

Great Ming 1401

Chapter 1401 The Water Is Too Cold

Qian Qianyi and Cheng Jiasui thanked the soldier, then continued their journey toward Tianjin, though the closer they got, the more the road began to feel... strange in a way that made a seasoned scholar's heart itch with unease.

Because the deeper they went, the more soldiers they saw, yet instead of the usual sight of men in armor bullying civilians, barking orders, or looting carts like hungry wolves in human skin, these troops moved with a discipline that felt almost... unnatural, as if someone had taken the idea of "soldiers" and rewritten it from the ground up.

Cheng Jiasui could not help but sigh as he walked, watching a group of soldiers helping an old farmer fix a broken cart wheel as casually as if they were doing their own household chores.

"These Shared Governance troops are truly different," he said slowly, his tone half admiration, half disbelief, "not only do they refrain from harming the people, they even give things away. Compared to the soldiers we've seen before, it's like heaven and earth."

Qian Qianyi snorted softly, folding his hands behind his back in that classic literati pose that carried both pride and stubbornness in equal measure.

"All of this is just theater," he said, his voice calm but firm, like a man clinging to the last plank of a sinking ship, "buying hearts with cheap tricks. I, Qian Qianyi, remain loyal to the Great Ming and His Majesty. I will not abandon my principles for a few sacks of grain."

Cheng Jiasui glanced at him, lips twitching, though he wisely chose not to argue, because some men could be persuaded with logic, while others needed history itself to slap them across the face before they would reconsider.

And so, the two continued forward in silence.

Not long after, Tianjin Port finally appeared before them.

The moment they stepped onto the docks, both men instinctively sucked in a breath, not out of politeness, but pure shock.

Ships.

Ships everywhere.

The harbor was packed so densely that the water itself seemed to disappear beneath hulls of wood and iron, while further out at sea floated massive vessels so large that they made the ships at the dock look like toys left behind by careless children.

Some of those giant ships stretched sixty, seventy meters long, towering over the waves like floating fortresses, their silhouettes cutting into the sky with an authority that no traditional junk could ever hope to match.

Qian Qianyi's voice dropped into a whisper.

"The Shared Governance faction... is this powerful?"

Cheng Jiasui did not answer immediately, because his eyes had already locked onto a familiar figure standing atop one of the larger ships.

"Look over there," he said quietly, "that is General Commander Cao Wenzhao."

Qian Qianyi followed his gaze and saw the man clearly, standing alongside Cao Bianjiao, both of them calm, composed, as if the storm shaking the entire empire was nothing more than a passing breeze.

Beside them stood a young man dressed in an almost theatrical outfit, something like a wandering hero from a stage play, handsome to the point of being slightly suspicious, as if he had stepped out of fiction rather than reality.

Qian Qianyi's expression hardened slightly.

"A traitor to the Emperor," he muttered.

Cheng Jiasui sighed.

"Try not to say that too loudly," he said dryly, "we still need to hitch a ride on their ships."

That practical reminder was enough to silence even Qian Qianyi's righteous indignation, because principles were important, but getting out alive was even more so.

After scanning the dock for a while, Cheng Jiasui quickly spotted what they were looking for.

"There," he pointed, "that's one of their transport ships. It delivers grain for the army, and once it's done, it returns south empty. We should be able to board it if we pay."

They approached.

The ship was in the middle of unloading cargo, with sacks of grain being carried down one after another, forming a small mountain on the dock in what felt like no time at all.

Cheng Jiasui watched, his merchant instincts kicking in immediately.

"Their logistics are terrifying," he murmured, "far stronger than the court's."

And that was not speculation.

Everyone knew Emperor Chongzhen was broke.

Not just "a little short on funds" broke, but the kind of broke where even officials whispered about it over tea, shaking their heads while pretending not to notice.

Taxes could not be collected, corruption had hollowed out the system, and the entire structure was like a rotten beam waiting to collapse.

Now, standing here and watching the Shared Governance faction unload endless grain like it was nothing, the contrast became painfully obvious.

The court was starving.

These people were overflowing.

Cheng Jiasui stepped forward and called out politely.

"Brother, a moment please."

The man in charge turned, revealing himself to be Zhuge Wangchan, the logistics officer, his expression relaxed, almost friendly.

"Good day, gentlemen. What can I help you with?"

Cheng Jiasui bowed slightly.

"We are from Jiangnan, hoping to return south due to... recent circumstances. We were told your transport ships return empty after delivery. Would it be possible for us to purchase passage?"

Zhuce Wangchan waved his hand lightly, as if brushing away the idea.

"No need to pay," he said with a smile, "Dao Xuan Tianzun instructed us that our mobilization would surely disturb many people. Those who wish to leave are simply trying to avoid chaos. Helping you is our responsibility."

Cheng Jiasui blinked.

"...We couldn't possibly accept that without paying."

"Then consider it compensation," Zhuge Wangchan replied, still smiling.

At that point, refusing further would only be awkward, so the two boarded the ship.

Once on deck, the scale of the vessel became even more overwhelming.

The flat expanse could carry unimaginable amounts of cargo, while below deck were cabins comfortable enough for long journeys, far surpassing anything Qian Qianyi had ever seen.

Even he, stubborn as he was, had to admit in silence that this was... impressive.

Very impressive.

And more terrifying than the ship itself was the realization that there wasn't just one.

There were dozens.

Cheng Jiasui, unable to hold back his curiosity, asked, "Are all these supplies provided by Jiangnan merchants and Zheng Zhilong?"

Zhuge Wangchan laughed.

"They can only contribute a small portion," he said, shaking his head, "most of this is produced by ourselves."

He casually picked up a cob of corn and tossed it lightly in his hand.

"With fertilizers, yields have doubled in many regions. Add land reclamation, new crops, livestock development... Shaanxi and Shanxi now produce more grain than Jiangnan."

That sentence hit like a thunderclap.

"More... than Jiangnan?" Cheng Jiasui repeated, stunned.

Zhuge Wangchan nodded as if it were nothing special.

"And it's spreading. Henan, Sichuan, Yunyang, Anlu... soon the whole realm will have enough food."

Cheng Jiasui frowned slightly.

"But the drought..."

Zhuge Wangchan grinned.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun already said the drought won't last long. Better days are coming."

That was the moment something finally clicked in Cheng Jiasui's mind.

This "Dao Xuan Tianzun" was not just a religious figure.

He was the core.

The anchor.

The invisible hand holding all of this together.

But before he could ask further, the ship gave a sudden, deep vibration.

It moved.

Without sails.

Without warning.

Qian Qianyi, who had been standing at the railing trying to look composed and scholarly, had absolutely no mental preparation for this.

The ship lurched forward.

He slipped.

And in one elegant, tragic motion, he flipped straight over the side and plunged into the sea.

Splash.

The water swallowed him whole.

Several sailors rushed to pull him out, dragging the soaked scholar back onto the deck like a fish that had just reconsidered its life choices.

Qian Qianyi lay there, drenched, shivering, dignity shattered beyond repair.

He opened his mouth, trembling.

"The water... is too cold..."

Chapter 1402 Everyone, Do Not Be Afraid

As Zhu Yujian arrived in Tianjin as the first force advancing toward the capital, the various armies of the Shared Governance faction began moving in succession, no longer scattered rumors but converging realities, advancing from three directions, east, south, and west, forming a tightening ring around the Imperial Capital with a quiet inevitability that felt less like chaos and more like execution of a plan long prepared.

Baoding, located in Hebei and barely two hundred li from the capital, stood as what should have been the final defensive barrier, a position that in any ordinary time would have been fiercely contested, yet in this moment of uncertainty revealed something far more telling about the state of the empire.

The defenders had already fled.

The wealthy gentry had already fled.

Even the officials who once spoke of loyalty with practiced confidence had vanished so thoroughly that their absence felt almost deliberate, leaving behind an entire city filled with unarmed civilians who had neither the means nor the authority to decide their own fate, and who now trembled at the mere rumor that the "rebels" were approaching.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

"Where can we even go?"

"When the Jurchens came, we could still hide behind the city walls, but this time even the soldiers have run away, so what exactly are these walls supposed to protect?"

One man cursed loudly, his confusion turning into anger.

"When the Jurchens attacked, the garrison did not run, so why did they run this time?"

The question, crude as it sounded, exposed a deeper truth that few were willing to articulate, because the Jurchens had always been regarded as a persistent but ultimately survivable threat, something irritating enough to demand resistance but not terrifying enough to destroy confidence in the future, which allowed soldiers to defend the city with a sense of purpose and allowed officials to speak of honor without feeling foolish.

This time, however, the situation carried a different weight, as the actions of the Shared Governance faction no longer resembled a passing disturbance but instead suggested something far more dangerous, something that aimed not at the borders but at the very head of the court itself.

Under such circumstances, the idea of defending the city out of loyalty quickly lost its appeal, and survival became the only logic that mattered, which explained why even a major city like Baoding now stood without defenders.

The people, left to themselves, struggled to make sense of it.

"Should we all run to the capital?" someone suggested, clinging to the possibility that proximity to power might still offer safety.

"It is more than two hundred li," another replied, shaking his head, "we will die on the road before we arrive."

"Then we die here if we stay," came the response, sharper now, driven by fear rather than reason, "if the rebels come, we will all die anyway."

The discussion spiraled without resolution, circling between bad options and worse outcomes, until a voice suddenly rose above the noise, calm and steady in a way that immediately drew attention.

"Everyone, do not be afraid, and there is no need to run," the voice called out, carrying across the street, "just live as you always do."

The crowd turned toward the source, where a man wearing a blue cap walked through the streets holding a crude iron loudspeaker, calling out as he moved.

It was the manager of the fertilizer factory.

In Baoding, he was a well-known figure, as the factory itself had been established by a wealthy local gentry family who had spent heavily to recruit him from the capital, specifically from Liang Shixian's circle, and when he first arrived, he had demonstrated an almost unsettling level of efficiency and dedication, completing the factory construction at remarkable speed.

However, the gentry soon discovered that his loyalty had limits.

When they attempted to leverage their influence at court to request exemption from value-added tax, the manager immediately resigned, vanished for five days, and left the entire operation in limbo, forcing the gentry to withdraw their request in panic, after which he returned as if nothing had happened and resumed work without explanation.

From that moment onward, the people of Baoding understood that this was not a man who could be easily controlled.

At the same time, his conduct toward the workers earned him genuine respect, as he treated them fairly, advocated for their wages, and helped resolve their personal difficulties, making him not only influential but trusted.

Now, with every other authority figure gone, he had, by default, become the most reliable presence in the city.

So when he spoke, people listened.

"Manager, you are not lying to us, are you?" someone in the crowd asked, unable to hide his anxiety.

The manager smiled lightly.

"Why would I lie?" he replied, his tone calm and almost casual, "I am still here, and if I were afraid, I would have left before all of you."

That simple statement carried more weight than any official reassurance, because it rested on visible reality rather than empty promises.

He raised the loudspeaker again.

"Very well, since things have come this far, I will stop pretending," he said, pausing briefly as the crowd quieted, "I am part of the Shared Governance faction."

The words caused a moment of shock, but he continued without hesitation.

"The people in our faction are just like me," he said, "the way I treat the workers is the way our army will treat all of you."

Before doubt could take hold, the factory workers stepped forward.

"The manager treats us very well."

"He never uses his position to bully us."

"He fights for our wages."

"He is a good man."

Their voices overlapped, reinforcing one another, and as their confidence spread, it began to influence the rest of the crowd, moving from person to person until the entire city seemed to shift ever so slightly away from panic.

"If they are all like him," someone said quietly, "then perhaps there is nothing to fear."

The idea spread quickly through the streets, carried along the simple layout of the city until it reached every corner.

"Open the gates," the manager said calmly, "there is no need for pointless resistance, so let us wait for them peacefully."

After a brief hesitation, the decision was made.

The gates were opened.

The people waited, uneasy but no longer frantic.

Before long, the Shanxi army appeared, and at its front rode Chen Qianhu, whose imposing and rather unfortunate appearance immediately unsettled the fragile calm, as fear surged back the moment the people laid eyes on him.

"Ah, we are finished."

"That must be their leader."

"He looks like he eats people."

"We are doomed."

"Maybe we should have run to the capital after all."

The city seemed to tremble under the weight of its own imagination, yet Chen Qianhu himself did not advance immediately, as he had already come to understand that winning people over required more than small gestures, and that true persuasion demanded something deeper, something that could reach beyond reason.

With a practiced motion, he raised a loudspeaker, and before anyone could guess his intention, a band emerged behind him, instruments rising as music began to flow, soft yet resonant, filling the air with an unexpected warmth.

Then, with surprising sincerity, Chen Qianhu began to sing.

"Every night, in the wilderness of dreams..."

Behind him, thousands of soldiers joined in, their voices merging into a single chorus that rolled toward the city like a tide.

"I am a proud giant."

The people of Baoding stood frozen, unable to reconcile what they were witnessing with anything they understood about war.

On the city wall, the blue-cap manager seized the moment, leaping up and shouting down at the crowd with perfect timing.

"He may be ugly, but he is a good man," he called out, his voice carrying clearly, "and tell me, among those smiling officials who ran away, how many of them were actually good?"

Chapter 1403 Just Got Robbed

The people of Baoding did not really understand the song.

What they understood, however, was something far more important, something that did not require education, literacy, or political awareness, only experience, and unfortunately, they had plenty of that.

Any ordinary army, upon arriving at a city with no defenders, would not even bother pretending to behave; if they did not immediately start looting, burning, and smashing things for sport, they would at the very least swagger through the streets like they owned the place, eating, taking, and demanding whatever they pleased.

A bowl of noodles without payment was not a crime in such situations, it was tradition.

And yet, this army did none of that.

They did not rush in.

They did not posture.

They did not even cross the gates.

Instead, they stood outside and sang.

That single detail was enough to tell the people everything they needed to know, because whatever these men were, they were clearly not the same breed as the armies that had come before.

Chen Qianhu raised his tin megaphone again, his already rough voice pushed even further as he roared with full force, "I, Chen Qianhu, hate evil people the most, and I say this clearly today, every last one of them should die."

The declaration rang out with such raw conviction that the common folk did not question it for even a second.

"Did you hear that, he means it."

"I can feel it in his voice."

"If he curses the wicked, then he must be a good man."

It was simple logic, the kind born from desperation, but in times like these, simple logic was often the only kind that worked.

After finishing his performance, Chen Qianhu steadied himself and spoke again, his tone shifting from theatrical to earnest, though not losing that peculiar intensity that made people want to listen.

"People of Baoding, the Shared Governance faction makes this promise to you, we will improve your lives, and we will make this nation prosper again, though no system is perfect and there will always be flaws, what we offer is something the old court never dared to give."

He paused briefly, not for drama, but to let the idea settle, like a merchant placing goods on display and allowing the customer to take a proper look.

"We open a path for the common people to speak, we allow you to choose your own representatives, and those representatives will fight for your interests."

He tapped his chest.

"I stand here today as the representative of the people of Shanxi, and I look forward to the day when you, the people of Baoding, choose your own voice, so that together, we may govern this land properly."

And then, just like that, he turned his horse.

No threats followed.

No demand for surrender was made.

No symbolic march through the open gates occurred.

The army simply moved around the city and continued onward toward the capital, as if Baoding were merely a waypoint rather than a prize.

Only then did the people of Baoding collectively release the breath they did not realize they had been holding, their bodies relaxing all at once as the tension drained away.

So this was what it looked like.

An army that did not enter.

A force that did not prove itself through taking.

Strange, unsettling, and yet, somehow reassuring in a way none of them could properly explain.

The same scene unfolded across the northern territories.

Multiple armies of the Shared Governance faction advanced toward the capital, each deliberately choosing different routes, carefully avoiding one another, as if following an invisible map drawn by a hand far above them.

Those who had been eagerly waiting for internal conflict, including Emperor Chongzhen, court officials, wealthy gentry, and every conservative force clinging to the old order, could only watch in stunned disbelief.

No clashes occurred.

No competition for position emerged.

No accidental friction sparked between advancing forces.

There was only coordination, quiet, efficient, and deeply unsettling to anyone who had assumed chaos would tear these rebels apart.

Of course, not every army followed the same script.

One, in particular, carried its own flavor of absurdity.

The Sichuan army.

They were poor.

Painfully poor.

Even though Gao Family Village had done its best to support Sichuan, once these troops stepped out of their home region and entered the northern territories, the comparison became brutally clear.

They were still the poorest among all the forces.

A soldier approached Flat Rabbit and saluted, though his expression carried more frustration than respect.

"Reporting, with my military pay, I actually eat better than these northern peasants, but my relatives back home, my seventh aunt, second aunt, and third grandaunt, they eat worse than the people here, and if I help these locals, my sixth aunt, third aunt, and fourth grandaunt will beat me to death when I return."

Flat Rabbit blinked, then tilted his head slightly.

"Hold on, the numbers in your list just changed halfway through."

The soldier sighed with the exhaustion of a man burdened by excessive family structure.

"I have too many aunts, I cannot list them all in one sentence, so I rotate them."

Flat Rabbit fell silent.

This was not a problem he had ever anticipated.

After a moment of consideration that was far more serious than the situation deserved, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small piece of silver, holding it up with obvious pride.

"In that case, I will personally contribute and send some relief to your second aunt, sixth aunt, and seventh grandaunt, see, your Rabbit Lord is not stingy."

The soldier took one look and inhaled sharply.

"Rabbit Lord... is that all you have?"

Flat Rabbit frowned immediately, his dignity clearly offended.

"What do you mean 'all,' this is a substantial amount."

Without another word, the soldier pulled out a silver ingot that was at least three times larger and pressed it into Flat Rabbit's hand.

"Rabbit Lord, please use this to buy yourself something decent, I cannot bear to watch this."

Flat Rabbit stared at the silver in his palm, momentarily speechless.

And just like that, the story spread.

"Rabbit Lord is poor."

"Not just poor, disastrously poor."

"Forget helping the northern people, we should help Rabbit Lord first."

"Save the impoverished rabbit."

What followed was a wave of enthusiastic donations.

Within moments, Flat Rabbit found himself buried under a pile of silver, his expression somewhere between disbelief and existential crisis.

"I swear we came here to help the people, why are you all helping me, I already receive food and clothing from the village council, money is useless to me."

The soldiers grinned.

"You need it to get married."

Flat Rabbit snorted.

"Women only slow down my sword."

The soldiers laughed even harder.

"Rabbit Lord, your sword speed is already useless, it cannot get any slower."

Flat Rabbit's face darkened.

"You little brats."

The laughter only grew louder.

"Rabbit Lord, without a woman, you cannot even produce little brats."

Flat Rabbit said nothing more.

There are defeats in life that cannot be countered with logic.

Meanwhile, on the eastern route from Shanhai Pass, Wu Sangui's army advanced toward the capital in a manner far more traditional.

A scout returned and reported, "There is a village ahead, but the people have all fled."

Wu Sangui let out a cold snort.

"They fled, then who will supply my army, search the surrounding hills, drag them out, put a blade to their necks, they will produce grain soon enough."

The scouts dispersed quickly, moving into the nearby terrain with practiced efficiency, their skills honed on the frontier where survival depended on seeing what others could not.

It did not take long.

The villagers were found.

Blades were placed against their throats.

And the hidden grain was surrendered.

Wu Sangui did not kill them.

To him, these people were not individuals, they were resources, a kind of living mine that could be harvested repeatedly as long as it was not destroyed.

Leave them alive, and after some time, they would produce again.

Much like monsters in a game that respawned, waiting patiently to be cleared for rewards.

"Drive them off, we continue."

The army moved on, leaving behind a group of people stripped of everything, standing in stunned silence, their minds blank as they tried to comprehend what came next.

How does one live after losing everything.

Before they could even begin to answer that question, the sound of hooves thundered in the distance.

A heavily armored cavalry unit approached at speed, dust rising behind them like a rolling wave, and at their head rode Ma Shouying.

The villagers did not run.

There was nothing left to protect, nothing left to lose, and fear, when stretched too far, simply broke.

Ma Shouying reined in his horse and looked them over before asking in a low voice, "You were robbed just now."

One of the villagers stepped forward, his tone hollow.

"Yes, just robbed, there is nothing left for you to take, if you want to kill us, then do it."

Ma Shouying's gaze hardened slightly.

"Who did it."

"Wu Sangui, they say he is part of the Shared Governance faction, marching on the capital."

Ma Shouying let out a quiet scoff.

"He is not one of us, just a pretender wearing the name."

Then he turned to his men without hesitation.

"Distribute supplies."

Chapter 1404 Everyone Must Die

The common people were completely thrown off balance, the kind of confusion that did not come from ignorance but from witnessing too many contradictions stacked on top of each other in too short a time, because just moments ago one group claiming to be the Shared Governance faction had swept through and stripped them clean down to bare bones, and before the dust even settled another group arrived under the same banner, calmly declaring the previous one a counterfeit, then proceeded to hand out money and grain as if reality itself could be rewritten on demand.

What kind of operation was this.

No one could make sense of it, but then again, understanding had never been a requirement for survival.

In the end, the logic of the common folk remained brutally simple and stubbornly effective, whoever bullied me is the villain, whoever helps me is a good person, and everything else can go argue with the wind.

Ma Shouying raised a hand and pointed at the banner fluttering within his ranks, his tone carrying the kind of certainty that did not invite debate.

"Remember this clearly. That five-colored Dao Xuan Tianzun banner. Only those who carry this are the good ones. If you see anything else, stay as far away as you can."

The villagers nodded with surprising speed, not because they fully understood, but because they needed something solid to believe in, and a piece of cloth was far easier to trust than abstract ideology.

With a sharp whistle, Ma Shouying turned his horse, and the Armored Cavalry Unit surged forward like a released bowstring, pulling away from the village in a matter of breaths.

The banner drifted farther and farther into the distance, until it became nothing more than a small flicker of color against the horizon, and the villagers stood there watching, quietly reaching a conclusion that would shape their behavior from that moment on.

That flag is good.

Every other flag is trouble.

Ma Shouying continued his march, and along the way he passed several more villages, each one bearing the same hollowed-out look, the unmistakable aftermath of Wu Sangui's handiwork, houses looted, granaries emptied, people reduced to thin, wary shadows of themselves.

He stopped at each one.

He distributed grain.

He reassured them.

He stabilized what little remained of their faith.

If one were to strip away the rhetoric and look only at the actions, what he was doing did not differ all that much from what the old bandits used to do, except for one crucial distinction, he did not drag the villagers along with him as unwilling followers, and perhaps in this era, that single difference was enough to redraw the moral boundary.

Ma Shouying frowned as he rode, the thought forming slowly but insistently in his mind, whether he should chase down Wu Sangui and give him a proper beating before things spiraled any further.

At that moment, the embedded reporter caught up from behind.

She was also a disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun, but unlike the soft-spoken Zhou Daya, this woman carried herself with a sharp, athletic edge, riding a red horse that cut through the wind with clean precision, her posture straight, her presence bright without being loud.

She reined in beside him and gave a brief salute.

"General Ma, I may need to leave your unit for a while."

Ma Shouying turned, his brows knitting together almost immediately.

"Where are you going? It's chaos out there. Don't wander off recklessly. If something happens to you, I won't be able to answer to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The reporter smiled, not dismissively, but with a kind of calm confidence that suggested she had already weighed the risks.

"My safety is my own responsibility. If anything happens, it won't be your burden to carry."

Ma Shouying shook his head.

"That's not how it works. You are a disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Her smile softened slightly.

"Being a disciple of Dao Xuan Tianzun isn't meant to grant us privileges or special protection. It's supposed to mean something else."

Ma Shouying blinked.

"Something else?"

She nodded, choosing her words carefully, as if repeating something she herself was still trying to fully grasp.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun personally arranged for the entire news division to become his disciples, not so that we would be treated better, but so that we would hold a distinct position, one that allows us to supervise the village committees in the future."

Ma Shouying stared at her.

"Supervise... the village committees?"

The reporter let out a small sigh.

"To be honest, I don't really understand it either. The village committees are already doing quite well, aren't they."

They both fell silent.

Some ideas did not reveal their purpose immediately, and some systems were not built for the present, but for a future that had yet to arrive, a future where power would begin to rot from the inside, where privilege would quietly grow teeth, and only then would people like her, carrying the title of Dao Xuan Tianzun's disciple, step forward and finally make sense of the role they had been given.

Ma Shouying exhaled and waved a hand.

"We're getting off track. Reporter, what exactly are you planning to do after leaving my unit?"

She straightened slightly.

"I'm going to catch up to Wu Sangui's forces and secretly record him looting the civilians."

Ma Shouying paused, then nodded slowly.

"I see."

"He's currently operating under the banner of the Shared Governance faction. If we move against him directly, it will only confuse the people and give the conservative faction an excuse to attack us. But if we have clear footage of his crimes, everything changes."

Ma Shouying's expression tightened.

"That's extremely dangerous. Wu Sangui is a seasoned general. His forces will have scouts spread out everywhere. Getting close enough to record anything won't be easy."

The reporter's lips curved slightly.

"There's always a way. My special operations team came from Gao Family Village as well."

Ma Shouying held her gaze for a moment before finally nodding.

"Be careful."

She acknowledged with a short response, then turned her horse and sped forward, her team following close behind, disappearing into the distance with practiced efficiency.

Ma Shouying did not let the matter rest.

He urged his horse forward as well, keeping a distance, trailing behind just enough to intervene if things went wrong, though whether he would arrive in time if they truly did was another question entirely.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in the Imperial Capital had taken on a strange and uneasy texture.

The Shared Governance forces were advancing toward the city from multiple directions, and at the same time, refugees were flooding in from every possible route, turning the capital into a crowded, restless mass almost overnight, a scene eerily reminiscent of the previous incursions from the Liaodong Front.

The streets were packed.

Noise filled the air.

Even within the palace walls, the distant clamor seeped through, a constant reminder that control was slipping, not with a bang, but with a slow, grinding erosion.

And yet, strangely enough, there were barely any proper troops stationed in the city.

Eunuch Cao Huachun stood atop the city walls with a collection of guards and palace eunuchs, joined by members of the conservative faction who had brought their own household retainers to bolster the defense, though "defense" might have been too generous a word for what was essentially a loose gathering of men with uneven discipline and even less unity of purpose.

No one truly wanted to fight.

Each man was calculating something of his own.

And then, without warning, the tension began to loosen.

After a few days of noise and panic, the common people started leaving the capital in small but steady waves.

Cao Huachun stood by the city gate, overhearing fragments of conversation drifting up from below.

"Have you heard? The Shared Governance army doesn't harm civilians at all. We don't need to hide in the capital. We can just go home."

"Not just that. I heard if you go back now, they even give out grain. They call it 'disturbance compensation.'"

"What the hell? Something that good actually exists? Don't lie to me. If this turns out to be fake and we get robbed instead, I'm coming back to settle accounts with you."

"Well... I only heard about it too."

"Don't be scared," a man wearing a yellow helmet cut in, his tone confident in a way that only firsthand information could support. "I just got word from my village. It's completely safe to go back now. Plenty of workers from our fertilizer plant already received the 'disturbance compensation.' Big bags of grain. If you go back too late, you won't get anything."

The moment he finished speaking, he took off running toward the city gate with startling speed.

At this point, the rebel forces had not yet fully reached the city, and the officials and nobles were still in the middle of their so-called strategic withdrawal, so the gates had not been completely sealed, only left partially closed with a narrow opening.

The man in the yellow helmet darted through that gap with a movement so quick it resembled a flash of light, vanishing onto the southern road before anyone could properly react.

The others froze for a fraction of a second, then one phrase echoed in their minds like a warning bell.

If you go back too late, you won't get anything.

It was terrifying in a way that swords and arrows could never quite match.

In an instant, the crowd surged toward the gate.

The eunuch guards panicked, shouting at the top of their lungs.

"What are you doing? Stop pushing! Keep order! If you keep this up, I'll kill every one of you!"

The threat worked, at least on the surface.

The people slowed down, straightened themselves, and filed out in something resembling order.

But once they had passed through the gate and put some distance between themselves and the walls, they turned back as one, their fear evaporating into something far more familiar.

Anger.

"You damn eunuch, and you dare call yourself 'your father'? Do you even have the parts for that? Can you produce a son? You'll never be anyone's 'father' in this lifetime. Damn you!"

"Yeah, we used to be afraid of you, but what is there to fear now? When the Shared Governance army arrives, all of you eunuchs are finished!"

Chapter 1405 Petty Arguments Inside the Capital

The burst of cursing from the commoners was not the kind that scattered harmlessly into the wind, but the kind that landed with weight and intent, sharp enough to make the eunuch soldiers atop the city walls burn with anger, yet with nowhere to release it, because the offenders had already vanished as if the streets themselves had swallowed them whole.

In the blink of an eye, the area was empty.

Unless cavalry were deployed, there was simply no catching them.

And the eunuch soldiers, for all their bluster, had never trained in anything resembling Iron Body kungfu or agile movement techniques, so chasing was out of the question, leaving them no choice but to shout after empty air, voices full of indignation that sounded increasingly hollow the longer they echoed.

"A bunch of unruly rabble! Rabble!"

Not far away, Eunuch Cao Huachun watched the entire scene unfold in silence, his expression unreadable, yet inside he let out a long, quiet sigh that carried more weight than any shouted insult.

The Emperor's authority had collapsed.

Not weakened, not shaken, but collapsed so thoroughly that even the commoners living within reach of the Imperial Capital dared to jump and curse at the guards on the walls without a trace of hesitation, which meant that in their hearts, the conclusion had already been made.

A change of dynasty was no longer a distant possibility.

It was something people were beginning to assume as inevitable.

And while the streets roared with that unspoken certainty, the court was busy doing something far more refined, far more dignified, and infinitely more useless.

They were arguing.

Days earlier, Emperor Chongzhen had ordered Eunuch Cao Huachun to organize palace guards and eunuchs to defend the city, while at the same time preparing to recall Lu Xiangsheng to reinforce the capital.

But several days had passed.

The order had still not been issued.

The reason could be summed up in two words.

Endless wrangling.

Emperor Chongzhen was afraid.

He wanted to bring Lu Xiangsheng back, that much was obvious, but he also knew that the moment Lu Xiangsheng withdrew, the defenses at the Daling River would be left dangerously thin, and the Jurchens could very well seize the opportunity to retake Jinzhou, dragging the strategic situation right back to where it had been before all the recent sacrifices.

And if that happened, the label of "a foolish ruler ruins the nation" would land on him again without mercy.

With the Shared Governance faction already stirring trouble everywhere, he could not afford to be branded that way again.

So naturally, like any ruler cornered by both reality and reputation, he looked for a way out.

He wanted to pass the burden to someone else.

Seated on the dragon throne, he spoke at length, his tone measured, almost scholarly, as if the calmness of his voice alone could turn uncertainty into consensus.

"There remain sufficient forces beyond the passes, and the situation may yet be sustained..."

The moment he began, the officials understood exactly what he was doing.

He wanted to recall Lu Xiangsheng.

And more importantly, he wanted them to say it first.

"This matter of great military importance," he continued, "should be deliberated and decided by you gentlemen. It must not be delayed or evaded."

The words sounded reasonable.

They also sounded extremely familiar.

Because when he had previously ordered the recall of Cao Wenzhao, Gao Jie, Xing Honglang, Yang Guozhu, Wang Pu, and others, he had not consulted anyone at all, issuing commands directly without the slightest pause for discussion.

Now, suddenly, it was "you gentlemen should decide."

In other words, he wanted them to open their mouths so that he would not have to bear the blame.

If they spoke, he would no longer be the foolish ruler.

They, however, would instantly become the traitors who abandoned the frontier.

The officials were not fools.

They knew Emperor Chongzhen's habits all too well, and none of them had any intention of picking up that particular piece of poison.

Vice Minister of War Chen Yan stepped forward, speaking slowly, carefully, every word wrapped in layers of caution.

"Recalling Lu Xiangsheng may indeed be an effective strategy against the rebels. However, his army bears great responsibility. His troops are feared by the Jurchens. Not only does Ningyuan rely on him, but the passes do as well. Even if he cannot always provide timely reinforcement, the mere presence of elite troops there strengthens morale. Should he be withdrawn, the remaining forces, scattered across various fortresses, may not be reliable. If something goes wrong, would our flesh be enough to feed the consequences? This concerns the very safety of the realm. We have discussed it in private and dare not make a hasty decision. We are unworthy and lack the courage to gamble with the borders. We beg Your Majesty to decide."

Another vice minister, Zhang Jinyan, was far more direct, slicing through the fog with a single sentence.

"Whether Lu Xiangsheng is recalled depends on whether Ningyuan is abandoned. Two choices, nothing more."

Chen Yan added quietly, "Every inch of land is worth an inch of gold."

And just like that, the air in the hall turned stiff.

The burden had been tossed out.

No one caught it.

Emperor Chongzhen found himself momentarily speechless, caught in the awkward space between authority and responsibility, forced to confront the fact that no one was willing to stand in front of him and say what he wanted to hear.

In the end, he let out a breath, the kind that carried resignation more than resolve.

"Securing the passes while achieving victory against the rebels may be a lesser strategy, yet it is one born of necessity."

The officials relaxed almost imperceptibly.

Good.

He had said it himself.

That meant they were safe.

And he, once again, had stepped into the role he feared the most.

"Go," the Emperor snapped, irritation surfacing now that the decision had been forced out of him. "Why are you still standing here? Issue the order at once. Recall Lu Xiangsheng."

The officials withdrew.

Back in the Ministry of War offices, they sat down, unhurried, as if the urgency of the imperial command had somehow dissolved along the way, each man taking his time to sip tea, flip through reports, and let half an hour drift by before anyone so much as mentioned the matter again.

Only then did Minister of War Chen Xinjia speak, as though remembering something trivial.

"Let us hold a meeting and discuss how best to recall Lu Xiangsheng."

Suggestions followed, each one sounding productive, each one ensuring that nothing would actually happen anytime soon.

"Submit a joint memorial," one said, "so that the governors outside may also agree."

"Request further discussion," another added, "regarding how to defend the passes after abandoning Ningyuan, and how to settle both soldiers and civilians."

Everything was framed as caution.

Everything was, in truth, delay.

Back and forth they went, consulting, reporting, asking for further instructions, turning a single decision into a maze with no exit.

A month passed like this.

By the end of it, even Emperor Chongzhen was exhausted by the sheer persistence of their inertia, forced to issue a direct decree to push things forward.

And still, the wrangling continued.

Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he turned his attention to Jizhen.

Jizhen, one of the nine great frontier garrisons, sat north of the capital, long responsible for holding back Mongol incursions and quietly balancing the power of the capital's own troops.

It had once been commanded by a figure of legend, Qi Jiguang, whose campaigns against the pirates had earned him lasting fame before he was reassigned to defend the northern frontier under the support of Zhang Juzheng and Tan Lun.

With that in mind, Emperor Chongzhen quickly ordered Tang Tong, the commander of Jizhen, to bring his forces to defend the capital.

Tang Tong arrived with eight thousand soldiers, encamping outside Qihua Gate.

The Emperor hosted a banquet in his honor, offering generous praise and rewards.

Tang Tong responded with all the expected loyalty.

"I am willing to give my life to serve, and ensure the swift destruction of the enemy."

The Emperor was pleased.

He rewarded Tang Tong with silver, and the soldiers as well.

And yet, despite the show of trust, unease lingered.

Eight thousand troops stationed so close to the capital was not something he could fully relax about.

So he did what he believed to be a reasonable precaution.

He assigned a eunuch, Du Zhizhi, as a supervisory commissioner.

Tang Tong's reaction was immediate and explosive.

He threw the rewards to the ground, his anger no longer disguised.

"The Emperor honors me as a teacher, treats me as a noble, yet sends a palace eunuch to command over me. Am I to be considered inferior to a servant?"

Then, without waiting for approval, he submitted a memorial arguing that his forces were too few to face the rebels in open ground and that he should instead withdraw to Juyong Pass to hold a defensive position.

Before any reply could arrive, he had already packed up and left.

In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Under normal circumstances, Emperor Chongzhen would have had his head.

Now, he could do nothing.

So the court returned to what it did best.

More wrangling.

At some point, the Emperor came to a simple conclusion.

The reason he lacked troops was not because there were none, but because there was no money.

With money, he could hire men.

With men, he could defend the capital.

So he issued a new order.

Nobles, eunuchs, and officials were to contribute funds, with thirty thousand taels set as the highest tier of contribution.

The response was unanimous in the worst possible way.

No one wanted to pay.

Left with no better option, the Emperor secretly instructed the palace eunuch Xu Gao to approach Zhou Kui, the father of Empress Zhou, asking him to set an example.

Zhou Kui, however, had no intention of parting with his wealth.

After a moment of thought, he came up with what he considered a clever solution.

He went to his daughter.

"My child," he said with practiced helplessness, "your husband asks me to contribute funds, but our family has none."

Empress Zhou clenched her teeth, forcing herself to accept the burden, and gathered five thousand taels from the inner palace to give to her father.

Zhou Kui accepted the money with great satisfaction.

Then, with even greater satisfaction, he quietly set aside two thousand for himself.

And presented the remaining three thousand to Emperor Chongzhen.

Chapter 1406 This Eunuch Is... Interesting

Among the nobles and imperial relatives, only Taikang Bo Zhang Guoji was willing to put forward a serious contribution, offering twenty thousand taels of silver and earning himself a promotion to marquis in return, which, depending on how one chose to interpret it, could either be called loyalty or a rather efficient investment.

As for the civil and military officials, their "contributions" ranged from a few dozen taels to a few hundred at most, amounts so symbolic that they barely qualified as participation, more like tossing a coin into a wishing well and hoping the Emperor would count it as devotion.

Emperor Chongzhen took one look at the total and understood immediately that this path was going nowhere.

So he changed the rules.

If voluntary contributions did not work, then they would no longer be voluntary.

At first, each government office was assigned a quota.

Then the system grew more refined, or perhaps more desperate, as quotas were distributed based on provincial origin, with officials from Jiangnan expected to produce eight thousand taels, those from Jiangbei four thousand, Zhejiang six thousand, Huguang five thousand, Shaanxi four thousand, Shandong four thousand, and so on, as though loyalty could be calculated by geography.

The officials looked at this arrangement and arrived at a simple conclusion.

If being an official meant having to pay the court out of one's own pocket, then perhaps the most logical solution was to stop being an official altogether.

And so they did.

One after another, the gentry submitted resignations, stepping away with remarkable unity, as if they had all suddenly remembered urgent personal matters that required their immediate attention far from the capital.

Among the eunuchs, Eunuch Wang Zhixin was known to be the wealthiest, with rumors claiming he had as much as three hundred thousand taels stored at home, a number so large that it practically glowed with temptation.

Emperor Chongzhen personally called on him to contribute generously.

Wang Zhixin responded with a sigh so sincere it might have convinced someone less informed.

"In recent years, my household has suffered greatly. There is little left to spare."

In the end, he offered ten thousand taels.

Which, for a man of his rumored wealth, was less generosity and more careful accounting.

The other eunuchs followed suit, each performing their own version of poverty with admirable creativity, some hanging signs on their doors declaring their houses for urgent sale, others sending antiques and curios to the market, all of them putting on a convincing display of financial distress, as though ruin had arrived just in time to excuse their reluctance.

And so the wrangling continued.

The capital remained trapped in endless negotiation, endless delay, a machine that consumed time and produced nothing.

Time passed.

A great deal of it.

Two months later, Lu Xiangsheng finally received the imperial order recalling him to defend the capital.

By then, however, the situation outside the city had already changed beyond recognition.

The armies of the Shared Governance faction, with the sole exception of Wu Sangui, who had yet to show his hand, had already arrived.

They did not rush forward in chaos.

They arranged themselves.

From three directions, they formed a tightening ring around the Imperial Capital, not as a mob, but as an organized force with structure and intent.

From the south came troops from Shandong, Anlu, and Sichuan.

From the west came forces from Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan.

From the east came armies from Jiangnan and the coastal regions.

Only Wu Sangui lingered unseen, hiding in the hills near the capital, waiting, watching, calculating.

On the city walls, Eunuch Cao Huachun stood with his hands behind his back, his gaze fixed on the formations below, his brow slowly tightening as he took in the sight.

He was not a military expert.

But he was not blind.

These troops were disciplined, their ranks steady, their presence carrying a kind of quiet confidence that spoke of training and purpose.

They were nothing like the decayed imperial forces.

They were nothing like the disorganized rebel bands of the past.

This was something else entirely.

"This will be difficult," Cao Huachun murmured, more to himself than anyone else. "Your Majesty... I fear we may not pass this trial."

Another senior eunuch, Wang Dehua, stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"In the past, the capital has been surrounded by the Jurchens more than once, and yet the city never fell. Perhaps there is no need to be so pessimistic."

Cao Huachun let out a quiet breath.

"In those times, we had relief armies from across the realm rushing to the rescue. This time..." He paused, letting the implication settle. "We have none. With only the troops inside the city, do you truly believe we can hold?"

Wang Dehua hesitated.

That was indeed a problem.

After a moment, he tried another angle, his tone cautious.

"The Shared Governance faction is far from unified. There are figures like Flat Rabbit, clearly little more than bandit stock, alongside former frontier officers like Chen Qianhu, and even princes such as Prince Tang, the Prince Fu heir, and the Qin Prince heir. Surely internal conflict is inevitable. Perhaps we can exploit that."

Cao Huachun nodded slightly.

"That is our only chance."

Then he added, almost under his breath, "If they give it to us."

Before the thought could settle, movement stirred in the enemy lines.

A single rider emerged.

No escort.

No formation.

Just one man on horseback, advancing calmly toward the city gates, stopping well within arrow range as if the distance meant nothing to him at all.

The boldness alone was enough to draw attention.

The man patted the sword at his waist and burst into laughter, his voice carrying clearly across the distance.

"Eunuchs on the walls, take a good look at this sword at my side. This blade exists to kill the wicked. One flash of cold light chills forty provinces, its energy stretching thirty thousand li. I have come to the capital for one reason, to cut down those officials who oppress the people. Do you know how long I have waited for this day?"

The guards on the walls said nothing.

They simply watched.

Flat Rabbit raised his voice further.

"The root of all oppression is that Emperor Chongzhen. Today, on behalf of all soldiers and citizens of the Shared Governance faction, I formally declare that he must abdicate at once and yield the realm to collective rule. Otherwise, do not blame me for what follows."

The words rang out with surprising force.

Even Cao Huachun felt a chill at their weight.

And then, just as the tension reached its peak, another voice cut through from behind.

Zheng Gouzi.

"Hey, Rabbit, since when do you use phrases like 'do not blame me for not warning you'? Where did you even learn that?"

Flat Rabbit turned around, visibly annoyed.

"This lord is a man of great learning and unmatched talent. Why can I not use a proper phrase or two?"

"Oh, there it is," Zheng Gouzi replied with a laugh. "That sounds more like you."

The Sichuan troops behind him burst into laughter.

"Exactly, that is our Rabbit!"

Flat Rabbit blinked, genuinely confused.

"What do you mean? I just used two more refined expressions. Did you not hear them?"

"Because those," Zheng Gouzi said, still grinning, "are exactly your level."

Flat Rabbit stared at him.

"?"

The tension dissolved.

Just like that, the suffocating atmosphere that had hung over both sides loosened, replaced by something almost absurd.

On the city wall, Cao Huachun straightened slightly, seizing the moment.

"Hero," he called out, his tone polite, even respectful, "you are the representative of the Sichuan Shared Governance forces, Flat Rabbit, correct?"

Flat Rabbit nodded.

"Ah, right, introductions. I almost forgot. That is correct. I am the representative chosen by the people of Sichuan. Flat Rabbit. Remember the name."

Cao Huachun continued smoothly.

"And may I ask, how exactly did you leave Sichuan alive? I was under the impression that no rabbit survives there."

Flat Rabbit froze.

The soldiers behind him froze.

For a brief moment, even the wind seemed uncertain.

Cao Huachun coughed lightly.

"My apologies. I was carried away by your... atmosphere and spoke out of turn."

Silence lingered for a heartbeat longer before he returned to business.

"As for your proposal regarding abdication, I am but a humble eunuch and cannot decide such matters. I will convey your request to His Majesty as quickly as possible. This will require time. I ask that you refrain from rash military action in the meantime."

Flat Rabbit nodded.

"Fine. I will give you time. Go and ask your Emperor."

Cao Huachun hesitated, then added with a trace of sincerity that felt almost misplaced.

"I truly do not wish to correct you, but His Majesty is not yet thirty. He is not an old man."

Flat Rabbit went silent again.

Behind him, Zheng Gouzi burst out laughing.

"You see, Rabbit? When you act unserious, even your enemies stop taking things seriously."

Cao Huachun did not respond to that.

Instead, he asked a different question, one that carried far more weight.

"One more thing. Can your words truly represent the entire Shared Governance faction? Or will Prince Tang have one opinion, the Qin Prince heir another, Chen Qianhu yet another? If your positions are not unified, His Majesty cannot possibly give you a single answer."

The moment the words left his mouth, both Flat Rabbit and Zheng Gouzi broke into grins.

"Well now," Zheng Gouzi said, eyes narrowing with amusement, "even at a time like this, you are still trying to sow discord."

Flat Rabbit tilted his head, studying the man on the wall with renewed interest.

"This eunuch..."

He paused, then chuckled.

"...is kind of interesting."

Chapter 1407 A Throne Without Legitimacy

Even someone like Flat Rabbit, whose brilliance came and went in unpredictable bursts, could grasp one simple truth about the current situation.

The court's only real hope lay in one thing.

That the Shared Governance faction would tear itself apart from within.

Only internal conflict could save the old order now, because without troops, without money, and without grain, Emperor Chongzhen had nothing left to gamble with except other people's divisions.

Anything else was wishful thinking dressed up as strategy.

Flat Rabbit laughed the moment the idea was implied, the sound carrying a mix of mockery and genuine amusement, as though he had just heard someone suggest that fire might politely decide not to burn.

"Cao Huachun," he called out, grinning, "you might as well put those little schemes away. The Shared Governance armies are not going to fight each other."

On the city wall, Eunuch Cao Huachun kept his expression steady, but his thoughts moved along a very different line.

Not fight each other?

Of course they would.

The moment Emperor Chongzhen truly abdicated, the question of who would take the throne would rise immediately, and when that happened, the princes within their ranks would not politely negotiate over tea.

They would compete.

And competition, in times like these, had a way of turning into something far less civilized.

Still, none of that needed to be said aloud.

Cao Huachun gave a brief nod, offered a few polite words, and withdrew at once, moving with surprising speed for a man of his station, as if the conversation itself had already yielded what he needed.

Moments later, he was back inside the palace, standing before Emperor Chongzhen.

"Your Majesty," he said, bowing, "that rebel called Flat Rabbit has made an outrageous demand. He requests that Your Majesty abdicate."

The reaction was immediate.

"Abdicate?" Emperor Chongzhen let out a cold laugh, the word itself seeming to offend something deep within him.

There had never been any real possibility of that.

He was not the kind of man who would quietly step down and hand over the throne, not even in the face of overwhelming pressure, not even when the world seemed determined to close in around him.

Death, perhaps.

Submission, never.

If there was a path forward, it would have to be carved out from the edge of collapse itself.

"Let them speak of abdication all they like," he said slowly. "If I step down, who among them will take the throne?"

Cao Huachun lowered his gaze.

"That remains unclear."

"Then tell me," the Emperor continued, his eyes sharpening, "how are these rebel forces arranged outside the city?"

Cao Huachun answered without hesitation.

"They are deployed separately. Each major force occupies its own position along the walls, their formations distinct and not intermixed. As for Wu Sangui, he has not appeared. His army is hidden far to the north."

At that, something flickered in Emperor Chongzhen's eyes.

Separate.

Not unified.

Each with its own base, its own interests, its own candidate.

A structure like that was not a single block of iron.

It was a collection of blades, all pointed in roughly the same direction for now, but capable of turning on each other the moment their interests diverged.

A thought took shape.

Then another.

By the time he spoke again, there was already a plan forming beneath his words.

"They come from different regions, each backing their own cause. Such a coalition cannot be truly unified. If handled correctly, they may be divided."

He paused briefly, then leaned closer, lowering his voice.

"I have an idea."

Cao Huachun inclined his head.

"Your Majesty?"

The Emperor spoke quietly, outlining his instructions in measured detail, each step designed not to confront the enemy directly, but to shift the ground beneath their feet.

"You will select a few bold eunuchs..."

Night fell.

North of the capital, in the forested hills, Wu Sangui's camp stretched across multiple ridges, its scale evident in the scattered glow of torches that lit the darkness like fallen stars, each flame marking the presence of men who had followed their commander into this carefully chosen position.

Wu Sangui had brought everything.

No reserves held back, no strength concealed.

Fifty thousand troops, hidden yet ready.

A force waiting for the right moment.

Not far beyond the outer perimeter, concealed within a patch of dense woodland, a field reporter crouched with a special operations team, their attention fixed not on the grand scale of the army, but on something far more specific.

They were changing memory cards.

The device beside them, a so-called "portable" camera roughly the size of a door panel, hummed softly as it was prepared for continued recording, its previous storage already filled with footage collected over several days of shadowing Wu Sangui's movements.

There had been no shortage of material.

Enough, in fact, that a single card could no longer contain it.

"Move faster," the reporter whispered, her voice tight with urgency. "We are not missing anything tonight."

Before the team could finish, movement appeared in the distance.

Three figures on horseback.

Eunuchs.

Riding hard toward the base of the hills.

The reporter's eyes lit up instantly.

"This is it," she said under her breath. "Big news. Swap the card, now. Start recording."

The team accelerated, hands moving with practiced precision, and within moments the new card was in place, the camera lifted, and the group slipping silently through the trees until they reached a vantage point close enough to capture everything without being seen.

Through the grass, the lens locked onto the scene.

Wu Sangui's guards stepped forward, blocking the eunuchs' path.

"Who are you? State your business."

The leading eunuch straightened slightly, gathering what remained of his official bearing.

"My name is Zhang Yin. I serve at His Majesty's side."

The guards exchanged glances, then grinned.

"Oh, one of His Majesty's people?" one of them said, the tone light, almost mocking. "And what does someone like you want with our General?"

It was a small shift in attitude.

Once, a palace eunuch would have been enough to make even seasoned soldiers lower their heads.

Now, they joked.

Zhang Yin felt the change as clearly as anyone, but he swallowed his irritation, keeping his voice controlled.

"I carry a secret edict from His Majesty. I request an audience with General Wu."

The guard nodded lazily.

"Wait here."

From their hidden position, the reporter and her team exchanged looks.

"This is huge," one of them whispered. "But if they take him inside, we lose the shot."

"Then we adapt," the reporter replied, though the uncertainty in her eyes suggested she knew how narrow their window was.

And then, unexpectedly, the problem solved itself.

Wu Sangui came out.

He did not summon the eunuchs inward.

He stepped out to meet them personally.

A man in his position understood the value of appearances, especially when the throne he might one day claim had not yet fallen.

Respect, even if only performed, still had its uses.

He approached with a formal gesture.

"Eunuch Zhang," he said, "you honor me with your presence. I regret not receiving you sooner."

Zhang Yin lifted his chin slightly, allowing himself a trace of dignity.

"General Wu, I bring His Majesty's secret edict."

Under normal circumstances, Wu Sangui would have knelt.

Presented himself properly.

Observed the full ritual.

Now, he merely smiled.

"Then let us hear it."

The absence of ceremony hung in the air, unspoken but unmistakable.

Zhang Yin hesitated briefly before continuing.

"This matter is confidential. I ask that you dismiss those around you."

Wu Sangui glanced to either side.

A few soldiers stepped back, leaving only his most trusted guards nearby.

"That will suffice," he said.

Zhang Yin lowered his voice.

"His Majesty is aware that you have aligned yourself, at least in appearance, with the Shared Governance faction. They are now pressuring him to abdicate. Are you aware of this?"

Wu Sangui nodded.

"Of course. However, I am not truly one of them. I have never demanded His Majesty's abdication."

Zhang Yin's expression brightened, as though reassured.

"As expected, General Wu remains loyal."

Inside, Wu Sangui almost laughed.

Loyalty was a flexible concept.

But he let the moment pass.

Zhang Yin leaned in slightly.

"His Majesty is surrounded on all sides and understands that his position may not be preserved. He has considered abdication. However, he does not wish the realm to fall into the hands of... lesser men. After careful thought, he believes that if the throne must be yielded, it should go to a man of true capability. A hero."

Wu Sangui's eyes sharpened.

Zhang Yin continued.

"A man such as yourself."

There it was.

The hook.

Wu Sangui did not react immediately, though something beneath the surface had already begun to shift.

"Is that so?" he asked lightly.

Zhang Yin produced a document.

"His Majesty's personal edict. You may read it."

Wu Sangui took it, holding it up to the torchlight, scanning the contents carefully.

The wording was, as expected, layered with formality, circling around the central idea before arriving at it.

The Emperor acknowledged the instability of his position.

Rejected the legitimacy of the other claimants.

And offered something extraordinary.

If Wu Sangui could defeat the other rebel forces, the throne would be his.

Wu Sangui lowered the document slowly.

Inside, satisfaction rose like a tide.

This was perfect.

He could seize the throne by force, of course.

But that would forever stain his rule.

A ruler who takes power without legitimacy earns a name that history never forgets.

A throne taken improperly remains improper, no matter how firmly it is held.

But this...

This changed everything.

With this edict, the narrative shifted.

He would not be a usurper.

He would be chosen.

Sanctioned.

Legitimized.

He looked up at Zhang Yin, a faint smile forming.

"Return and inform His Majesty," he said, his tone calm, almost respectful, "that I will handle the rest."

He paused, then added, the meaning unmistakable.

"I will eliminate the others."

Chapter 1408 The Emperor's Secret Edict

At the very same moment Wu Sangui received that carefully crafted imperial secret edict, the capital had already begun moving in quieter, subtler ways, as if the entire city had suddenly become a chessboard where every piece started plotting for itself.

Emperor Chongzhen, cornered on all sides with no troops, no money, and no reliable allies left, still refused to give up the one thing he had never lacked, which was the ability to scheme even when the situation was already beyond saving.

So while one messenger rode north to tempt ambition, another chose a far less dignified route.

From the western wall of the capital, a eunuch lowered himself down on a rope under the cover of night, robes brushing against cold stone, movements careful yet lacking any real elegance, landing on the ground before quickly straightening his posture as if that alone could restore the dignity of his position.

This man was Eunuch Wang Dehua.

And tonight, he was not just a messenger, but a gambler carrying the Emperor's last desperate wager.

Not far ahead lay the Shaanxi camp of the Shared Governance faction, the forces that supported Qin Prince Heir Zhu Cunji.

The camp was quiet.

Too quiet.

Not the loose silence of disorganized rebels, but a controlled stillness that spoke of discipline, the kind that made even an outsider instinctively lower his voice.

Wang Dehua slowed down, eyes narrowing slightly as he observed the neat arrangement of tents, the orderly patrol routes, and the complete absence of chaos.

This was not what he expected.

Zhu Cunji was supposed to be a useless princeling, a spoiled noble with no real ability, yet the army under his banner looked anything but incompetent.

Before he could think further, a voice cut through the darkness.

"Who goes there?"

A sentry had already spotted him.

Wang Dehua quickly composed himself and stepped forward.

"I am Wang Dehua, I serve His Majesty."

The guard let out a short laugh, not even bothering to hide the mockery.

"We came here to drag His Majesty off the throne, and you came here to introduce yourself?"

Wang Dehua forced a stiff smile.

"I am here to see Qin Prince Heir Zhu Cunji, I carry a secret imperial edict."

The guard tilted his head, clearly amused.

"At this point, who still listens to edicts?"

Even so, he waved him in.

"Fine, I will report it, might as well see how this plays out."

Wang Dehua was led into the camp, and the deeper he went, the more uneasy he became.

Everything was orderly.

Everything was controlled.

Everything felt... prepared.

This was not a mob.

This was an army.

By the time he reached the central tent, his earlier assumptions about Zhu Cunji had already begun to crack.

Then he stepped inside, and whatever remained of those assumptions shattered completely.

Because the man he came to see was standing there in loose nightwear, holding a pig-bristle toothbrush, calmly brushing his teeth like a man who had absolutely no concern for imperial urgency.

Foam clung to the corner of his mouth as he spoke, words coming out in broken rhythm.

"Wang... Gong... Gong... I was just about... to sleep... brushing my teeth... you came at a bad time... sorry about that..."

Wang Dehua froze for a moment, then felt a surge of irritation rising in his chest.

He had come here carrying the Emperor's secret edict, and this man was brushing his teeth.

Brushing.

His.

Teeth.

So that slogan about "No Cavities" was actually real.

Zhu Cunji rinsed his mouth, spat the foam aside, and finally spoke clearly.

"Wang Gonggong, do you want to try this toothpaste, it is called Leng Suan Ling, a heavenly product, it solves sensitivity, cold, sour, sweet, everything. If you want, I will give you a discount, only fifty taels a box."

Wang Dehua's expression stiffened.

"You are staring at me like that for what," Zhu Cunji continued casually, "just trust me, I do not run dishonest ads."

Wang Dehua almost lost control right there.

It took visible effort for him to suppress his anger before finally getting to the point.

"Ahem, Your Highness, I am here with His Majesty's secret edict."

Zhu Cunji raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Wang Dehua pulled out the scroll.

Zhu Cunji took it and read.

The content was, as expected, full of empty words, but the meaning was simple.

Emperor Chongzhen admitted that he could no longer hold the throne, but he did not want the empire to fall into the hands of outsiders like Flat Rabbit, Chen Qianhu, or Wu Sangui, and after looking around, he had concluded that among all members of the imperial clan, only Zhu Cunji was worthy of inheriting the throne.

As long as he eliminated the other rebel forces, the empire would be his.

Zhu Cunji almost laughed.

What nonsense is this, you think I would believe that?

But outwardly, he showed nothing but delight.

"Ah, many thanks to His Majesty, I never expected that he thought so highly of me, this is truly touching."

Wang Dehua nodded eagerly.

"His Majesty hopes that the Zhu family's empire can continue to flourish in your hands."

Zhu Cunji smiled.

"Of course, I will do my best."

Wang Dehua finally relaxed.

Good.

The mission was a success.

At the same time, in another camp, Tang Prince Zhu Yujian was also reading a similar edict.

The same tone.

The same promise.

The same request.

Eliminate the others, and the throne would be his.

Zhu Yujian let out a quiet laugh.

"So now you remember extinguishing my loyalty back then."

Elsewhere, Chen Qianhu held his own copy, reading through it with a calm expression.

The Emperor admitted that none of the imperial clan were capable, then turned to praise Chen Qianhu's military achievements, suggesting that perhaps the empire would be safer in his hands.

Chen Qianhu lowered the letter and snorted.

"So you praise my ability, but not my character."

"Fine, at least you are honest."

And then, in the southern camp, things went in an entirely different direction.

Flat Rabbit held the edict in his hands, rotating it left and right, upside down and sideways, before suddenly lighting up.

"I recognize this character, so this side must be the top."

The eunuch standing beside him fell silent.

"Do you want me to read it for you?"

Flat Rabbit nodded.

"Yes, this is clearly advanced literature."

The eunuch took a breath and read aloud.

"The Emperor says he knows he must abdicate, but he does not trust the princes or generals, they do not understand the suffering of the common people. Only you, Flat Rabbit, come from the grassroots and understand the people. If you eliminate the other factions, the throne will be yours."

Flat Rabbit nodded seriously.

"I see."

Then, without warning, he turned and punched Zheng Gouzi straight in the face.

A loud thud echoed.

Zheng Gouzi dropped to the ground.

"What the hell was that for?"

Flat Rabbit cracked his knuckles.

"I am eliminating rival factions, starting with you."

Zheng Gouzi exploded with anger.

"Are you insane, come on then!"

He jumped up and threw a punch.

Flat Rabbit immediately countered, and the two started trading blows right in front of the stunned eunuch.

The eunuch stood there, completely frozen.

This worked? That fast?

He instinctively took a step back.

Then another.

Because the situation was clearly escalating into something that could very easily involve collateral damage.

Punches flew back and forth, fists colliding with dull thuds, until after several exchanges, Flat Rabbit let out a cry and was knocked to the ground, receiving two more hits before raising his hands in surrender.

"I give up, I give up, spare me."

Zheng Gouzi finally stopped.

Flat Rabbit climbed back to his feet, rubbing his bruises, then turned toward the eunuch with a completely serious expression.

"You saw that, right, I cannot even beat this guy, dealing with the other factions would be extremely difficult, basically a near-death task."

The eunuch nodded slowly, unsure where this was going.

Flat Rabbit continued.

"If the Emperor wants me to do something this dangerous, the reward should be increased."

The eunuch blinked.

"Increased?"

Flat Rabbit pointed at Zheng Gouzi.

"Giving me the throne alone is not enough."

"Give him one too."

The eunuch went completely silent.

Flat Rabbit crossed his arms, fully convinced of his own logic.

"One empire, two emperors, that sounds fair."

Chapter 1409 Count Me In Too

By the time the fifth watch arrived, Zhu Youjian was still wide awake.

Outside, the night had sunk into complete darkness. Inside the imperial study, a few dim lamps struggled to hold their ground, casting a weak and flickering light that barely kept the shadows from swallowing the room whole.

Standing nearby, Cao Huachun and Wang Chengen kept him company. One emperor and two eunuchs, all waiting in silence, none of them showing the slightest intention of resting.

Time stretched on, slow and suffocating.

No one could tell how long had passed before hurried footsteps finally broke the stillness.

It was Wang Dehua, the first to return.

"Your Majesty," he reported, bowing quickly, "Zhu Cunji has agreed. He says he will wipe out the other rebel forces without fail."

Zhu Youjian's eyes immediately lit up.

"Good," he said with a sharp grin. "I knew it. That useless fool is the easiest to trick."

Not long after, another eunuch rushed in.

"Your Majesty, Chen Qianhu has also agreed. As expected of a military man, simple-minded. He read your letter and believed every word. He says he will engage the other rebels head-on."

Zhu Youjian's smile deepened, satisfaction creeping across his face.

Then came another report.

"Your Majesty, Zhu Youzhong has taken the bait. He says he will lead the Henan army and deal with the other rebels."

Another voice followed right behind.

"Your Majesty, Zhu Yujian was deeply moved. He says you finally understand his march to the capital to aid you. He feels greatly reassured."

"And Zhu Youxu has agreed as well. He will lead the Shandong and Anlu forces to eliminate the other rebels."

"Wu Sangui has also fallen for it. He promises to help Your Majesty deal with the rebels and insists he has nothing to do with the Public Governance faction."

The reports stacked up one after another, each one sweeter than the last, until the final eunuch stepped forward with a slightly awkward expression.

"Your Majesty... Flat Rabbit... acted immediately after hearing your message. However, he was defeated on the spot by a bandit leader named Zheng Gouzi."

Zhu Youjian paused for a brief moment, then waved it off as if it were nothing worth dwelling on.

"Minor issue."

His mood soared once more.

Everything else was progressing perfectly.

Perfectly.

They would fight. They had to fight.

Once those rebels turned on each other and descended into chaos, it would buy him the time he desperately needed. And if time could be secured, then perhaps Lu Xiangsheng would manage to return with reinforcements.

At that thought, Zhu Youjian frowned slightly.

Where exactly was Lu Xiangsheng right now?

No answer came.

With rebel forces surrounding the capital on all sides, no information could pass through. Messages could neither leave nor enter. The city had become a lonely island stranded on land.

After a brief hesitation, he forced himself to let it go.

It did not matter.

As long as the rebels fought among themselves, that alone was enough to put him at ease.

The tension that had been coiled tightly in his chest finally loosened.

At last, he allowed himself to rest.

He leaned back against the dragon throne, closed his eyes, and slipped into sleep almost instantly.

That night, he dreamed.

In his dream, all the rebel forces had fallen into brutal infighting, tearing each other apart until none remained. Corpses littered the land, and not a single enemy was left alive.

Then he rose above it all, called out to the world, and the people returned to him once more. They acknowledged him as their emperor again, and no one dared to call him incompetent anymore.

Even the Manchus of Liaodong bowed their heads in submission.

His Great Ming entered a glorious revival, a golden age unlike any before.

Just as the dream reached its most satisfying moment, dawn arrived.

The moment Zhu Youjian stirred, Wang Chengen was already by his side.

"Your Majesty, you're awake. Would you like to wash your face?"

"No time for that."

Zhu Youjian sprang up in one swift motion, his robe barely settling as he demanded, "What is the situation outside?"

"At first light, the rebel forces began moving," Wang Chengen replied immediately. "The eastern and western armies are both heading south. It seems they intend to gather in one place."

Zhu Youjian's eyes gleamed with excitement.

"They're gathering to fight each other, aren't they? Like a nest of venomous insects, ready to tear one another apart."

He did not hesitate for a second.

"Prepare at once. I will personally go to the city wall and watch this unfold."

This was no ordinary event.

This was a grand spectacle.

Several princes were among the participants, which made it perfectly appropriate for him, as emperor, to attend. Without them, he might have needed to maintain some dignity and keep his distance, but now there was no such concern.

He wanted to see it with his own eyes.

The eunuchs hurried to make preparations.

Before long, Zhu Youjian quietly left the palace in a small sedan chair, slipping through hidden routes under tight escort. By the time he reached the southern city wall, he had already composed himself, ready to watch the performance in secret.

He intended to observe first, then reveal himself at the perfect moment and astonish them all.

Seated atop the southern gate tower, he looked out over the battlefield.

What he saw made his pulse quicken.

From every direction, the rebel armies were converging toward the southern gate.

The Public Governance faction had only a single force stationed there, the combined armies of Shandong and Anlu, supporting Zhu Youxu, the Prince of De whose fief lay in Jinan.

Among them stood a figure Zhu Youjian recognized clearly.

Shi Kefa.

He had once believed this man to be loyal.

And yet now, that same man had brought troops to support a rival prince.

A traitor.

A white-eyed wolf.

Still, Zhu Youjian found a certain grim satisfaction in the thought that these so-called loyalists would soon destroy each other.

From the east, a large banner came into view, bearing bold characters that read:

"Representative of the Jiangnan People, Zhu Yujian."

From the west came another:

"Representative of the Shaanxi People, Zhu Cunji."

From the southwest:

"Representative of the Shanxi People, Chen Qianhu."

Soon after:

"Representative of the Henan People, Zhu Youzhong."

And then:

"Representative of the Sichuan People, Flat Rabbit."

One after another, they arrived.

Zhu Youjian could barely contain his excitement.

"They're all here," he muttered, his voice trembling with anticipation. "Now comes the real show. A brutal internal slaughter. Let every last traitor die."

Yet just as the moment seemed to reach its peak, something unexpected happened.

The advancing armies slowed, then came to a complete stop. None of them made any move to charge, and no clash broke out between them. Instead, from each army, a single leader stepped forward and began walking toward the same spot, gathering roughly two arrow-shots away from the southern gate.

Zhu Youjian frowned, a faint unease creeping into his chest.

What happened next only deepened that feeling.

Rather than preparing for battle, those leaders casually took their seats as if they had agreed upon this beforehand. Small tables and stools were brought out and arranged neatly, and before long, a steaming hot pot was placed right in the center.

The fragrant steam rose into the morning air, spreading slowly as more people gathered around, forming a full circle. The scene looked less like a battlefield and more like a group of old acquaintances meeting for a meal.

Zhu Youjian's eyes widened.

What... was this?

Zhu Cunji picked up a thin slice of beef, dipped it into the boiling broth, swirled it for a moment, then pulled it out, coated it in sauce, and tossed it into his mouth.

"Now this," he said with clear satisfaction, "is proper food."

Only then did he reach into his robe, pull out an imperial edict, and place it casually on the table.

"Take a look, everyone. I received this last night. Zhu Youjian wants me to kill all of you so he can make me emperor."

"What a coincidence," Zhu Youzhong replied, calmly cooking a piece of tripe. "I got one too."

He set his own edict beside it.

"Same instructions. Kill all of you."

Chen Qianhu burst out laughing as he slapped his edict down on the table with a loud bang. The force nearly sent the broth spilling over the edge, causing everyone around the pot to lean back at the same time.

"Careful!" someone shouted. "You trying to scald us?"

Flat Rabbit glanced at the pile of edicts, then spoke in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"This emperor... not very honest."

He paused for half a heartbeat, then added,

"Let's beat him up."

"Agreed," Zhu Yujian said immediately. "I've wanted to do that for a long time. I raised troops to help him fight off the Manchus, and what did I get in return? Punishment. It really feels like offering kindness and getting slapped in the face."

"Then it's settled," someone else added.

"Let's beat him up."

The agreement came effortlessly.

Not a single voice objected.

On the city wall, Zhu Youjian sat completely frozen.

His mind struggled to process what he was seeing.

This was not how things were supposed to go.

"Why?" he muttered, his voice trembling. "Why aren't they fighting? Why are they not turning on each other?"

His breathing grew uneven, panic slowly creeping in.

"Don't they want the throne? Not a single ambitious man among them? Impossible. That's impossible. There must be at least one. There has to be."

Right there, in front of him, within clear sight of the city wall, they sat together, happily eating hot pot while calmly discussing how to deal with him.

Chapter 1410 The Playback Device Is Coming Soon

Just as Zhu Youjian was beginning to lose his composure, something happened that made the situation even worse.

From the north, a woman came riding in at speed. She was strikingly beautiful, dressed in a fitted Jianghu outfit that allowed for easy movement, giving her the air of a wandering heroine. Behind her followed a small special operations squad, and trailing them was a large cart carrying a strange object shaped like a door panel.

The rebel leaders, who had been gathered around the hot pot, immediately recognized her and broke into smiles.

"Well, well, the war correspondent is here."

Zhu Youjian, however, had never seen her before. He turned toward the eunuchs beside him, his brows tightening.

"Who is she?"

The eunuchs exchanged glances, then shook their heads in unison.

"No idea, Your Majesty."

The woman dismounted smoothly and approached the group, offering a polite bow that was neither overly humble nor disrespectful.

"Gentlemen, it seems everyone has gathered here today. Even His Majesty is present. This is quite the scene."

As she spoke, she cast a glance toward the capital.

The city walls were packed to the brim. Guards, eunuchs, officials, wealthy merchants, and even civilian militias had all gathered, their figures layered upon one another until the battlements looked ready to overflow.

A faint smile appeared on her lips.

For a journalist, there was nothing better than a moment like this. The larger the spectacle, the more explosive the story.

She pulled out a metal loudspeaker and aimed it toward the southern gate. When she spoke, her voice carried clearly, steady and measured, every word delivered with practiced precision.

"Dear viewers, over the past several days, our channel has been secretly following Liaodong militia commander Wu Sangui, documenting his actions. We have now obtained substantial evidence of his crimes."

The moment her words reached the city, confusion spread instantly.

Zhu Youjian frowned.

"Tracking... filming? What does that even mean?"

The eunuchs could only shake their heads again. None of them had ever heard of such a thing.

The people of the capital were no different. Without any exposure to Gao Family News, they had no frame of reference for what they were hearing. Only a few among the crowd, such as Liang Shixian and Sun Chuanting, exchanged knowing glances but chose to remain silent.

The reporter continued without pause.

"However, the capital currently lacks playback equipment, so these valuable recordings may need to wait..."

Before she could finish, the embroidered figure on her chest suddenly spoke.

"There is no need to wait. My true form has already arrived above the capital. A playback device will be delivered shortly."

The reaction was immediate.

"The Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived!"

Excitement surged through the crowd like a rising tide.

The older generation from Gao Family Village understood well that the Dao Xuan Tianzun's true form usually operated within a limited range. Whether out of habit or simple laziness, he rarely traveled far from the village, remaining within a broad circular area centered around it.

Beyond that range, his protection weakened, and people had to act with far greater caution. Cheng Xu knew this especially well. The moment he stepped outside that invisible boundary, he would start seeing his great-grandmother hovering above him, a rather unsettling reminder of his situation.

Because of this, most people had assumed that the Dao Xuan Tianzun would never bother coming all the way to the capital.

And yet now, he had.

Far above, unseen by ordinary eyes, Li Daoxuan allowed himself a faint smile. The salvation index had been rising steadily, and the capital had only just entered his field of perception. Since the opportunity had presented itself, he saw no reason not to give the people below a proper demonstration.

The embroidered Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke again.

"Show them the footage as it is. There is no need for editing."

The reporter bowed her head slightly.

"As you command."

Outside the sandbox world, Li Daoxuan lifted the lid and carefully lowered a tablet device toward the open space outside the southern gate.

After a brief pause, he adjusted his plan and brought down a second device as well. The two tablets were placed back-to-back, one facing the capital and the other facing the rebel forces, then quickly synchronized so that both would display the same images at the same time.

To the soldiers of the Public Governance faction, the sight of this massive "immortal treasure mirror" descending from the sky felt almost routine.

To the people within the capital, however, it was a completely different story.

Gasps erupted across the walls, followed by a wave of chaos as the crowd reacted in shock.

The reporter raised her loudspeaker once more.

"This object is known as the Immortal Treasure Mirror. It can display scenes from the past and future, preserving all images within it. It is a divine artifact bestowed from the heavens, and you have just witnessed its descent. There is no need to doubt its authenticity."

The effect was immediate and overwhelming.

Officials, soldiers, and commoners alike burst into an uproar. Some trembled where they stood, while others felt their knees weaken, as if they might drop to the ground at any moment.

Seated atop the city wall, Zhu Youjian felt his entire body go numb.

Deep within his mind, a voice screamed uncontrollably.

Great Ancestor Jiajing, if you can hear this, climb out of your grave and take a look. The immortal you spent your entire life searching for is standing right outside the southern gate.

The reporter retrieved a storage card from her recording device, its size so large it resembled a small board. With a crisp motion, she inserted it into the tablet, then set up a simple stand and began operating the device with swift, practiced movements.

It did not take long before the footage was ready.

Both synchronized screens lit up at the same time, displaying identical images to the capital and the forces outside.

What appeared first was a small village.

A militia soldier on the wall immediately recognized it.

"That's our Li Village."

Before anyone could react, the scene shifted into motion. Soldiers rushed into the village, looting everything in sight while the villagers cried out in desperation. Their pleas went unanswered, and in a matter of moments, the entire place was stripped clean.

The soldiers returned laughing to their command banner, where the words "Liaodong Militia Commander, Wu Sangui" stood clearly visible.

Unlike the other forces of the Public Governance faction, whose banners all bore titles like "Representative of the People," Wu Sangui's banner was blunt and direct. Just from that alone, it was obvious he was not aligned with the others.

The perspective of the footage drew closer, steadily narrowing in until Wu Sangui's face filled the screen in a clear close-up.

At that moment, the militia soldier who had spoken earlier could no longer hold himself back.

"Damn it, that bastard Wu Sangui looted my village. My uncle and my second uncle were both robbed, and one of those soldiers even kicked my aunt. I swear I'll settle this with him."

Zhu Youjian watched in silence, his expression stiff and unreadable.

He had seen countless memorials reporting that soldiers plundered civilians, but those reports had always been nothing more than cold lines of text, too distant and abstract to leave a real impression.

What he was seeing now was entirely different.

The impact struck directly.

There was no distance left to hide behind.

The first clip came to an end, but before the weight of it could settle, another began playing immediately.

This time it was a different village, yet the pattern remained unchanged. Soldiers poured in, stripped the place of everything of value, and left behind only ruin and grief.

Then came another recording.

And then another.

One after another, the scenes unfolded with relentless consistency, as if the entire stretch from Shanhaiguan to the capital had been reduced to a single, continuous trail of plunder, with no exceptions and no mercy.

As the footage continued, the mood within the capital shifted.

Anger began to rise.

For many in the city, these were not distant events happening to strangers. They were reminders of homes lost, families scattered, and lives uprooted. Watching it all replayed so clearly made the pain feel immediate again.

Zhu Youjian's face darkened as fury surged within him.

"These soldiers are nothing but bandits in uniform. Wu Sangui is no better than a thug."

Just as his anger reached its peak, a quiet voice sounded from among the officials behind him.

"Your Majesty, most of our troops behave like this. It is not only Wu Sangui. Many generals are the same."

The words were soft, almost hesitant, but they landed with undeniable weight.

Zhu Youjian froze, then slowly turned his head, his gaze sharp.

"Who said that?"

His eyes swept across the gathered officials.

"Step forward."