

I. Dynasty 217

Chapter 217: The Four Great Threats

Fei Ji was momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer number of exquisite Qingzhou goods before him.

This time, the Prince of Qi had truly given him ample face.

After Emperor Xiao Wenzuan repeatedly proposed the marriage alliance on Xiao Ming's behalf, Fei Ji had already made up his mind. And following the great victory at Cangzhou, he became even more certain of his decision.

The Fei family had a long and distinguished heritage. When it came to scholarly households, if the Fei family claimed to be second, no one in the Great Yu Empire dared call themselves first. Because of this, the Fei family had produced generations of talented individuals, with high-ranking officials in every dynasty.

Logically, he had not originally wanted Fei Yue'er to marry far away in Chang'an.

But after much contemplation, his intuition told him this might be a wise choice. He also believed this unconventional Prince of Qi would bring something extraordinary to his family in the future.

"Thank you, Your Highness. Such generous gifts leave me unworthy of your kindness." Fei Ji clasped his hands in gratitude before instructing his servants to store the presents.

After a moment of thought, Fei Ji sighed. “I understand the purpose of Your Highness’s visit today. Regarding this marriage—I consent.”

Xiao Ming smiled. As Consort Zhen had predicted, the matter had resolved itself naturally. “Grand Secretary Fei’s favor humbles me. I, Xiao Ming, offer my deepest respects.”

With that, Xiao Ming stood and bowed to Fei Ji.

From now on, this would be his father-in-law.

Fei Ji did not rise but accepted the gesture. At this moment, it was not about ruler and subject—but family.

“Your Highness, please sit. Beyond this marriage, you must also wish to discuss the current state of the empire with me.” Fei Ji’s eyes gleamed with insight.

Had this been the old Xiao Ming, he would never have spoken so frankly. But from Qingzhou’s newspapers, he had glimpsed a different man.

“Indeed. I hope Grand Secretary Fei can enlighten me.” Xiao Ming did not deny it.

Though he possessed vast technological knowledge, Xiao Ming still lacked a deep understanding of the Great Yu Empire—a critical gap for Qingzhou’s development.

After all, Qingzhou was part of the empire. It could not thrive in isolation, as many resources had to be sourced from elsewhere.

Moreover, he needed to identify enemies, allies, and those who could be swayed. As the great leader once said: Unite all forces that can be united. Going it alone was not an option.

Fei Ji smiled faintly, stroking his beard. “The Great Yu Empire now faces internal strife and external threats—this much you surely know. Our most formidable enemy remains the barbarians. Though Beishan retreated this time, he will return to avenge his humiliation at Cangzhou. According to my sources, Beishan was merely reprimanded upon his return. Worse, he used this opportunity to move the Blood Wolf Tribe from Shanhai Pass into Youzhou. Compared to the Huyantuo Tribe, the Blood Wolf Tribe is in a league of its own.”

This was news to Xiao Ming. He couldn’t help but lament how inferior his intelligence network was compared to the court’s.

Fei Ji continued, “The Huyantuo were just a minor tribe. They only occupied Youzhou by currying favor with Wuzhugu. But the Blood Wolf Tribe is one of Bei Shan’s strongest forces. You’ve seen the Blood Wolf Guards yourself.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “Those Blood Wolf Guards are indeed well-trained and exceptionally fierce.”

The image of their corpses piled high during the Battle of Cangzhou still haunted him. Even in the face of such slaughter, they had charged forward without fear.

“Precisely. Those Blood Wolf Guards fought alongside Bei Shan in campaigns against the Ottomans—battle-hardened veterans. The Blood Wolf Tribe itself is one of the steppe’s major powers, with over 500,000 people. That’s enough to muster 100,000 cavalry, not counting slave soldiers. After the blow you dealt Bei Shan, he will undoubtedly study your cannons and devise countermeasures.”

“I’ve anticipated as much. The worst-case scenario is Beishan acquiring cannons himself.” Xiao Ming frowned. “But I understand Qingzhou’s forces are no match for the barbarians on the open plains. My strategy is to advance slowly, fortifying strongholds and using artillery to nibble away at Youzhou’s territory.”

Fei Ji sighed in relief. “Good. That was my very concern. You must never engage the barbarians rashly on the steppes. Beyond them, the Great Yu Empire faces three other major threats.”

“Please elaborate, Grand Secretary.”

Fei Ji spoke methodically:

“First, as Prince Wei mentioned in court, coastal piracy runs rampant. Of these raiders, 40% are Japanese, another 40% are Koreans, and the remaining 20% are traitors from Wu and Yue who collaborate with them to plunder our shores.”

“40% are Koreans?” Xiao Ming was stunned.

Fei Ji nodded. “Correct. Korea was once our vassal. But when the barbarians grew powerful, they switched allegiance and began looking down on us. To please their new masters, they once murdered

our envoys, severing all ties. Since then, seeing our weakness, Korea has even sent soldiers disguised as pirates to raid wealthy coastal cities and slaughter our fishermen.”

“So that’s why even seaside regions like Dengzhou rarely fish offshore.” Xiao Ming recalled historical records from the tech database—specifically, Korea’s Annals of King Sejong, which admitted: In previous dynasties, Japanese pirates ran rampant, leaving the people destitute. Yet the Japanese numbered only one or two out of ten. Our own people, donning Japanese attire, formed gangs and rebelled.

In the Great Yu Empire, emboldened by the barbarians, the Koreans had grown even bolder. But whether Japanese or Korean, both nations had long coveted the empire’s lands.

Whenever the Central Plains dynasty faltered, these jackals would pounce.

Fei Ji added, “This is why our maritime trade has declined. Aside from Prince Wei, few merchants dare sail abroad these days.”

Xiao Ming nodded grimly.

Fei Ji then said, “The second threat is Annam. They frequently kill our border villagers and seize our territory. Despite multiple military campaigns, we’ve mostly retreated in defeat, wasting vast resources.”

Annam—modern-day Vietnam—had also once been a vassal state. But after the reign of the founding emperor, the pro-empire Trần dynasty was massacred in a coup, replaced by the hostile Hua dynasty. Since then, Annam had repeatedly raided the southern borders, burning and pillaging.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming felt history's eerie parallels. In modern times, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam had all clashed incessantly with China. Even now, they remained key players in efforts to contain the nation.

Born into the Great Yu Empire, Xiao Ming could easily imagine these same nations, centuries later, still acting as deadly shackles around the Central Plains.