

## I. Dynasty 871

### Chapter 871

“This Li Chuyuan seems to have finally come to his senses.”

Xiao Ming chuckled after reading Li Chuyuan’s memorial.

At this moment, he was in the Grand Secretariat’s office. All nine Grand Secretaries were present. Seeing Xiao Ming laugh so happily, Pang Yukun asked with a smile, “Your Majesty is so pleased. It seems there’s good news again.”

“That’s for sure. Li Chuyuan wants to purchase more cannons, firearms, and ammunition from us, and the scale is beyond imagination. Because he lifted the State of Chu’s firearms ban, the powerful families in Jiangnan are all craning their necks, eager to acquire firearms to arm their private armies,” Xiao Ming said.

“The firearms ban is lifted!” Pang Yukun was somewhat surprised. “It seems Li Chuyuan has finally seen through the Sima family. He thought the Sima family would help him, but he never expected that the Sima family had malicious intentions all along, did he?”

Fei Ji, who knew the Sima family best, said, “I, your old servant, once said that if the Prince of Chu died, only the Sima family could seize the State of Chu. Now, it seems it’s about to come true.”

Xiao Ming nodded slightly, “If that’s the case, I have even more reason to send troops. But before that, I need to think about how to make another huge profit.”

Everyone laughed upon hearing this. Zhan Xingchang said, "During the northern war, we confiscated many export-model cannons from the feudal lords. We can seize this opportunity to sell them. And when the first batch of cannons was manufactured, there were barrel explosions due to material issues. Since they want better cannons, let's sell these soon-to-be-obsolete cannons to them."

"However, the firearms captured from Goryeo have already been sold to them. Now, if they still want more, the military machinery department will have to produce them," Yang Chengye said thoughtfully.

"That's fine. The structure of matchlock guns and flintlock guns is simple and easy to produce. We can select a batch of old workers from the military machinery department and have them, along with some new workers, restart the phased-out production lines. This can completely meet their demands," Xiao Ming said.

"If that's the case, I will immediately order the mobilization of resources for production. We will make another huge profit before heading south." Pang Yukun was very excited.

Clearly, the wealthy south would bring them even more war profits. With these profits, northern industrialization and railway construction would accelerate again.

They would have ample military funds to attack Japan and stabilize the north.

Having settled this matter, the entire Grand Secretariat began to operate. The nine Grand Secretaries, led by Pang Yukun, began to coordinate this arms trade in all aspects.

And the military machinery department, having received the order, quickly drew out a portion of old workers. Soon, the flintlock gun production lines were fully restored. Flintlock guns and matchlock guns came off the production lines one by one.

From June to October, for four months, the imperial court was in a frenzy of arms trade.

To their delight, they truly made a huge profit this time.

Besides the Prince of Chu's regular purchases, the southern powerful families showed their generosity this time. Now, Xiao Ming finally understood the phenomenon of a wealthy populace but a poor nation in the late Ming Dynasty.

These southern gentry and powerful families sold firearms as extravagantly as contemporary Shanxi coal bosses sold houses. Basically, they could produce as much as these powerful families could consume.

To avoid affecting the arms trade, he even postponed his southern expedition by a month. The arms trade only cooled down in November.

At this time, the silver, gold, tea, porcelain, silk, and ore transported from the south already totaled sixty million taels, approximately two hundred million Golden Dragon Coins.

The capital spent on manufacturing weapons in Qingzhou over the years had been fully recovered, and they even earned several times the exorbitant profits.

However, Xiao Ming was still not satisfied with this figure, because he knew very well that even so, it was merely squeezing a small portion of the powerful families' wealth. The wealthy southern powerful families still had much more to extract.

And this final blow would be dealt by war.

On November 5th, as the weather in Qingzhou Province gradually turned cold, two divisions equipped with Falcon Rifles departed from Qingzhou by train to Dengzhou, and then embarked on ships from Dengzhou to Jinling Province, heading south.

“Although the arms trade is very profitable, attacking the south this time will also be difficult. I hope the Falcon Rifle can truly perform well.”

Niu Ben was somewhat worried on the train.

This time, Xiao Ming, along with his consorts and imperial heirs, also planned to go to Jinling Province. Now that the Grand Secretariat was operating smoothly and government affairs were handled in an orderly fashion, he didn't need to constantly stay in Qingzhou Province.

So, taking advantage of the trip south, he also planned to tour Jinling City for a while. At the same time, he would inspect Jinling Province. This used to be the Prince of Wei's feudal state, and there were many former Wei loyalists remaining.

Both Pang Yukun and Fei Ji found this place a headache.

“Why worry, General? The powerful families in Jiangnan are buying weapons and cursing me as foolish. Do you also think so?” Xiao Ming chuckled.

Niu Ben's face turned pale. "I, your old servant, would never dare."

Xiao Ming smiled. He said, "Actually, both the powerful families and the merchants' council know very well that I will march south. That's why they are scrambling to buy firearms. For them, I know very well that buying weapons means arming the enemy. But what they don't understand is that without an industrial foundation, the firearms in their hands will quickly become mere sticks."

"Sticks?" Niu Ben was a bit puzzled.

Xiao Ming continued, "I have already ordered Yue Yun to blockade the Great Yu Empire's maritime routes. Neither Britain nor France can now resupply them with ammunition by sea. At the same time, I have ordered the Yizhou provincial office to prohibit the sale of saltpeter to the south. This way, once they run out of ammunition, what use are their cannons and firearms?"

Niu Ben suddenly understood. "I, your humble general, see now. Li Chuyuan is deliberately fighting a prolonged war with the merchants' council. This way, their ammunition will be consumed quickly. By the time we act, they won't have much left."

"Precisely. To ensure Li Chuyuan continues to stir up trouble, I even promised him wealth and glory for the rest of his life." Xiao Ming looked south. After the officials he dispatched arrived in Lin'an, Li Chuyuan secretly made this request.

The reason he told Qingzhou officials about this was that he dared not trust anyone in Lin'an.

Niu Ben's face relaxed, while Luo Quan was full of confidence. For him, the Great Yu Empire had been divided for too long. Now, they were finally going to complete the great task of unification.

Three days later, Xiao Ming arrived in Jinling Province.

Returning once more, Xiao Ming found that it had not only recovered its prosperity but had even surpassed its former glory. Through the harbor, he could even see plumes of smoke drifting in the sky, a typical sign of steam engine factories.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming couldn't help but sigh with emotion. This Jinling City indeed possessed too many advantages.

However, there were even more geographically advantageous places in Jiangnan, such as the Songjiang area, which was contemporary Shanghai. And this was also the first target of this southern expedition.

Once this place was captured and a harbor established, supplies from Qingzhou Province could be directly transported to Songjiang, saving the trouble of transshipment from Jinling Province.

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"Huben 1st Army Commander Lu Fei greets Your Majesty!"

In the Jinling Province Grand Camp, Lu Fei gave Xiao Ming a military salute. After occupying Jianzhou, Lu Fei handed Jianzhou City over to Lei Ming, and he and Luo Xin led their respective armies back to their garrisons.

According to the original intention of the military reform, each army corps had its own area of responsibility, much like contemporary military regions, each with its own operational objectives.

During the northern expedition, Lei Ming could not cope with the barbarians alone, which was why Lu Fei and Luo Xin went north. After the war ended, Lei Ming's army corps could defend the six cities, so Lu Fei and Luo Xin led their troops back. Everyone performed their respective duties.

Now, with the war against the south about to begin, Lu Fei would naturally undertake the main offensive task. At the same time, he also transferred Luo Xin's three divisions. Thus, Jinling City now had a total of 60,000 men.

"Rise!" Xiao Ming looked at Lu Fei, and at the same time stopped Luo Xin's polite formality. He said, "How are your preparations coming along?"

"Reporting to Your Majesty, everything is ready. We can cross the river south at any time," Luo Xin said with great confidence.

Xiao Ming nodded. He looked at the soldiers who were lined up in two rows to welcome him. These soldiers held their Falcon breech-loading rifles at an angle. Hanging from their bodies were circular pouches, each with a small hole, containing paper cartridges.

Each cartridge belt held a full one hundred and twenty rounds. During battle, soldiers could quickly take cartridges from their hanging pouches and fire from any position.

In addition, the soldiers' cloth shoes had been replaced by black leather boots, and steel helmets were worn on their heads. Coupled with their dark green tunics, their military appearance was very imposing.

Xiao Ming's smile grew richer as his gaze swept over the soldiers. He had actually conceived the idea of steel helmets long ago, and the military machinery department had also been designing steel helmets.

However, in the northern expedition against the barbarians, an army that basically had no firearms, steel helmets were not necessary. But it was different for the southern army. This southern expedition, he would probably face large-scale firearm combat.

Therefore, while producing Falcon firearms, he also required the production of steel helmets. This type of steel helmet had a curved surface. If an enemy bullet did not hit the center of the steel helmet, due to its curved surface, it would mostly deflect, which was his reason for equipping steel helmets, as it could reduce soldier casualties.

Coupled with the current progress in Qingzhou Province's medical science, if not hit in the head, the casualties caused by the current level of firearms would be fewer than the wounded.

After inspecting the Jinling Province Grand Camp, Xiao Ming composed himself. Everyone went together to the General Staff Department in the grand camp. A sand table of the Jiangnan region had already been created there.

Through the sand table, they could clearly see the situation of Li Chuyuan and the merchants' council.

"Your Majesty, after four months of fierce fighting, Li Chuyuan captured Wuxian. However, although the merchants' council lost Wuxian, it consumed a large amount of Li Chuyuan's forces. The State of Chu lost forty thousand men here, almost half its strength. Now Li Chuyuan is planning a direct attack on Suzhou."

Lu Fei pointed to the battlefield area near Suzhou, explaining the current situation to Xiao Ming.

After a pause, Lu Fei continued, "Besides Wuxian, Jiaying and Songjiang were also attacked by Li Chuyuan, but Li Chuyuan suffered defeats in both places."

Luo Quan frowned. "It seems these two factions are indeed evenly matched. But what does this mean?"

As he spoke, Luo Quan pointed to areas like Jianning and Guangzhou.

Luo Xin said, "This is news just sent by the secret guards. In these places, merchants are responding to the merchants' council, and they are now organizing local militias to contend with the powerful families."

"This Cao family indeed has some capability. However, Jianning and Guangzhou are commercially prosperous, with many wealthy merchants. It's not surprising that they support the merchants' council," Xiao Ming said calmly. "But if that's the case, we must prioritize eliminating the merchants' council, after all, the establishment of the merchants' council is intricately linked with Western forces."

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "I have already discussed this privately with Li Chuyuan. According to our timeline, he will invite me tomorrow to assist him in suppressing the rebellion. In my opinion, we and Li Chuyuan will first eliminate the merchants' council forces, and then we will seize the opportunity to deal with the powerful families of Jiangnan."

Niu Ben and the others nodded. This was their strategy for this southern expedition: pulling one over to their side and fighting the other, ultimately devouring those who remained.

Having settled this matter, everyone returned to prepare.

Xiao Ming, meanwhile, moved into the Jinling Province temporary imperial residence with his consorts. Immediately, five thousand imperial guards from Qingzhou Province meticulously protected his residence.

The next day, Li Chuyuan, as agreed, arrived in Jinling Province with Sima Hao.

Unlike his usual arrogant and domineering demeanor, the current Li Chuyuan looked disheveled. Sima Hao, though dressed neatly, clearly showed fatigue on his face.

For them, life was getting harder and harder. The State of Chu was now embroiled in war everywhere. Powerful families and merchants were fighting fiercely, and the common people had also joined the two factions, attacking each other.

He was now very glad he had purchased many firearms from Xiao Ming. Otherwise, their family property would have long been seized by the rebels instigated by the merchants' council.

Moreover, as the war progressed, although they seemed evenly matched on the surface, they were gradually losing their popular support.

Many common people, who had been oppressed and bullied by powerful families for hundreds of years, sided with the merchants' council. If this continued, they would only face defeat.

So, Sima Hao had no choice but to abandon his persistence and agree to Li Chuyuan seeking help from Xiao Ming. For him, now, as long as the merchants' council could be completely eliminated, everything else could be discussed later.

"Your Majesty..."

In the main hall of the temporary imperial residence, Li Chuyuan "plop" knelt down upon seeing Xiao Ming. Then he crawled to Xiao Ming, tightly embracing Xiao Ming's leg, "The State of Chu faces this great calamity. I hope Your Majesty can save your humble prince, and it would not be in vain for my humble prince's loyalty to Your Majesty."

Xiao Ming's face showed a look of pity, but in his heart, he was already blooming with joy. He cooperated with Li Chuyuan and said, "The State of Chu is a feudal state of the Great Yu Empire. Now that the State of Chu is in trouble, the imperial court naturally cannot stand idly by. After all, the State of Chu is also territory of the Great Yu Empire!"

Although Sima Hao was unwilling in his heart, having to ask Xiao Ming for help, he could only nod in submission.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. If Your Majesty hadn't intervened, your humble prince might have already been in mortal danger," Li Chuyuan said.

Xiao Ming nodded. He seized the opportunity and said, "If that's the case, then you will remain in Jinling Province. Although the merchants' council is powerful, it is no match for me. You will be safe here."

Li Chuyuan breathed a slight sigh of relief. This was what he came for. This was also their agreed plan: as long as he remained in Jinling Province, his life would be safe.

And Xiao Ming could then use him to issue orders to the State of Chu, killing two birds with one stone.

Sima Hao's mouth hung open in astonishment. He hadn't expected such a turn of events. He only felt as if the sky had collapsed.

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"Your Highness, absolutely not! The State of Chu still has many important matters requiring your judgment! How can Your Highness remain in Jinling Province?"

The atmosphere in the main hall froze for a moment. Sima Hao shouted anxiously.

"Presumptuous! Is this a place for you to shout?" No sooner had Sima Hao's voice fallen than Qian Dafu immediately rebuked him sternly.

Sima Hao's mind was instantly shaken. He then realized that the person before him was the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. And he, having lived in Lin'an for many years, had no respect for the imperial family at all.

Xiao Ming's eyes narrowed slightly. He naturally saw that Sima Hao had no reverence for him whatsoever. Hearing was not as good as seeing; now he finally understood the imperial family's standing in the eyes of these Jiangnan powerful families.

If Sima Hao, a person with sensitive political instincts, would still neglect respect for the imperial family due to habit, what would other powerful families do?

Now he felt even more strongly how correct it was to let the Jiangnan powerful families and the merchants' council fight each other. As long as their influence disappeared, the imperial family's influence could control the south.

Li Chuyuan, kneeling on the ground, secretly rejoiced. This time, he finally saw Sima Hao suffer a setback.

Xiao Ming merely snorted. He said bluntly, "I have long heard of your Sima family's reputation. But you must remember, whether in Jiangnan or Jiangbei, you are all citizens of the Great Yu Empire. What the imperial family gives you, the imperial family can also take back."

Sima Hao's expression was grim, but he still forced a smile. He said, "Your Majesty, I was merely speaking out of urgency. After all, a nation cannot be without its monarch for a day, and a feudal state cannot be without its feudal prince for a day."

"Is Li Chuyuan not the Prince of Chu? The place where he is, that is your royal court. If you are willing to remain in Jinling Province, I will also agree."

Sima Hao choked. Li Chuyuan was already his pawn, and now this pawn had been seized by Xiao Ming with just a few words. He was truly unwilling, but he also understood that he was powerless to argue further now.

So he said, "Yes, Your Majesty. However, government affairs in Lin'an are busy, so I cannot remain."

Xiao Ming nodded. He then said to Li Chuyuan, "The merchants' council colluded with barbarians, incited the common people, and caused chaos in the region. They are rebels and traitors. Effective immediately, I will lead the imperial army to punish them."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for your immense grace." Li Chuyuan let out a heavy sigh of relief. He was finally out of danger.

Having settled this matter, Li Chuyuan had Sima Hao return first, and instructed Sima Hao to provide convenience for the imperial army upon his return to Lin'an.

Sima Hao sneered inwardly, but readily agreed verbally. For him, he would not provide even a single grain of food to the imperial army.

Watching Sima Hao depart, Li Chuyuan's face now turned grim. He turned to Xiao Ming and said sadly, "Father King resented me and hated me, and did not believe me. The Sima family is ambitious and determined to control me. And the Cao family even wants to annihilate me. This State of Chu has no place for me, Li Chuyuan. It is truly lamentable, truly tragic."

Xiao Ming, hearing this, said, "You needn't belittle yourself. The long-standing problems of the State of Chu did not develop overnight. Even without the merchants' council, you would have met the same fate if you inherited the throne one day."

Li Chuyuan sighed slightly. He said, "I, your humble servant, now desire nothing more. I only wish to live a life of wealth and glory in the latter half of my life."

“What’s so difficult about that? I have prepared a large mansion for you in Qingzhou Province. You will surely like it when you see it,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Keeping Li Chuyuan was still useful. After all, the Li family still had influence among the common people. As long as Li Chuyuan was present, he could use this card at any time. If he died, there would be no more playing this game.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Li Chuyuan said sincerely. He believed Xiao Ming, because the Third Prince was still living well in Bashu.

Xiao Ming could show such kindness to the rebellious Third Prince. He believed he would also keep his promise to him.

With a slight smile, Xiao Ming had Li Chuyuan return to rest, leaving the remaining matters for him to handle.

After Li Chuyuan left, Qian Dafu said with emotion, “Your Majesty’s benevolence is known throughout the realm. Li Chuyuan has also sincerely submitted. It’s just a pity that the old Prince of Chu did not see through it.”

“He was too clever for his own good. If he had realized earlier, he wouldn’t have ended up like this,” Xiao Ming said angrily. The current situation in Jiangnan was entirely caused by the Prince of Chu.

After exchanging a few casual words with Qian Dafu, Xiao Ming drafted an imperial edict and sent it to the Jinling Grand Camp. He ordered Lu Fei to immediately cross the Yangtze River southward and attack Songjiang and Jiaying.

Jinling Grand Camp. Upon receiving Xiao Ming's order, Lu Fei immediately mustered his troops. He and Luo Xin each headed for Songjiang and Jiaying.

At the pier, the Qingzhou Navy's warships had already been resupplied. The two, each leading twenty thousand men, boarded the ships, left the Yangtze River for the sea, and landed near Songjiang and Jiaying from the sea.

After a night's march, the next morning, Lu Fei landed east of Songjiang. On the ship, the soldiers, having packed three days' rations in their combat backpacks, successively disembarked.

"Songjiang is less than a day's journey from here. These rations are enough, after all, the warships are anchored at sea, and we can get supplies at any time."

Lu Fei pointed to the landing site on the map and the location of Songjiang City.

Beside him were the commanders of the 1st and 2nd Divisions, one named Fang Zicheng, and the other Guo Ming.

"There are forty thousand soldiers of the merchants' council stationed in Songjiang City. According to secret guard intelligence, they all use old flintlock guns provided by the French. They also have seventy-two cannons, all traditional siege cannons, with a range similar to Qingzhou Province's first-generation artillery," Fang Zicheng said.

Guo Ming frowned. He said, "These cannons can still pose a threat to us. A skirmish line would be useful."

"Indeed, you're right. This time, our Huben 1st Army is the first to be equipped with Falcon breech-loading rifles. You must not disgrace me. I only give you two days. You must take Songjiang City for me and march south!"

"Yes, Army Commander!" Fang Zicheng and Guo Ming shouted loudly. They did not want to lose to Luo Xin's men either.

With that, the two led their troops towards Songjiang City. After half a day, they saw Songjiang City standing on the plains.

At the same time, the council army of Songjiang City also saw this army.

"General, look! This army's attire is truly strange!" a general on the city wall said.

The person responsible for defending Songjiang City was Yao Hongtao, a former general of the old Prince of Chu. Under the temptation of the merchants' council's money, he chose to betray after the Prince of Chu's death.

And under the attack of Li Chuyuan's army, he, relying on his trained new army, repelled Li Chuyuan's army's attacks several times.

However, when he clearly saw this army, the calm expression on his face disappeared. He exclaimed, "Oh no! This is the northern army! There's no mistake! Although they wear helmets, their military uniforms are still the same!" Yao Hongtao said.

He had once followed the Prince of Chu to scout Jinling Province's deployment and recognized the northern army.

The soldiers, hearing this, immediately panicked. They all knew the news of the northern army defeating the barbarians. Could they now withstand them?

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The salty, humid scent of the sea breeze wafted over them from the east.

Yao Hongtao stared intently at the steadily approaching imperial soldiers. Unlike their own nervousness, these soldiers seemed utterly confident of victory.

From a distance, they could even hear clear singing, a rousing and inspiring melody.

"Prepare the cannons."

Yao Hongtao put down his monocular telescope. These items were all purchased by the merchants' council from Western merchants; almost every general now possessed one.

“Yes, General.” Upon receiving the order, the deputy general immediately had all the artillerymen take their positions, loading their shells and waiting.

At the same time, soldiers with flintlock guns moved back and forth on the city wall, deploying defenses. Each found his firing position.

All preparations complete, the deputy general frowned and said, “General, there seem to be not many Great Yu Empire soldiers, perhaps only about twenty thousand. Perhaps we can defeat them head-on.”

Yao Hongtao glanced at the deputy general. He said calmly, “Do you think the northern imperial army is like Li Chuyuan’s scattered rabble? When these soldiers were defeating the barbarians with flintlock guns in Jizhou, you were probably nowhere to be found!”

The deputy general’s face flushed red. Having successfully repelled several sieges, he was very confident in his current firearm army. In his opinion, defeating Li Chuyuan was only a matter of time.

Precisely because of this, they paid no heed to the army before them. He said, “General, it seems you are giving others courage and diminishing your own prestige. Now, facts prove that the loyalty of soldiers serving feudal lords is far inferior to that of soldiers serving the merchants’ council. Similarly, I believe the common people must also be discontent with the northern corrupt dynasty. Their soldiers will not fight to the death for them.”

“Is that so? Have you been to the north? Do you understand Qingzhou Province?” Yao Hongtao was somewhat displeased. This deputy general was not his own man, but appointed to him by the merchants’ council.

He knew very well that the merchants’ council did not entirely trust him. However, he had chosen to betray the Prince of Chu, and now he had only one path: to follow the merchants’ council. Besides, Cao Kun had promised him a seat as a councilor.

The deputy general was once again speechless. He argued, "General, it seems you still don't trust the merchants' council enough. Now, at the suggestion of the Azure Dragon King, the merchants' council has decided to adopt his method used in Jizhou to win over hearts. You'll see, soon the common people of Jiangnan will gather around the merchants' council, just like they did in Jizhou back then."

"Azure Dragon King." Yao Hongtao frowned. He had met this Azure Dragon King before. He was a very cold-looking scholar, and what was most terrifying was that this Azure Dragon King was very skilled at inciting people.

When the Prince of Chu had heavily relied on him, he successfully stirred up unrest in Jizhou. However, after failing and returning to the State of Chu, he was sidelined because the Prince of Chu also worried that this Azure Dragon King would bring disaster to the State of Chu.

Now that this Azure Dragon King had defected to the merchants' council, he could already imagine what would happen when these two oddities combined.

The deputy general, seeing this, immediately smiled. He said, "This Azure Dragon King is indeed skilled at winning over the common people. Now, many common people are defecting to the merchants' council to avoid taxes and for land redistribution."

Yao Hongtao suddenly sneered repeatedly upon hearing this. He suddenly felt sorrow for the common people, because he knew very well that this slogan would ultimately become an empty promise.

Since ancient times, when has there ever been a dynasty that did not collect grain? Now, the merchants' council was merely painting a grand picture to make the common people die for them.

"Pitiable, lamentable." Yao Hongtao didn't know if he was referring to the deputy general or himself. He said no more, but stared intently at the approaching imperial soldiers.

Outside the city, Lu Fei was observing the situation in Songjiang City.

Unlike before, the Huben Army now was not arranged in dense formations. Instead, they were spread out in skirmish lines, dispersed outside the eastern city wall of Songjiang City.

"This section of the city wall has twenty cannons, and the city wall is manned by soldiers with flintlock guns. A frontal assault would result in heavy casualties. We only have twenty thousand men; we must exploit the advantage of our breech-loading rifles," Lu Fei said seriously. Even with cannons, siege warfare was still a headache.

Especially since the soldiers inside the city also used firearms. They could completely rely on the city walls to use firearms to inflict casualties on the attacking soldiers, which was very costly.

So, he continued, "Guo Ming, you are to immediately lead your soldiers to dig trenches, all the way to within fifty meters of the city wall."

"Yes, General."

Guo Ming responded. Now, spades had basically become standard equipment for the army, specifically for digging trenches. Upon receiving the order, thousands of soldiers threw themselves into the task.

Thus, Yao Hongtao was very surprised to see the imperial army stop at three hundred meters and begin digging.

“General, what are they doing?” the deputy general asked, startled. They had never encountered such a situation.

Yao Hongtao shook his head. He was also baffled, but he understood that this was certainly not a good sign. He shouted to the artillerymen, “Fire!”

Upon his command, the cannons on the city wall immediately roared. Solid shot flew towards the imperial army like lightning.

But when the cannons roared, the imperial army opposite immediately dispersed, seeking uneven terrain as cover and lying down. At the same time, he saw the imperial soldiers lying on the ground begin to fire.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

Flashes of fire erupted, and bullets flew wildly over the city wall. Some soldiers, unable to dodge, were hit and fell with screams. The city wall immediately fell into chaos.

Even more, cold sweat broke out on Yao Hongtao’s back. Since when could the imperial army’s firearms shoot three hundred meters?

As he was in a frenzy, Lu Fei continuously urged his soldiers to dig trenches. In truth, the accuracy of this firing was not very high, as the precision of target practice at three hundred meters was not great.

In daily training, he had already gained experience. In fact, as the distance increased, the accuracy of soldiers' shooting continuously decreased. Although the range and accuracy of breech-loading rifles had greatly improved, human vision and operation had their limits.

It was very difficult to accurately hit a person within five hundred meters. The optimal firing range was still within two hundred meters.

So, this firing was merely to suppress the enemy's artillery, not to kill.

After a round of covering fire, the soldiers dug trenches even faster. No soldier wanted to be crushed into meat paste by the cannons on the city wall.

Three hours later, a winding trench extended to the foot of Songjiang City. Other soldiers entered the trench and continuously expanded the trench works.

After the initial bombardment, the council army quickly stopped firing, because the imperial soldiers hiding in the trenches simply could not be harmed by solid shot.

At this point, Lu Fei ordered all soldiers to enter the trenches, completely surrounding Songjiang City. At the same time, mortars, carried by two men each, also entered the trenches.

They advanced to fifty meters from the city wall.

Upon receiving Lu Fei's command, they immediately lobbed explosive shells and lime bombs onto the city wall of Songjiang City. Soldiers carrying Falcon Rifles also fired at the city wall from the edge of the trenches.

The Battle of Songjiang City officially began.