing the chaos caused by roaming bandits, and now even achieving a great victory against the Manchu forces.

Each of these accomplishments stood as undeniable proof of his ability.

I am clearly a wise and virtuous ruler, a monarch destined to restore the Ming Dynasty to its former glory, and yet these people dare to call me incompetent.

The thought alone made his expression darken.

If I were to follow their suggestions now, would that not be equivalent to admitting that I am indeed a foolish ruler? That is something I will never accept.

With a cold face, he gave his order.

"Send commands to all Jinyiwei across the land and instruct them to act immediately. Every instigator must be arrested and brought to justice without exception."

Cao Huachun bowed deeply and replied, "This servant obeys."

The imperial decree was issued at once, spreading outward from the capital.

However, once it left the palace, it was as if it had fallen into an endless sea, vanishing without a trace of effectiveness.

The Jinyiwei across various regions rushed about busily, searching everywhere with great enthusiasm, yet despite all their efforts, they failed to capture even a single target, their actions resembling a group of confused fools chasing shadows.

Zhu Youjian understood very well that information did not travel quickly. News from the provinces would take several days to reach the capital, and after he issued his orders, it would take several more days for them to arrive at their destination. By the time the local Jinyiwei began their operations, even more time would have passed.

Under such circumstances, there was nothing he could do except wait patiently.

What he did not realize was that the people of Gao Family Village were operating under an entirely different system, one in which information moved with astonishing speed, almost as if it were happening in real time.

Throughout the major cities within the Liberation Zones of Dao Xuan Tianzun, enormous Immortal Treasure Mirrors had been installed at city gates and marketplaces, allowing citizens in urban areas and nearby regions to quickly grasp developments across the entire realm. Through the extensive Solar Bus Network, this information was then carried outward, spreading efficiently from cities into the countryside.

On Gao Family News, a young scholar appeared before the camera, speaking with confidence and clarity.

"Dear viewers, a group of students in Yan'an recently submitted a joint petition to the Emperor, requesting that he issue an order to attack Shenyang. Unfortunately, our petition has once again been ignored, as it was withheld without response. Not only did the Emperor refuse our request, but he has also dispatched the Jinyiwei to arrest us."

Across from him, the female reporter widened her eyes slightly, deliberately exaggerating her surprise.

"Does that mean you are now in great danger?"

The scholar smiled calmly, showing no sign of panic.

"There is no need to worry. We are perfectly safe, and the Jinyiwei will not be able to find us."

The reporter tilted her head, her tone light.

"Really? Because I found you quite easily."

The scholar's smile froze instantly, his expression turning stiff as he struggled to respond.

At that very moment, a loud knocking sound echoed from outside, followed by a firm voice.

"Jinyiwei, open the door."

The scholar reacted as if struck by lightning, leaping to his feet in a single motion.

"I will take my leave first."

Without waiting for another word, he rushed out of the frame, leaving the camera focused solely on the reporter, who maintained her composed smile as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Our interview subject has temporarily withdrawn. Whether he will be captured or not remains to be seen, so please stay tuned for our next report."

The audience watching the broadcast immediately grew anxious, their concern evident in their reactions.

"This is bad, those students in Yan'an might really get caught."

"If they are captured, they will definitely be thrown into the imperial prison."

"I just hope they manage to stay safe."

The scene shifted once again.

This time, the camera appeared at the entrance of Luoyang University, where a reporter stood with a professional smile.

"Hello everyone, I am currently standing outside a private academy established by Mr. Gu Yanwu. It has been said that the students here recently held a discussion forum, so let us go inside and learn more about it."

As she entered the campus, she immediately noticed something unusual.

The school was completely empty.

There were no teachers, no students, and no signs of normal activity.

Instead, a group of Jinyiwei could be seen wandering around the grounds, their presence creating an atmosphere of tension.

The reporter blinked in surprise before stepping forward.

"Excuse me, officers, may I ask what is happening here?"

One of the Jinyiwei turned toward her, his expression impatient.

"This is an official investigation. All unrelated individuals must leave immediately."

The reporter smiled politely, her tone calm yet firm.

"I am not an unrelated individual. I am a journalist. Dao Xuan Tianzun has clearly stated that the government should be subject to supervision by the press, so I request to report on your actions in full."

The Jinyiwei frowned, clearly irritated.

"What nonsense are you talking about? Leave at once, or do not blame us for being rude."

As he spoke, his attention shifted to the large device behind her, his confusion evident.

"What exactly is that thing doing?"

Behind the reporter stood a massive recording device, nearly the size of a door panel, carried steadily by a team of special operations soldiers.

Naturally, the Jinyiwei from the capital had never seen such a thing before.

The reporter smiled gently as she explained, "This is a recording device. It captures everything that appears before it."

The Jinyiwei frowned even more deeply.

"And what use is that?"

The reporter's smile grew slightly brighter as she answered.

"For example, if someone were to accept bribes while carrying out official duties, this device would record everything. Later, the footage could be displayed on the Immortal Treasure Mirror for everyone to see."

The atmosphere shifted instantly.

The faces of the Jinyiwei darkened, their expressions turning grim.

To an organization that had already begun to decay, such a device was nothing short of a disaster waiting to happen.

The leading officer quickly made his decision.

"Destroy it."

Several Jinyiwei stepped forward, preparing to carry out the order.

However, before they could get close, they were stopped by the special operations soldiers standing guard.

The two sides faced each other, tension rising rapidly.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Obstructing a Jinyiwei investigation is punishable by arrest."

The next moment, the confrontation erupted into chaos, with blows exchanged in quick succession, the sounds of impact echoing across the empty campus.

In a remarkably short time, the Jinyiwei were forced into retreat, fleeing in disarray without even attempting to maintain their dignity.

Once they were gone, the quiet campus suddenly came to life.

Several concealed panels in the ground opened, and from beneath them emerged a large number of students and teachers, including Gu Yanwu himself, all of whom appeared completely at ease, as if the danger had never truly concerned them.

They waved cheerfully at the reporter.

"Oh, a journalist has arrived. Are you here for an interview? Please hurry, while the Jinyiwei are unlikely to return anytime soon, we should make the most of this opportunity."

The camera turned toward the students as the reporter smiled and began her questions.

"We have heard that the students of Luoyang University recently held a debate. Could you share what topic you discussed? Was it about whether Zhu Youjian is a foolish ruler?"

One student representative stepped forward, shaking his head calmly.

"No, whether Zhu Youjian is a foolish ruler is no longer important to us."

Another student continued, his tone steady and thoughtful.

"The real question we are concerned with is something deeper."

A third student spoke, his voice clear and firm.

"What kind of system gives rise to a foolish ruler in the first place?"

The first student concluded, his words carrying weight.

"Our topic is this."

"That absolute power leads to absolute corruption."

Chapter 1363 If Change Is Needed, Then It Must Be Done

Facing the camera, the students began to speak one after another, each expressing their thoughts with growing confidence, their voices no longer hesitant like beginners but steady, as if they had already rehearsed these ideas countless times in their minds.

One student stepped forward and spoke first, his tone calm yet filled with conviction.

"The Emperor is ultimately just a person, and as long as he is human, he will inevitably have flaws. It could be a lack of knowledge, or perhaps defects in character, but no matter the case, he can never be perfect. Yet such an imperfect individual stands in a position that demands perfection. With a single thought, a single word, he can decide the politics, economy, military, and diplomacy of an entire nation. When you think about it carefully, does that not seem strange?"

Another student followed immediately, picking up the argument with a more serious tone.

"No matter how wise or capable an emperor may appear, there will always come a day when he makes a wrong decision. The real problem is that once such a mistake is made, there is no one who can correct it, and so that mistake becomes amplified without limit, eventually leading to consequences that are far more severe than anyone could have imagined."

A third student raised his voice slightly, bringing the discussion to its core.

"That is why the topic of our debate is this. A system ruled by a single individual will inevitably produce countless problems, and what we truly need is governance by the many."

Another added without hesitation, his words sharp and direct.

"The best way to deal with a foolish ruler is not to remove him, nor is it to replace him with another emperor. The real solution lies in changing the system itself, transforming it from one where a single person holds absolute authority into one where power is shared among many."

Nearby, Gu Yanwu listened quietly as his students spoke their minds, a satisfied smile spreading across his face, because everything he had been teaching at Luoyang University about collective governance had begun to take root, and not only that, it had evolved beyond his own expectations.

These students were even bolder than he was.

Their criticism of imperial authority was sharper, more daring, and far less restrained than anything he himself had ever openly expressed.

As their discussion was broadcast through the Immortal Treasure Mirror, their voices spread rapidly across every city within the Liberation Zones of Dao Xuan Tianzun, reaching audiences of all kinds.

For the new generation of intellectuals who had grown up studying the Heavenly Books provided by Li Dao Xuan, these ideas were not particularly shocking, as they had already encountered similar concepts before.

However, for ordinary people who had never received formal education, these words struck them like thunder, shaking the foundations of everything they had taken for granted.

In the past, common folk had never really thought about such matters, nor did they have the opportunity to discuss them with scholars, as no one had ever bothered to explain these concepts to them in a way they could understand.

Now that someone had finally done so, it felt as though a door to an entirely new world had been opened before them.

Using their simplest and most practical way of thinking, the people began to interpret these ideas through their own experiences.

"When the militia first came and promoted new crops, my father refused no matter what we said. If our family had been run entirely by him alone, without my uncles stepping in to argue and reason with him, we would have ended up in ruin. It was only because the whole family discussed it together and outvoted him that we decided to follow Dao Xuan Tianzun's guidance and plant corn, and that is how our family finally became prosperous."

Another person nodded repeatedly, clearly convinced.

"That is exactly right. If one person makes all the decisions and happens to be wrong, then what are we supposed to do?"

Someone else added, his tone full of common sense.

"When it comes to important matters in a family, everyone discusses it together before making a decision. That is the only reasonable way."

A different voice hesitated slightly.

"But since ancient times, has it not always been the emperor who makes the decisions?"

That question was quickly met with a blunt reply.

"Since ancient times? Back in ancient times your ancestors were living in caves. Are you planning to go back and live like them too?"

The crowd burst into laughter.

Another person chimed in, pushing the argument further.

"Forget your ancestors, let us talk about your father. He spent his entire life as a craftsman, struggling day after day. Now you work in a factory as a blue-hat engineer. Tell me honestly, would you go back to living the same life as your father?"

The man was momentarily speechless before shaking his head.

"...No, that would not be necessary. Some things really do need to change."

The response was immediate.

"Well then, that settles it."

The people within the Liberation Zones of Dao Xuan Tianzun were already more open-minded than those in other regions, and given enough time, they were fully capable of keeping up with the pace set by Gao Family News.

Meanwhile, the group of Jinyiwei who had just been beaten at Luoyang University were rushing angrily toward a nearby Shanxi garrison, their faces filled with humiliation and frustration.

"Who is in charge here? Someone has assaulted the Jinyiwei. Mobilize your troops immediately and follow us to suppress those criminals."

However, before they could finish speaking, they found themselves surrounded by a large group of militia soldiers.

"So there really are Jinyiwei sneaking in here."

"Beat them."

"Lock them up first."

The militia surged forward as one, and in a matter of moments, the Jinyiwei experienced firsthand what it meant to walk straight into a trap of their own making.

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In the Jiangnan region, beyond the reach of the Liberation Zones of Dao Xuan Tianzun, vast territories such as Nanzhili, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Fujian remained outside direct influence.

However, while the power of Dao Xuan Tianzun had yet to fully extend into these areas, the scholars from Gao Family Village had already begun to arrive.

At a marketplace in Nanjing, a young scholar stood holding a thick stack of manuscripts, reviewing them carefully as he memorized each line with intense focus.

This scholar was Li Yan.

Since joining the Gao Family Village faction, he had devoted himself wholeheartedly to study, gradually realizing the foolishness of his past beliefs and beginning to understand what truly needed to be done to save the nation.

After thoroughly committing his script to memory, he stepped onto a wooden platform in the center of the marketplace, reached into his sleeve, and pulled out a pouch filled with copper coins.

Without hesitation, he grabbed a handful and scattered them into the crowd.

The effect was immediate.

People rushed forward from all directions, scrambling to grab the coins, and within moments, a large crowd had gathered, their attention fully captured.

Only then did Li Yan clear his throat and raise his voice.

"Everyone, please lend me your ears."

The crowd, having just benefited from his generosity, naturally turned their attention toward him with great interest, their eyes filled with expectation, as if hoping he might throw out another handful of coins.

However, Li Yan did not repeat the gesture. Instead, his tone grew firm.

"A foolish ruler harms the nation and delays critical opportunities. The country now stands before a rare chance to reclaim the lost lands of Liaodong, yet because of Zhu Youjian's personal stubbornness, this opportunity has been delayed. The army remains stalled at Dalinghe, unable to advance, consuming supplies day after day without progress. If this continues, the nation itself will be in danger."

The moment these words were spoken, the crowd erupted into commotion.

Some quick-witted individuals immediately slipped away, heading toward the local authorities to report the situation.

Li Yan noticed this from the corner of his eye, yet he showed no concern, as he knew full well that the officials would take time to arrive, leaving him with a window to continue speaking.

Raising his voice, he pressed on with urgency.

"To the gentry, merchants, craftsmen, and farmers of Jiangnan, do you not wish to have a greater voice in the affairs of the nation? Those with greater ability should be able to speak more, while even those with lesser ability should have the chance to express their views. A country cannot be governed by the will of a single person alone."

These words struck deeply among certain members of the crowd.

In Jiangnan, the early signs of emerging capitalism had already begun to take shape, and with it, new social classes were quietly forming beneath the surface. These emerging groups were often suppressed by the old order, particularly the smaller merchants, who possessed their own political aspirations but lacked any means of expressing them.

Now, hearing Li Yan's speech, many of them felt something stir within their hearts.

At that moment, a shout came from the edge of the crowd.

"The Jinyiwei are here!"

Li Yan smiled faintly, as if he had been expecting this all along. He stepped down from the platform and slipped smoothly into the crowd.

Hidden among the people, agents from the Divine Shield Bureau immediately moved into position, surrounding him and guiding him out through another side of the crowd with practiced efficiency.

Meanwhile, the approaching Jinyiwei found themselves blocked by another group disguised as ordinary onlookers, who deliberately crowded together, slowing their advance.

By the time they finally forced their way through the dense crowd, Li Yan had already disappeared without a trace.

Chapter 1364 Throw Him Out

"Your Majesty, unrest has spread across the entire country. Everywhere people are saying that you are..."

The young eunuch's voice faltered before he could finish, his courage clearly insufficient to utter the final words.

Zhu Youjian's face darkened as he completed the sentence himself, his tone heavy with suppressed anger.

"They are calling me a foolish ruler."

The eunuch immediately lowered his head even further, not daring to respond, his entire posture shrinking as if he wished he could disappear on the spot.

Zhu Youjian let out a cold snort, his irritation growing more intense with every passing moment.

"Every single one of them is trying to force me to issue an order to attack Shenyang. They think they can pressure the Emperor and control the court through public opinion. Is that what this has come to? Then I will do the exact opposite. I refuse to issue that order."

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, because in his mind, this situation was nothing less than an open challenge to imperial authority.

Since when did a group of insignificant people gain the right to influence my decisions?

At that moment, the Grand Secretary He Fengsheng quietly entered the hall, his face already carrying a familiar smile before he had even fully stepped inside.

"Your Majesty, a new batch of factories has recently been established in the Beizhili region. As a result, our tax revenue has increased by this amount."

He respectfully handed over a report.

Zhu Youjian glanced at it, and his mood improved instantly, because the numbers were undeniably impressive, enough to momentarily wash away his frustration.

Although this new Grand Secretary might lack ability in other areas, his talent for generating revenue was something Zhu Youjian deeply appreciated, to the point that he felt rather satisfied with his own decision to appoint him.

After finishing his report, He Fengsheng prepared to leave immediately, as if he had no intention of lingering even a moment longer than necessary.

However, Zhu Youjian stopped him.

"Minister He, I have a question for you. What is your opinion regarding the matter of military action in Liaodong?"

The moment he heard this, He Fengsheng's body stiffened slightly, as if he had been struck by an invisible force.

During the previous debate between war and peace factions, he had deliberately avoided taking a stance, because maintaining neutrality was his greatest survival principle.

Now that unrest was spreading across the country and young scholars were causing trouble everywhere, this issue had become extremely sensitive, and for someone like him, speaking openly carried unnecessary risk.

Still, since the Emperor had asked directly, he had no choice but to respond.

Fortunately, he had already prepared the perfect answer long ago.

"This minister believes that Liaodong may be attacked, and it may also not be attacked."

Zhu Youjian raised an eyebrow slightly, intrigued.

"Oh? It may be attacked, and it may not be attacked? Explain yourself."

He Fengsheng nodded politely, maintaining his calm demeanor.

"It may be attacked because our army has just achieved victory, and its momentum is at its peak. Continuing the advance toward Shenyang at this moment would likely yield great results with relatively little effort."

He paused briefly before continuing in the same steady tone.

"It may also not be attacked because our army has just endured a difficult battle, and the soldiers must be exhausted. To force a tired army to continue advancing would carry significant risk. Allowing them time to rest and recover would also be a wise decision."

After speaking, he lowered his head slightly, as if his task were complete.

In truth, he had said everything and nothing at the same time.

Zhu Youjian, however, felt unexpectedly pleased, because while the explanation was vague, it provided him with something he had previously lacked, which was a reasonable excuse to oppose further military action.

Yes, the soldiers are exhausted. That is a perfectly valid justification.

He Fengsheng bowed and quickly withdrew, having successfully fulfilled his role without committing himself to anything substantial.

Zhu Youjian, on the other hand, now felt far more confident, as if he had finally armed himself with a solid argument.

Let them accuse me of delaying the war effort again. This time, I will have an answer for them.

The next morning, he sat upon the dragon throne with visible confidence, his posture steady and composed.

The civil and military officials entered the hall and took their positions in orderly rows on both sides.

Without hesitation, Zhu Youjian spoke first.

"Today, we will first discuss the matter of military action in Liaodong."

The moment he said this, the officials immediately understood what was happening, because it was obvious that the Emperor had been pushed to the limit by public criticism and now intended to defend his position.

In the past, he had forbidden anyone from mentioning Liaodong under threat of execution, which had silenced the entire court, but now that he had opened the topic himself, no one intended to remain quiet.

An official stepped forward without hesitation.

"Your Majesty, this is the best opportunity to reclaim Liaodong. There is no better moment than now."

"I agree."

"I also agree."

With Gao Qiqian dead, the peace faction had effectively disappeared, leaving the court dominated by those who supported war, and soon a flood of arguments filled the hall, each one emphasizing why immediate action was necessary.

Zhu Youjian had already anticipated this reaction, so he remained calm, allowing them to speak before finally letting out a cold laugh.

"You all speak with great confidence, yet you overlook a crucial matter. During the battle at Dalinghe, our soldiers fought bravely, shedding blood and sacrificing their lives, and even the supervising official Gao Qiqian died in battle. This alone proves how intense that battle was."

His tone grew firmer as he continued.

"And now, after such hardship, you would deny them even a moment of rest? You would force an exhausted army to continue advancing, placing them in even greater danger. Is that not equivalent to sending them to their deaths?"

The hall fell silent.

Zhu Youjian seized the moment.

"I will not allow such reckless disregard for the lives of our soldiers. The matter of advancing into Liaodong will be postponed."

The silence did not last long.

"Your Majesty, this cannot be done."

"Your Majesty, this is precisely the time to act."

"Your Majesty, we must not give the Manchu any opportunity to recover."

The officials began speaking again, their voices overlapping as they attempted to persuade him.

However, the more they spoke, the less Zhu Youjian wished to listen, because in his mind, yielding now would mean losing control.

He intended to be an emperor with independent judgment, not one led by the opinions of others.

At that moment, another official stepped forward with a different matter.

"Your Majesty, in Haizhou, a group of merchants has recently begun causing trouble. They openly accuse Your Majesty of being stubborn and inflexible, and they are demanding the lifting of the maritime ban."

The moment Zhu Youjian heard this, his anger flared once again.

Scholars across the land were already calling him a foolish ruler, and now even merchants had joined in, daring to make demands in such a manner.

In truth, he had already experienced the benefits of lifting the maritime ban in Shanghai, and if these merchants had presented their request through proper channels, he might have considered agreeing.

However, the fact that they chose to create unrest first made the situation unacceptable.

His expression turned cold.

"The maritime ban was established by the founding emperor. It is not something I created, yet these merchants dare to accuse me without reason. I have been lenient, and now they believe they can trample over me without consequence."

His voice sharpened.

"Order the Jinyiwei to arrest them immediately."

The official hesitated before speaking again.

"These merchants of Haizhou may not be so easy to deal with. In truth, their activities are not very different from those of pirates. Relying solely on the Jinyiwei may not be sufficient."

Zhu Youjian paused briefly, then quickly understood the implication.

These so-called merchants were nothing more than pirates operating under a different identity, switching roles depending on whether they were at sea or on land.

Now, they were simply trying to legitimize themselves.

If you want to legitimize yourselves, then do so properly. Why must you insult me first?

His anger intensified.

"Order the coastal commander Cao Wenzhao to eliminate these pirates."

Another official immediately stepped forward in objection.

"Your Majesty, Commander Cao Wenzhao has been actively engaged on the Jinzhou and Dalinghe frontlines after assisting the Ministry of War. The Guanning cavalry under his command are highly experienced in Liaodong operations. If he is reassigned now, the plan to counterattack in Liaodong will be severely affected."

Zhu Youjian's expression darkened further.

"I have already said that we will not proceed with the Liaodong campaign for now. The army must rest. Are you incapable of understanding this?"

The official hesitated but still spoke.

"Even so, sending them to suppress pirates would not count as rest either."

For a brief moment, the atmosphere became awkward.

However, such discomfort only existed for those in lower positions, because those in power always had a way to move past it.

Zhu Youjian's expression shifted instantly as he waved his hand dismissively.

"You speak nonsense. I find your words irritating. Guards, remove this man from the hall and forbid him from attending court for the next two months."

The order was given without hesitation, bringing the discussion to an abrupt end.

Chapter 1365 Operation Surpass Wolong

Zhu Youjian had always possessed a stubborn streak that bordered on pathological, and the more others tried to push him in a certain direction, the more he would dig in his heels and refuse to move, as if resistance itself had become his final proof of authority in a world that increasingly refused to obey him.

On top of that, he carried an almost fragile arrogance, the kind that could not tolerate even the slightest criticism, so the moment he sensed that others viewed him in a negative light, his mind would spiral, his emotions would ignite, and he would deliberately choose the opposite course, not because it was correct, but because it allowed him to assert control in the only way he still could.

Such a temperament rarely emerged in a vacuum, because it was often the product of limited education, a lack of emotional support in childhood, and a deeply rooted insecurity that masked itself as pride, and in Zhu Youjian's case, he embodied every single one of these traits to an almost textbook degree.

Under normal circumstances, a ruler like this might have been tempered by wise ministers or constrained by a functioning system, yet in the late Ming court, those safeguards had long since eroded, leaving behind a fragile structure that could not withstand the weight of a single man's contradictions.

Thus, what had once been a promising situation for the Ming dynasty began to unravel at an alarming pace, not due to external invasion or natural disaster, but because of the emperor's own refusal to move in step with reality, a slow but relentless descent triggered by something as intangible as temperament.

Across the realm, scholars and students grew more agitated with each passing day, their protests louder, their arguments sharper, their frustration no longer something that could be contained within classrooms or essays, but something that spilled out into streets, gatherings, and public discourse, forming a tide that continued to rise.

...

At the same time, Shengjing remained shrouded in gloom, the atmosphere heavy with anxiety as if the entire city were holding its breath, waiting for a blow that had not yet fallen but was certain to arrive.

Hong Taiji sat alone, flipping through Romance of the Three Kingdoms so many times that the pages had begun to curl and tear, yet despite revisiting every stratagem, every deception, every brilliant maneuver recorded within its covers, he could not find a single plan that could solve the crisis he now faced.

Finally, he let out a long breath and set the book aside, the gesture carrying both frustration and resignation.

Fan Wencheng entered at that moment, his expression carefully composed, though there was a flicker of anticipation in his eyes. "Your Majesty, the great iron vehicle has finally been completed."

Those words immediately lifted Hong Taiji's spirits, his fatigue replaced by a sudden surge of hope as he leaned forward. "Bring it here at once, let me see it with my own eyes."

Yet even as he spoke, he noticed the hesitation in Fan Wencheng's face, a hesitation that did not belong to good news.

"It has been completed," Fan Wencheng said slowly, as if choosing each word with care, "but there is a problem."

Hong Taiji's brows tightened. "Speak plainly."

"It does not move," Fan Wencheng admitted, the awkwardness now impossible to conceal. "In every visible aspect, it is identical to the enemy's machine, yet no matter what we attempt, it remains completely still, as though it were nothing more than a hollow shell."

Hong Taiji fell silent.

The reason lay hidden in what they did not possess, because although they had managed to replicate the exterior structure with meticulous precision, the core mechanism that powered the machine had never been revealed to them, leaving them with a body that lacked a beating heart.

A vehicle without its engine could never move, no matter how perfect its outer form might be.

"There must be something inside that drives it," Hong Taiji said at last, though even he sounded uncertain. "Have you examined every possibility?"

"We have exhausted every method we could think of," Fan Wencheng replied. "And still, nothing."

The silence that followed was heavy enough to crush words before they could form.

At length, Hong Taiji tilted his head upward, staring at the ceiling as though demanding an answer from the heavens themselves. "Dorgon is gone, Ajige is gone, I have lost two pillars of my army, the Mongols watch from the north, Joseon stirs in the south, and the Ming army could strike Shenyang at any moment, yet they do not come. They should have come already. Why have they not come?"

Fan Wencheng lowered his voice. "The only reason is Zhu Youjian's stubbornness. The louder the voices within Ming calling for an attack, the more he resists."

Hong Taiji blinked, then let out a hollow laugh that carried more disbelief than amusement. "So the survival of our state rests entirely on the temper of one man?"

"Yes," Fan Wencheng answered without hesitation.

For a long moment, ruler and minister stood facing each other, their shared understanding too absurd for comfort, too real to deny.

Then, suddenly, Fan Wencheng's expression shifted, a spark of clarity flashing in his eyes. "Your Majesty, I have devised a plan."

Hong Taiji leaned forward immediately, urgency replacing fatigue. "What is it?"

"If his stubbornness is the obstacle, then we shall strengthen it," Fan Wencheng said, his voice dropping as he outlined his idea in rapid succession. "We will activate our agents within Ming, have them join the voices demanding war, amplify the pressure, push him further, until he refuses to yield under any circumstance."

As the plan unfolded, Hong Taiji's expression transformed, first to surprise, then to admiration. "Such a strategy... even the ancients did not record such a thing."

"It will only buy us time," Fan Wencheng said, though there was a faint smile on his lips.

Hong Taiji laughed, a genuine sound at last. "Then let it be done. This plan surpasses even the schemes of Wolong himself. I will name it Operation Surpass Wolong."

...

In the Ming capital, a group of Manchu agents quietly completed their preparations.

They wrote their final letters without hesitation, each stroke steady, each word final, because they all understood that what lay ahead was a path from which none would return, and yet not a single man wavered, for they had long since chosen loyalty over life.

White cloth was tied around their heads, bold red characters declaring "Foolish ruler ruins the nation" standing out starkly against the pale fabric, turning each of them into a walking accusation.

When everything was ready, they armed themselves and stepped out.

Their destination was the Forbidden City.

Even before they acted, their mere presence in such a heavily guarded space drew attention, as patrol soldiers began to approach, intent on dispersing them before trouble could take root.

The agents exchanged a brief glance, a silent affirmation, then raised their voices in unison.

"Foolish ruler, you have squandered the chance for victory and endangered the nation!"

"We demand a self-criticism edict, a correction of errors, and immediate deployment of troops to attack Shenyang!"

"Drive out the Manchu and restore our lands!"

Their voices rang across the square, echoing against the walls, drawing more soldiers, more civilians, more attention with every passing second.

The patrol captain rushed forward, alarm written across his face. "Silence! Do you wish to die? Stop this at once!"

Instead of stopping, the agents raised their voices even higher, pushing the tension to its breaking point.

Then, in a single decisive motion, one of them drew a dagger and plunged it into the captain's side.

At that exact moment, all of them drew their weapons and charged.

"Foolish ruler, we will fight to the death!"

"Kill Zhu Youjian, install a worthy ruler, and march on Shenyang!"

Their cries were fierce, passionate, convincing enough to blur the line between performance and belief.

The battle that followed erupted instantly.

The agents, all elite warriors, cut through the initial patrol with brutal efficiency, their skill far surpassing that of ordinary soldiers, turning the first clash into a one sided slaughter.

But this was the Forbidden City.

Reinforcements arrived almost immediately, then more, then more again, until the square was flooded with soldiers from every direction, including the elite palace guards whose training far exceeded that of common troops.

Even the most skilled fighters could not withstand such numbers.

One by one, the agents fell.

Some were cut down mid strike, others were pierced by multiple spears at once, and still others were overwhelmed before they could even retreat a step.

In the end, only a few remained standing.

They stopped fighting.

Raising their blades to their own throats, they shouted one final time, their voices echoing with a deliberate intensity meant to linger in every ear that heard it.

"Foolish ruler, rise up, all heroes under heaven, rise up against him!"

Then, without hesitation, they drew their blades across their own necks.

Blood sprayed outward, and their bodies collapsed where they stood.

The square fell into stunned silence, but the echoes of their words did not fade.

Chapter 1366 Marching Backward Against the Tide

The chaos at the gates of the Forbidden City could not possibly be contained, no matter how desperately the court might wish otherwise, because within barely more than an hour, the news had already spread across the entire capital, and before long it seemed to sprout wings of its own as it flew outward to every corner of the realm, carried by merchants, travelers, rumor-mongers, and that invisible network of gossip that never failed to outrun official proclamations.

When Zhu Youjian finally heard about it, even he could not help but pause for a moment in genuine surprise, because someone had actually dared to charge the Forbidden City with blades in hand, which made him wonder whether these people had lost their minds entirely or had simply decided that death was preferable to living under heaven any longer.

Yet that moment of confusion did not last long, because Zhu Youjian was the sort of man who never allowed uncertainty to linger, and almost immediately his thoughts snapped into place as he constructed an explanation that satisfied his pride.

"This is the work of the pro-war faction," he said coldly, his face darkening as his temper rose. "They have gone so far as to send death squads to force my hand, thinking that by stirring chaos at the gates of the palace, they can compel me to issue orders to attack Shenyang. They believe they can manipulate me at will. Hah."

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, because in his mind, this was no longer merely a disagreement over military policy but a direct challenge to imperial authority, and nothing provoked him more than the sense that others were trying to push him around.

"They are going too far," he continued, his voice thick with irritation. "If I do not teach them a lesson, they will truly think I am nothing more than a clay idol they can knead however they please."

Cao Huachun stood nearby, wearing an awkward smile that he could not quite suppress, because the irony of the situation was painfully obvious to him, given that he himself had always been aligned with the pro-war camp, yet at this moment he could only keep his head low and say nothing, because speaking up would only invite disaster.

Fortunately for him, Zhu Youjian had no intention of turning his anger toward the eunuchs, as he had always shown them a peculiar degree of trust and favor, so instead he began searching for another target upon whom he could vent his frustration.

Just then, the commander of the Eastern Depot hurried in, bowing deeply before presenting his report.

"Your Majesty, we have thoroughly searched the bodies of the men who caused trouble at the palace gates," he said. "We discovered something rather interesting on them."

Zhu Youjian raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What did you find?"

The commander stepped forward and offered a small token with both hands. "This is a badge from the Wuzhen Superha unit."

The moment Zhu Youjian heard this, his expression shifted sharply, anger flashing in his eyes. "You mean to say those men were sent by the Manchu?"

The commander quickly shook his head. "Your Majesty, the Manchu are not fools. If they truly intended to carry out such an operation, they would have removed every trace of identification beforehand. The fact that we found such a token on them actually makes it less likely that they were sent by the Manchu."

Zhu Youjian froze for a brief instant, then slowly nodded as realization dawned on him. "That makes sense. The more obvious the clue, the less credible it becomes. Then who could it be?"

The commander lowered his voice slightly, as if guiding the emperor toward a conclusion. "It is not easy for officials in the interior to obtain such tokens, but for those stationed along the frontier, especially those who have recently fought battles against the Manchu and cleared the battlefield, acquiring one would not be difficult at all."

That was all it took.

In that instant, Zhu Youjian felt as though every piece of the puzzle had fallen perfectly into place, and with a surge of confidence that bordered on arrogance, he believed he had uncovered the truth with flawless clarity.

"There is only one answer," he said, his tone turning icy. "Lu Xiangsheng."

The name landed heavily in the room.

To Zhu Youjian, the logic was impeccable, because Lu Xiangsheng had been one of the most fervent advocates of continuing the campaign, and he was currently stationed at the front lines near the Great

Ling River, within striking distance of Shenyang, so if an attack were launched, he would undoubtedly be the one to claim the greatest glory.

"A conspiracy always benefits its creator the most," Zhu Youjian continued, his anger now fully ignited. "Lu Xiangsheng seeks to secure his legacy by forcing my hand, even if it means branding me as a foolish ruler in the eyes of the world."

Cao Huachun could not help but wince slightly. "Your Majesty, that seems unlikely... truly unlikely..."

Zhu Youjian slammed his hand against the table. "Unlikely? Then tell me, who else could have orchestrated what happened at the palace gates?"

Cao Huachun hesitated, unable to produce an answer that would satisfy the emperor without inviting further trouble.

"Enough," Zhu Youjian snapped. "Strip Lu Xiangsheng of his position and place him under investigation. Liu Yuliang will take over command of the army."

Both Cao Huachun and the Eastern Depot commander were visibly startled by this sudden decision, and they immediately spoke up in unison.

"Your Majesty, that cannot be done."

Their reaction gave Zhu Youjian pause, because unlike the objections of civil officials, which he often dismissed out of hand, the words of his trusted eunuchs carried weight, and after a brief moment of reflection, he grudgingly conceded that replacing a commander in the midst of a campaign might indeed be unwise.

"Very well," he said at last, adjusting his decision. "Lu Xiangsheng will be demoted from Minister of War to Vice Minister, but he will remain in command of the army and must redeem himself through meritorious service."

Only then did the two men relax slightly, relieved that the situation had not spiraled into outright disaster.

Even so, the damage had already been done.

Lu Xiangsheng had been struck down a rank, and Chen Xinjia was swiftly appointed as the new Minister of War, and this news, following so closely on the heels of the bloody incident at the Forbidden City, spread across the empire like wildfire.

Meanwhile, far to the south in Hangzhou, a city famed not only for its beauty but also for its thriving economy, a different kind of storm was quietly gathering.

Within a secluded garden, a group of officials and merchants had assembled in secret, their voices kept low as they discussed the increasingly chaotic situation at court.

"Gentlemen," one merchant began, his tone cautious yet tinged with excitement, "the emperor has been making one disastrous decision after another. Across the northwest and the central plains, dissatisfaction is growing, and scholars everywhere are stepping forward to criticize the current policies and promote the idea of shared governance."

Another man, a minor official, nodded in agreement. "Indeed. The unrest is spreading rapidly. I have even heard that in Nanjing, scholars are publicly throwing coins into the streets to gather crowds and deliver speeches. It will not be long before such actions reach Hangzhou."

A murmur passed through the group, because they all understood the implications.

For years, the merchants of Jiangnan had grown increasingly wealthy, forming the early roots of a new social force that was beginning to chafe against the constraints of the old order, yet they had always lacked the opportunity to assert themselves openly.

Now, however, the situation was changing.

"This may be our chance," one of them said quietly, his eyes glinting with ambition. "If we act at the right moment, we might finally achieve what we have long desired."

He did not need to finish the sentence.

Everyone present already knew what he meant.

They had been waiting for an opening, and now, with the entire empire in turmoil, that opening seemed to be within reach.

"Then we should act as well," another merchant added. "If we join the tide, who knows what might come of it..."

Before he could say more, a sudden shout erupted from outside the courtyard.

"Jinyiwei conducting an investigation."

The atmosphere inside instantly froze.

For a brief moment, fear flickered across their faces, but it was quickly replaced by something harder, something more resolute.

Then, almost as one, they turned toward their attendants and issued a single, decisive command.

"Kill them."

Chapter 1367 The Prince of Tang Steps Forward

A piece of news so outrageous it practically kicked the doors open before anyone could announce it properly stormed into the capital, and for a brief moment even the ever-tense air of Beijing forgot how to breathe.

Hangzhou had erupted into rebellion.

Not some distant, starving wasteland where drought and despair usually fermented into chaos, not one of those forgotten corners where people revolted because they had nothing left to lose, but Hangzhou, rich, refined, soaked in silk and commerce, a place that should have been too comfortable to even consider rebellion, let alone actually commit to it.

The shock hit Zhu Youjian like a misplaced thunderclap, and judging by the way the court collectively froze, it hit the civil and military officials just as hard, if not harder.

Rebellions had been everywhere since the Tianqi years, that much was true, but those were predictable disasters born from famine, taxes, and the slow grinding cruelty of survival, whereas this, this was something else entirely, something that did not fit into the neat, miserable logic everyone had grown accustomed to.

Hangzhou rebelling felt less like a crisis and more like a violation of common sense.

It did not take long before detailed intelligence reports arrived, and once the officials finished reading them, the confusion shifted into a very different kind of disbelief, the sort that made people reread the same line several times just to confirm that reality had not quietly gone insane.

The culprits were merchants.

Not starving peasants, not desperate soldiers, not bandits crawling out of the hills, but merchants, well-fed, well-dressed, and apparently far too comfortable with ideas that the court immediately labeled as outrageously treasonous.

A group of them had gathered in Hangzhou for what was supposed to be a meeting, the kind of gathering that usually revolved around profit margins, shipping routes, and the delicate art of making money without offending the wrong official, except this time they had decided to discuss something far more dangerous, ideas that drifted well beyond the acceptable boundaries of survival and straight into the territory of political audacity.

Unfortunately for them, the Jinyiwei had caught wind of it and showed up uninvited, as they tended to do when people forgot their place.

Now, if the officials expected an easy arrest, they clearly did not understand Hangzhou merchants.

These were not harmless shopkeepers counting coins behind wooden counters, many of them had one foot on land and the other firmly planted at sea, dealing in trade routes that stretched far beyond the empire, and if one wanted a cultural reference, one might recall the legendary Li Huamei, a seafaring powerhouse who just so happened to hail from the same city, which should have been warning enough.

When the Jinyiwei arrived, the merchants did not kneel, did not beg, and certainly did not wait patiently to be dragged away.

They fought.

Their household guards moved first, fast and decisive, and before anyone could pretend this was still a routine investigation, the Jinyiwei agents lay dead, their authority abruptly and violently canceled.

At that point, there was no returning to normal life, no quiet explanation, no clever excuse that could smooth things over.

So the merchants did what people do when they realize they have already crossed the line and might as well keep walking.

They rebelled.

Not like bandits, though, not like the usual chaos-driven mobs who burned everything in sight and called it strategy, but in a way that reflected exactly who they were, pragmatic, calculated, and disturbingly organized.

Instead of looting, they spent money.

Instead of chaos, they built structure.

They began recruiting desperate men, offering silver in exchange for loyalty, assembling a makeshift army not out of ideology but out of necessity, because survival, at the end of the day, always needed a price tag.

Unlike the roaming rebels who fought simply because there was nothing else left to do, these merchants had demands, long, detailed, and dangerously reasonable demands.

They called for the lifting of the maritime ban, for open trade with Western powers, for strict regulation against corrupt officials who treated merchants like walking treasure chests, and for legal protection of their class, not as parasites to be squeezed but as contributors to the empire's prosperity.

And that, more than the killings, more than the rebellion itself, was what truly enraged Zhu Youjian.

Who exactly had given them the audacity to sound reasonable?

"Mobilize the nearby troops immediately and crush them..."

He had not even finished the sentence when a young eunuch rushed in, breathless and pale in a way that suggested the situation had already escalated beyond anything the emperor would enjoy hearing.

"Your Majesty, this is bad, very bad."

Zhu Youjian frowned, already irritated, already expecting incompetence, but not quite prepared for what came next.

"What now."

"The Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian, who has been missing for a long time, has appeared in Hangzhou, and he has publicly declared that the merchants' demands are justified and should be implemented."

For a moment, the world did not collapse, it simply stopped making sense.

Then it exploded inside his head.

A group of merchants rebelling was a problem, yes, but it was the kind of problem that could be erased with orders, troops, and enough force to remind everyone how power worked.

A prince joining them, however, turned the entire situation into something far more dangerous, something that could not be crushed without consequences rippling outward in ways no one could fully control.

And when Zhu Youjian connected this with the growing chorus of voices across the empire calling him a foolish ruler, the pieces clicked together in a way that made his entire body go cold.

This was no longer a disturbance.

This was a threat.

"Jinyiwei, Eastern Depot, Western Depot, all of them move, mobilize the Hangzhou garrison, and since these are sea merchants, they must have naval strength, send orders to Fujian, have the roaming general Zheng Zhilong intercept them from the sea, I want every force we have moving at once, and I want Zhu Yujian captured and brought back immediately."

At that very moment, far from the suffocating tension of the capital, Zhu Yujian himself was sitting in a garden on the outskirts of Hangzhou, looking far too composed for a man who had just inserted himself into a rebellion.

In front of him sat a group of merchants, the very same ones who had been forced into open defiance after killing the Jinyiwei, men who had already prepared ships to flee to the South Seas if everything collapsed, while simultaneously throwing money at recruitment efforts in a desperate attempt to build something resembling an army.

They did not know what their future looked like.

But when Zhu Yujian appeared, it felt as if the fog had parted just enough for them to glimpse a path forward, uncertain, dangerous, but undeniably real.

"Your Highness, Prince of Tang," one of them asked, unable to hide the mixture of hope and caution in his voice, "do you truly support us?"

Zhu Yujian let out a soft sigh, the kind that suggested he had thought about this long before arriving.

"Yes, I do, because your demands are not madness, they are, in fact, painfully reasonable, lifting the maritime ban, engaging in trade with the West, protecting merchants from predatory officials, these are not acts of rebellion, they are corrections to a system that has been allowed to rot."

The reaction was immediate.

Relief, excitement, disbelief, all colliding at once as the merchants looked at one another, as if confirming that they had not collectively misheard something so important.

Zhu Yujian continued, his tone calm but carrying a weight that made it clear he was not speaking lightly.

"I believe these policies need to change, not as a favor to you, but for the good of the nation."

That was all it took.

The room erupted.

"So Your Highness intends to lead us..."

Zhu Yujian nodded.

That single motion nearly broke whatever restraint the merchants had left.

One of them reacted first, dropping to his knees with a thud that echoed louder than expected.

"Your Highness, I am willing to offer my entire fortune as military funding, I will support your ascension with everything I have."

The others cursed themselves internally for reacting a moment too late, scrambling to follow, kneeling one after another, each eager not to fall behind in what was rapidly turning into a competition of loyalty.

"I too am willing to risk everything."

"I will stake my life."

Zhu Yujian smiled, almost amused by their urgency.

"There is no need to go that far, even without your full support, I possess sufficient strength, all you need to do is stand firm in your beliefs."

That answer did not reassure them.

If anything, it confused them even more.

They exchanged looks, silently asking the same question.

Where exactly was this strength coming from?

He had been wandering for years, his estate gone, his resources supposedly nonexistent, and yet here he was, speaking as if power were something he carried casually in his sleeve.

Before they could press further, a servant rushed in, panic written all over his face.

"This is bad, very bad, Zheng Zhilong's fleet is heading toward Hangzhou."

That name alone was enough to drain the color from the merchants' faces.

Their confidence had always relied on one simple escape route, the sea.

If land failed them, they could sail away, disappear into the vast network of trade routes stretching toward the South Seas.

But Zheng Zhilong was the sea.

His influence dominated those waters like a silent law, and crossing him was not bravery, it was suicide.

They could challenge the court.

They could not challenge him.

"What do we do now, what do we do..."

Panic spread quickly, messy and unrestrained, until Zhu Yujian raised a hand, his expression calm in a way that felt almost unreasonable.

"There is no need to panic, we will go out to meet him at sea, I happen to have a few things I would like to discuss with General Zheng."

The merchants did not understand.

But they followed.

Because at this point, confusion was still preferable to despair.

At the shore, a ship was already waiting.

It was enormous, unfamiliar, and deeply unsettling in the way it simply existed without sails or oars, as if it had decided that the usual rules of movement did not apply to it.

They boarded, cautiously at first, then in growing numbers, along with their guards, yet the ship barely reacted, carrying them as if weight itself had become optional.

It moved smoothly into the open sea.

Questions piled up in their minds, but none of them dared to ask directly.

Not yet.

Soon, Zheng Zhilong's fleet appeared on the horizon, vast and imposing, a display of power that could have crushed ordinary resistance without effort.

The merchants braced themselves.

But something unexpected happened.

The fleet did not attack.

Instead, a single flagship, a massive Dutch-style sailing vessel, broke formation and approached alone, slow and deliberate, like someone choosing conversation over violence.

The two ships aligned.

Then, to everyone's utter disbelief, Zheng Zhilong, along with his key figures including Zheng Zhihu and Zheng Zhifeng, casually leaped across, smiling as if they were attending a friendly gathering rather than a potential battlefield.

The merchants stood frozen, their understanding of the situation collapsing piece by piece.

Zhu Yujian stepped forward, raising a hand in greeting, his smile calm, almost familiar.

"General Zheng, I have long heard of your reputation."

Zheng Zhilong laughed, equally at ease.

"Your Highness, the Prince of Tang, I have long heard of yours as well."

They spoke like strangers.

And yet, nothing about their tone suggested this was their first meeting.

The merchants could only stare.

Completely lost.

Chapter 1368 I Will Raise the Tang Prince

Zheng Zhilong did not bother easing into the conversation, because subtlety had never really been his style, and when a man spent most of his life commanding fleets that could erase entire coastlines from relevance, he tended to skip straight to the point.

"I received an imperial order," he said, voice relaxed but carrying the weight of someone who was used to being obeyed without question, "it says you are organizing a rebellion near Hangzhou, and that I am to arrest you."

Zhu Yujian smiled, not the defensive kind, not even the diplomatic kind, but the kind of smile that suggested he had heard variations of that sentence so many times it had long since stopped being interesting.

"Over the years, there has never been a shortage of people trying to capture me, so I have developed a certain familiarity with the experience."

Zheng Zhilong burst into laughter, loud and genuine, the kind that made it very clear he was enjoying himself far more than the situation probably warranted, before his gaze drifted past Zhu Yujian and landed on the group of merchants standing behind him.

The merchants immediately straightened, instincts kicking in faster than dignity, bowing and greeting him in a chorus that carried just enough nervousness to betray how acutely aware they were of the man's reputation.

"Greetings, General Zheng."

Zheng Zhilong studied them for a moment, and then recognition flickered across his face, because a few of them were not strangers at all, but men he had crossed paths with in the chaotic, profit-driven world of maritime trade, where alliances were flexible and memory was often measured in silver.

"So it is you lot," he said, amused, "what exactly have you gotten yourselves into this time."

The merchants exchanged looks, and then one of them sighed, the kind of sigh that came from realizing things had escalated far beyond the original plan.

"We only intended to stir things up a little and make some opportunistic profit, nothing too dramatic, but then the Jinyiwei came knocking, and at that point there was no room left for moderation, so we

rebelled, and to be honest, we were already preparing to head for the South Seas if everything fell apart, in which case we would have to rely on your protection."

Zheng Zhilong nodded slowly, not offended, not flattered, just acknowledging the logic of it, because in his world, survival always came before pride.

"The demands you made," he continued, "lifting the maritime ban, opening trade, limiting corruption, those are things I have wanted to bring up for a long time, but I am a military man, and when a military man starts talking about policy, people become suspicious very quickly, so I kept my mouth shut."

He paused just long enough to let that sink in.

"But now that all of you have said it out loud first, it would be rather awkward for me to pretend I disagree."

The merchants froze for half a second.

Then the meaning landed.

And when it did, the reaction was immediate.

Relief, excitement, disbelief, all colliding again, but this time amplified, because this was no longer just a prince offering legitimacy, this was the sea itself taking their side.

Zheng Zhilong did not let the moment linger too long.

"Let us not waste time dressing this up," he said casually, as if discussing a business arrangement rather than treason of the highest order, "I, Zheng Zhilong, will support the Prince of Tang, and we will overthrow the foolish ruler."

Silence lasted exactly one heartbeat.

Then it shattered.

The merchants stared at him, stunned not by the content, but by the sheer lack of hesitation, because most people would at least pretend to struggle with such a decision, whereas Zheng Zhilong had delivered it as if confirming the weather.

No concealment.

No hesitation.

No retreat.

And somehow that made it even more convincing.

One merchant inhaled sharply, then spoke as if afraid the moment would disappear if he did not seize it.

"We will also support His Highness and overturn the foolish ruler."

The others followed immediately, voices overlapping, urgency replacing caution.

"We pledge our support."

"We stand with the Prince of Tang."

Just like that, the matter was settled.

No ceremony.

No negotiation.

Just a shared understanding that the line had already been crossed, and there was no reason to pretend otherwise.

Zheng Zhilong had rebelled.

When that news spread, it did not ripple.

It detonated.

Compared to a group of merchants causing trouble, this was an entirely different scale of disaster, the kind that made the entire empire feel as if it had been shoved off balance.

When Zhu Youjian heard it, his mouth literally hung open, not out of theatrics, but because his mind had not yet caught up with reality.

It had started as a minor disturbance.

Then a prince became involved.

Now the dominant maritime power of the eastern seas had openly turned.

Each development stacked on top of the last, faster than he could process, faster than the court could stabilize.

The officials were visibly shaken.

"Your Majesty, the garrison forces in Fujian and the Liangguang region cannot possibly match Zheng Zhilong at sea, deploying them would be ineffective, what should we do?"

Zhu Youjian did what rulers often did when certainty failed him.

He looked for someone else to provide it.

His gaze shifted to the newly appointed Minister of War, Chen Xinjia.

Chen Xinjia cleared his throat, buying himself a moment to construct something that sounded like a plan.

"Well, Zheng Zhilong is a maritime power, so to deal with him, we must rely on naval strength, and at present, the only capable commander we have is the coastal commander..."

He paused.

"...Cao Wenzhao."

Zhu Youjian seized on that immediately, relief flooding in at the existence of something that resembled a solution.

"Yes, correct, dispatch Cao Wenzhao at once to suppress the rebellion."

"Your Majesty, that would be unwise."

A minister stepped forward, voice steady but carrying a tension that suggested he knew he was stepping into dangerous territory.

"Cao Wenzhao is currently stationed at Dalinghe Fortress, and cannot be withdrawn, Zheng Zhilong is formidable at sea, but on land he is far less threatening, we should prioritize eliminating the Jianzhou

threat first, and only then return to deal with him, if we withdraw Cao Wenzhao now, the enemy may seize the opportunity to retake key positions, and we will lose everything we have gained."

Voices followed.

"I agree."

"We should deal with the external threat first."

Zhu Youjian's expression hardened.

"The rebellion led by the Prince of Tang strikes at the foundation of the state, it cannot be compared to the Jianzhou problem, which is merely a surface ailment, my order stands, recall Cao Wenzhao immediately, and I will hear no objections."

That was when one official, pushed just a little too far, muttered something he should not have.

"This is what happens when decisions rest in the hands of one person alone, if more people had the authority to decide, such reckless orders would not occur."

Zhu Youjian frowned.

"What did you say."

The official froze, instantly aware that he had stepped onto very thin ice.

"Nothing, Your Majesty."

Zhu Youjian had not heard clearly.

But the officials standing nearby had.

Two words.

Shared governance.

Lately, those words had been spreading among scholars and students across the empire, whispered, debated, quietly gaining weight, yet never openly brought before the throne.

No one dared.

And no one intended to start now.

Far away in Liaodong, at Dalinghe Fortress, the scars of recent destruction had already begun to disappear.

Months ago, the fortress had been reduced to ruin under aerial bombardment and artillery fire.

Now it stood again.

Rebuilt.

Restored.

Or, to put it more bluntly, the cement had finally dried.

Lu Xiangsheng stood atop the newly finished walls, running a hand across the smooth surface with an expression that hovered somewhere between satisfaction and disbelief.

"I have to admit," he said slowly, "a fortress built like this inspires a rather unreasonable level of confidence."

He was just about to laugh when something caught his eye.

A footprint.

Right there on the otherwise perfect surface.

Ugly.

Obvious.

Unforgivable.

His expression changed instantly.

"Who did this," he demanded, outrage rising with impressive speed, "who stepped on the cement before it dried, who is responsible for this crime against order."

A servant soldier leaned in, voice carefully neutral.

"My lord, that would be you."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

"I beg your pardon."

"A few days ago, you insisted on inspecting this section despite being told it was not ready, General Cao warned you, but you stepped on it anyway to see what would happen."

Silence.

Then realization arrived, slow but devastating.

At that time, he had just received the imperial order stripping him of his title, reducing him to a disgraced official tasked with redeeming himself, and the frustration had driven him to drink.

He had obtained a bottle of "Wuniangye" from Li DaoXuan, or something like that, the name had been a blur even then, and after that, his memory had simply... stopped cooperating.

Now the evidence stood before him.

Solid.

Permanent.

Embarrassing.

"...I see."

He crouched down, staring at the footprint as if it had personally betrayed him.

"What do we do about this."

The servant lowered his voice.

"I have seen the workers handle this, they add more cement and smooth it out."

"Of course," Lu Xiangsheng muttered, as if this were a deeply philosophical revelation.

He fetched fresh cement, carefully filled the imprint, and picked up a smoothing board, fully committed to repairing his own mistake.

At that exact moment, Cao Wenzhao walked over, took one look, and stopped.

"Lord Lu," he said slowly, trying to process the scene in front of him, "what exactly are you doing."

Chapter 1369 This Does Not Mean We Are Friends

Lu Xiangsheng slowly lowered the smoothing board in his hand, his expression caught somewhere between dignity and the very real awareness that he had just been caught doing something profoundly undignified.

"Well," he began, in the tone of someone attempting to construct a reasonable explanation out of very unreasonable circumstances, "I merely thought smoothing cement looked rather interesting, so I decided to try it myself."

Cao Wenzhao did not even bother hiding his reaction.

"There is cement on your face."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

For a man who could stand calmly under artillery fire, the realization that his face might currently resemble a poorly maintained wall hit him with surprising force, and he immediately raised a hand, patting his face in a way that only made things worse before hurriedly trying to clean it.

Cao Wenzhao crouched down beside the damaged patch of ground, examining it with the seriousness of a battlefield inspection.

"Lord Lu, you cannot smooth cement like this, you will never get it even, let me try."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked, genuinely puzzled.

"You know how to do this?"

"Not at all," Cao Wenzhao replied cheerfully, already taking the tool from him, "but I have watched it often enough to be confident in my ability to pretend."

Before the experiment could proceed any further, a voice drifted over from not too far away, casual, almost amused, yet carrying a presence that made people instinctively pay attention.

"Cao Wenzhao, come here for a moment, there is something you should see."

Li DaoXuan stood there, holding a document that looked far too official to be good news.

Cao Wenzhao immediately straightened, his relaxed posture snapping into something far more alert.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, what is the matter?"

Li DaoXuan waved the document lightly.

"It is not me looking for you, it is Zhu Youjian, he has sent word."

That was enough to draw both Cao Wenzhao and Lu Xiangsheng over without hesitation.

The document in Li DaoXuan's hand was an imperial edict, delivered by a member of the Jinyiwei who, due to certain... alignments of interest, had chosen not to make a public spectacle of the delivery and instead handed it over quietly.

Once the two officials finished reading, their expressions shifted in ways that would have been difficult to describe as anything other than complicated.

Lu Xiangsheng was the first to speak, and his tone carried more weight than before.

"Zheng Zhilong has rebelled, he has declared his intention to overthrow the emperor and support the Prince of Tang, Zhu Yujian, and His Majesty has ordered you to return and deal with him."

Cao Wenzhao glanced at Li DaoXuan, who gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, the kind of gesture that carried far more meaning than it appeared to.

"I see," Cao Wenzhao said calmly, "in that case, I will need to depart immediately."

Lu Xiangsheng stiffened.

The situation, as he understood it, had just escalated from troubling to deeply alarming, because in his mind, this was no longer a matter of isolated unrest but a full-scale political upheaval led by a prince, backed by a maritime power.

And now, at precisely the worst possible moment, they were about to lose their primary field commander.

"That cannot be right," he said, frowning deeply, "even if Zheng Zhilong has rebelled, this is not the time to withdraw you."

Cao Wenzhao tilted his head slightly.

"Oh, and why is that?"

Lu Xiangsheng did not hesitate.

"Zheng Zhilong is formidable at sea, yes, but on land his strength is limited, even if he supports the Prince of Tang, he cannot cause immediate large-scale damage inland, whereas our current position here is critical, we should push forward, strike directly toward Shenyang, and eliminate the Jianzhou threat first, only then should we turn back to deal with Zheng Zhilong."

Cao Wenzhao smiled faintly.

"And if I withdraw, and the Jianzhou forces counterattack, that would be a waste of everything we have achieved, correct."

Lu Xiangsheng nodded firmly.

"Exactly."

"Then you may rest assured," Cao Wenzhao replied, his tone calm in a way that only made his words more unsettling, "my departure will not affect the outcome here in the slightest."

Lu Xiangsheng stared at him.

"That makes no sense, you are the de facto commander, how can your absence have no impact."

Cao Wenzhao did not answer immediately, instead glancing toward the surrounding troops, the unfamiliar formations, the strange equipment, the entire system that had quietly redefined how warfare operated here.

"This army," he said slowly, "does not rely on any single individual, remove one person, and it continues, because it was never built around a single person to begin with, every one of us is insignificant on our own, but together, we become something that is not."

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

The idea was not entirely incomprehensible.

But it was deeply unsettling.

"So when I leave," Cao Wenzhao continued, "another insignificant person will take my place."

Lu Xiangsheng frowned.

"Who."

Cao Wenzhao's gaze swept across the commanders from Gao Village, and he smiled.

"Anyone."

That did not help.

Not even slightly.

Lu Xiangsheng pressed his temples, already feeling the beginnings of a headache forming.

"This is precisely why you cannot be withdrawn," he muttered, frustration leaking through, "we are on the verge of a decisive advance, months have already been lost, and now, at the critical moment, His Majesty chooses to interfere again, what exactly is he thinking."

Cao Wenzhao, having clearly decided that further explanation would not improve the situation, simply turned and began preparing for departure.

At that moment, Li DaoXuan stepped forward, his expression calm, almost reassuring.

"Lord Lu, there is no need for concern," he said, settling into a seat as if this were a discussion rather than a crisis, "whether Cao Wenzhao leaves or stays, it will not affect our ability to deal with the

Jianzhou forces, we have already sealed them in from three directions, ensuring they cannot cause further disruption, what we are doing now is not merely fighting a war, but preparing the conditions for something larger."

Lu Xiangsheng looked at him.

"Something larger?"

Li DaoXuan smiled.

"A shift in how things are done, a moment for people to reflect on governance itself, whether power should remain in the hands of one, or be shared among many."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

He had been thinking about such things recently.

More than he ever had before.

Ideas that once felt distant were now uncomfortably close.

"Then who will command next," he asked after a pause, "surely you are not planning to lead the army yourself."

Li DaoXuan laughed lightly.

"Me, I am not suited for battle, I leave such matters to those who understand them, my strengths lie elsewhere."

"And what would those be?"

Li DaoXuan considered the question with surprising seriousness.

"Logistics," he said at last, "and guiding people toward thinking, and perhaps, toward progress."

Lu Xiangsheng did not respond immediately.

Because for the first time, he was beginning to suspect that those might be the more dangerous skills.

Far from Liaodong, across the sea, on the northern coast of Taiwan, stood a fortress known as San Salvador City.

Built in 1626, it had been under Spanish control for over a decade, a foothold carved into the island as part of a broader struggle for maritime dominance.

To the south, the Dutch held Fort Zeelandia, and for years, the two powers had clashed, competing for influence, resources, and control.

They had not been allies.

Not even close.

And yet, now, they sat at the same table.

The Spanish commander looked thoroughly unimpressed.

"If you have something to say, say it quickly, and then leave."

The Dutch commander did not react to the hostility, because this was not the time for pride.

"In recent days," he began, "forces from the Ming have established a supply settlement on the eastern side of the island and formed alliances with the indigenous tribes, we have already engaged them multiple times."

The Spanish commander frowned.

"And this concerns us how."

The Dutch commander's expression sharpened.

"You still do not see it, the Ming intend to take control of the island, once they defeat us, you will be next."

That gave the Spanish commander pause.

Not agreement.

But consideration.

The Dutch continued.

"We may have our differences, but we both came from Europe, and when facing a common threat, cooperation becomes necessary, otherwise, once they defeat us, your position here will not hold."

That, unfortunately, made sense.

In the age of maritime expansion, European powers fought each other relentlessly when they had the advantage, but when facing a stronger local force, alliances formed with surprising speed.

The Spanish commander thought for a moment, then finally nodded.

"Very well," he said, "we will cooperate and drive the Ming forces from the island."

He paused.

Then added, with deliberate clarity.

"But do not misunderstand this."

"This does not make us friends."

Chapter 1370 So They Have Joined Hands

The year was 1640, the thirteenth year of the Chongzhen reign, a year that looked perfectly ordinary on paper but was, in reality, quietly assembling disasters like a meticulous collector who knew exactly which pieces would ruin everything later.

Cao Wenzhao departed from Dalinghe Fortress with the Guanning cavalry, returning first to Dengzhou, where he barely allowed his troops enough time to stretch their legs before immediately pivoting into naval command, taking charge of the Dengzhou fleet and sailing south along the coastline under imperial orders to suppress the rebellion led by Zheng Zhilong.

Everything looked clean, logical, and reassuringly official.

Which was precisely why it was completely misleading.

Because once Cao Wenzhao's fleet reached the Zhoushan Archipelago, the story stopped behaving like a loyal report to the throne and started acting like a conspiracy that did not bother to hide very hard.

Zheng Zhilong arrived there as well.

Two fleets that were supposed to tear each other apart instead slowed down, approached, and then proceeded to do something that would have caused several court officials to faint on the spot if they had seen it in person.

They held a gathering.

Not a tense negotiation filled with veiled threats.

Not a cautious exchange of words through intermediaries.

A full gathering, complete with shared meals, loud laughter, and what the soldiers later referred to, with suspicious enthusiasm, as the "Dao Xuan Tianzun Seafood Hotpot Festival," an event that somehow turned hostility into camaraderie through the simple yet devastatingly effective method of feeding everyone until they forgot who they were supposed to kill.

By the time the gathering ended, the soldiers on both sides were no longer looking at each other like enemies, which, while excellent for morale, was deeply problematic if one still intended to follow imperial orders.

Then the fleet moved again.

At its core were more than seventy massive ships from Gao Village, vessels that did not look like anything traditionally associated with the Ming navy, surrounded by over a hundred smaller ships belonging to Zheng Zhilong's maritime forces, forming a combined fleet of roughly two hundred warships.

Instead of following known routes, they slipped away from the coastline, choosing obscure and rarely used sea paths, moving southward in a way that suggested they were not interested in being found until it was far too late.

On the western coast of Taiwan, a transformation had taken place that could only be described as aggressively ambitious.

What had once been a modest supply village had evolved into a proper city, complete with structure, planning, and a name that carried intent.

Zheng Chenggong had named it Nantun City, a name that sounded calm enough until one realized it was attached to a rapidly expanding foothold that was quietly rewriting the balance of power on the island.

Since the earlier incident where a three-man strike team had decisively dealt with a Dutch harassment force in a three-versus-five engagement, the Dutch had chosen, with remarkable wisdom, to stay away for a while, which in turn gave Gao Village all the time it needed to build without interruption.

Supplies flowed in from the mainland like a steady promise.

Food became wages.

Wages became loyalty.

And loyalty became construction speed that would have made any bureaucrat deeply uncomfortable.

The Dadu Kingdom, a coalition of indigenous tribes numbering over eight thousand, had gradually integrated into this system, with more than three thousand of them now actively working in Nantun City, receiving food and goods in exchange for labor, participating in something they might not fully understand yet but were increasingly unwilling to leave.

At the center of this transformation stood their king.

Ganza Xia Alami.

Once, he had declared with absolute conviction that he would never learn Han language, never adopt their customs, never allow his people to be influenced by outsiders, even if it meant throwing himself off a mountain to prove his resolve.

Now, he lived in a cement house.

A solid, well-built structure that did not leak, did not collapse, and did not require constant repair, furnished with wooden furniture coated in smooth paint, positioned along clean streets where goods from the mainland arrived in an endless variety that expanded daily life in ways that made his previous worldview feel... unnecessarily restrictive.

If his past self could see him now, there would probably be a long, uncomfortable silence followed by a reluctant admission.

This was better.

Much better.

When Zheng Chenggong walked in, carrying a roll of silk with the casual confidence of someone who knew exactly how persuasive luxury could be, he greeted him with an easy smile.

"Ganza Xia Alami, take a look at this, this comes from the Anqing sericulture cooperative back in the Ming, and before you ask, yes, it is exactly as good as it looks."

Alami took the silk, ran his fingers across it, and paused as the texture registered fully.

Smooth did not quite capture it.

This was the kind of smooth that made a person reconsider their entire economic model.

"This... how trade," he asked, his still-developing Mandarin bending slightly under the weight of curiosity.

Zheng Chenggong did not hesitate.

"One barrel of deer milk."

Alami's expression shifted instantly into satisfaction, because that was a price he could work with, given the abundance of deer on the island and the established practices of milking domesticated animals.

The trade was completed quickly.

Naturally, his mind moved to the next opportunity.

"I have antlers, hides, many, what trade for those."

Zheng Chenggong shook his head, and this time his tone carried a trace of something firmer.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has made it clear, no trade means no killing, the deer are not to be turned into commodities, you may take milk, but their lives are not part of the exchange system."

Alami fell silent.

This was, from his perspective, an inconvenient policy.

Because if hunting was restricted, then an entire portion of his people's livelihood would need to change.

Zheng Chenggong, who had clearly anticipated this exact moment, unfolded a map and pointed to a marked location.

"There is coal here," he said, tapping the spot with quiet confidence, "you and your people can mine it, and Gao Village will exchange it for food, wine, cloth, and anything else you now find yourself unwilling to live without."

"Coal," Alami repeated, frowning slightly.

Zheng Chenggong produced a black chunk of stone.

Recognition came quickly.

"That useless black rock, I know it, we never use it, it is ugly, why is it valuable."

Zheng Chenggong smiled.

"Because it makes everything else possible, and more importantly, it is worth more than hunting deer."

That was a compelling argument.

And one that Alami was clearly in the process of accepting.

Unfortunately, the discussion did not get to continue.

Because the alarm bell rang.

Sharp, metallic, relentless.

The kind of sound that did not ask politely for attention but took it by force.

Zheng Chenggong's expression changed instantly.

"We talk later."

He was already moving.

Alami followed without hesitation.

At the harbor, Gao Village sailors were rushing into position with practiced efficiency, while the indigenous population looked on, confusion spreading quickly before being replaced by tension.

Then the announcement came, shouted through a crude metal loudspeaker.

"The Dutch are approaching, combat units move to engage at sea, civilians take shelter immediately."

Alami reacted on instinct.

His voice rose in his native tongue, sharp and commanding.

"Warriors of the Dadu Kingdom, prepare to defend the city."

Men moved.

Not perfectly.

Not like drilled soldiers.

But with instinctive understanding of danger.

They took positions along the walls, archers crouching behind cover, eyes fixed on the horizon.

From the highest point, Alami looked out.

Three ships from Gao Village had already left the harbor.

In the distance, Dutch ships advanced.

Behind them, unmistakable in form and presence, came Spanish galleons.

The weight of the situation settled heavily.

"Our friends... are outnumbered again."

On the water, tension tightened like a drawn bowstring.

"They are here," Shi Lang shouted across the waves.

"And this time they brought friends."

"Five Dutch ships, five Spanish," Zheng Chenggong replied, his voice steady but edged with calculation.

Another voice cut in, dry and blunt.

"Three against ten, and if they board us, especially those Spanish ships, we are in trouble, those things carry hundreds of men, if it turns into close combat, we lose the advantage immediately."

Shi Lang glanced back toward Nantun City, where thousands now depended on them.

"We cannot run," he said quietly, but with finality that needed no reinforcement.

"Because if we do, the people behind us die first."

No one argued.

Because some decisions, once seen clearly, stopped being decisions at all.

