

I. Dynasty 323

Chapter 323: Yue Yun Returns

“Your Highness, I’m back!”

At the Prince of Qi’s manor in Qingzhou, civil and military officials had gathered.

In the center of the grand hall, Yue Yun and the surviving sailors dropped to their knees, crying uncontrollably.

Even Niu Ben and Lu Fei were moved. Of the more than seven hundred men who had set out, only two hundred and thirty-one returned. Two-thirds of the navy had perished in the vast sea.

Xiao Ming stepped forward and helped the soldiers up one by one. His eyes were hot with emotion. He had known from the start that the journey would be dangerous, but these men still went without hesitation.

It was because of brave, selfless soldiers like them that his territory stood strong and unshaken.

Xiao Ming believed in weapons—but more than anything, he believed in his men. Without their courage and sacrifice, how could he sit safely in this hall?

“Soldiers, it is I who should salute you.”

A thousand words in his heart condensed into a single deep bow.

Yue Yun and the others had red eyes, but their expressions remained firm. Together they shouted, “Our honor lies in our loyalty! For Your Highness, we fear neither death nor sacrifice! All so that one day, Your Highness will ensure that the people of the six prefectures are never humiliated by foreign invaders again!”

“Yue Yun, you’re a true man of iron and steel. I admire you!” Lu Fei shouted.

“We admire you too!” the other generals echoed loudly.

In that moment, Yue Yun could no longer hold back his tears. His mother had died at the hands of the Wokou. His crew had been attacked by a British fleet at sea. Later, with Wilson’s help, they narrowly escaped.

But while passing through the Ryukyu region, they were ambushed by a Dutch fleet.

Already badly damaged, they had little power to resist. With death on their minds, they managed to sink a Dutch warship—but their own ships could no longer sail. They had no choice but to beach themselves on a deserted island.

If they hadn’t encountered the Cao family’s fleet, they probably wouldn’t have made it back.

The hatred for his country’s enemies and the pain of personal loss weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Xiao Ming gave Yue Yun a firm pat on the shoulder. “I know how much you’ve suffered. The soldiers who died will not be forgotten. I will repay this blood debt tenfold, a hundredfold. The same goes for the civilians who died in the Cangzhou campaign. Our strategy for the next few years is this—march north to crush the barbarians, sail east to defeat the Wokou, and seize the sea trade routes!”

“March north! Sail east!”

The officials present all straightened up. This was the first time Xiao Ming had officially laid out their future strategy.

Yue Yun clenched his teeth. “Your Highness, we’ve been waiting for you to say that. You might not know, but the seas are crawling with Western warships. Their ships and weapons are far superior to those of the Great Yu Empire. From what I’ve seen, only Qingzhou’s warships stand a chance against them.”

“The Cao family told me everything. The Western powers are expanding their influence toward the Great Yu Empire. So first, we must crush the barbarians in Youzhou. Only then can we focus fully on taking the sea trade routes.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “The barbarian threat is like a dagger at the heart of the empire. It must be dealt with.”

Yue Yun added, “Now is the perfect time to build a large number of Galleon ships to prepare for future naval battles. I swear—I’ll feed those Dutch and British bastards to the fish!”

Xiao Ming smiled and clapped Yue Yun's shoulder again. This was exactly the kind of fighting spirit he needed.

Turning to the others, he said, "Now that Yue Yun has returned, we'll act on two matters. I've ordered the machinery department and the military workshop to work together and increase the production of flintlock rifles. This fall, there will be a northern expedition against the barbarians. General Niu, besides leading the Qingzhou army, start selecting elite troops from across the six prefectures to train with the Qingzhou forces. Also, form a chariot unit."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Niu Ben replied loudly.

"Pang Yukun, besides managing state affairs in each prefecture, the government must also support the shipyard's production of Galleon ships. Do not delay when it comes to funding."

"Understood, Your Highness," Pang Yukun said.

"Chen Qi, Lu Tong, the lime bombs are your responsibility. Also, when we march out, I want to see field cannons."

"Yes, Your Highness."

After issuing his orders, Xiao Ming looked northward.

This campaign against the barbarians was part of a larger plan—but also a necessary move. The unrest in Jizhou was getting worse. Attacking first was a way to defend. If the barbarians seized the chance to strike south, Jizhou wouldn't be able to hold.

And Xiao Ming was sure the barbarians wouldn't miss the opportunity in this time of chaos. If Jizhou fell, he'd be caught between enemies. That was something he would never allow.

So he made up his mind to launch a northern expedition, forming a chariot unit as the first line of defense in the field and asking Chen Qi to develop lightweight field cannons.

After setting the future direction for Qingzhou, Xiao Ming also announced rewards for Yue Yun and the navy officers, inviting Yue Yun to take a seat.

He had prepared a grand feast in the prince's manor to welcome them home and honor their courage.

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After the banquet, Xiao Ming met with Yue Yun alone.

"Your Highness, it's a shame that Wilson was killed by the Dutch during the sea battle. Otherwise, you could've heard firsthand about the current situation in the West."

“That’s not important. I’m already grateful that you all came back alive.”

Yue Yun was deeply moved. Xiao Ming’s care for his soldiers warmed his heart. ‘Even if I die in battle, it would be worth it,’ he thought.

Then he remembered something and handed Xiao Ming a notebook written by their interpreter.

Xiao Ming opened the notebook. It was filled with questions and explanations from Wilson. He read through the list carefully.

After going through it all, he had a clearer picture of the world situation. A few centuries ago, the northern grassland tribes had invaded Europe, completely shaking the Europeans’ worldview.

Since then, Europe had undergone an explosive transformation. Science progressed rapidly, with one breakthrough after another.

This scientific revolution pushed Europe into the Age of Exploration. First, the Americas were colonized. Then came Southeast Asia and East Asia.

According to Wilson, once the Dutch seized control of the East Asian trade routes, they banned merchants from other countries from entering.

That was why so few foreign envoys had come to the Great Yu Empire in recent years.

But the Dutch were now in decline. They were being replaced by Britain, France, and Prussia. Religious divisions in Europe were also causing tension and frequent wars.

As for their technological level, Wilson had described it in detail. In Xiao Ming's eyes, it matched the standards of mid-18th century modern Europe.

Britain had already proposed the steam engine and was trying to develop it.

Xiao Ming couldn't calculate the exact effect of the butterfly effect. Even a tiny change could shift everything. But now he saw that this world—after the Three Kingdoms era—had taken a completely different path.

Both Europe and Asia had entered an unfamiliar future.

Only the geography remained the same. Everything else had become foreign.

This was no longer the world he thought he knew. It was something else entirely—a far more dangerous world.