

I. Dynasty 511

Chapter 511

“Your Highness, these past few days I was almost devoured by merchants.”

In the main hall of Prince Qi’s mansion, Li Kaiyuan offered the Chamber of Commerce’s account book with both hands, complaining.

Xiao Ming smiled. He had heard about the events of the past two days, how the merchants almost broke down the Chamber of Commerce’s threshold because of the white sugar.

However, for him, he had already prepared himself mentally when he was about to release the white sugar technology. After all, the success of the soap workshops had made many merchants quite envious.

Moreover, this time, the white sugar had not even been sold in the Great Yu Empire by the Chamber of Commerce, which meant that white sugar would be a completely new commodity. Compared to soap, which had already brought in huge profits for the Chamber of Commerce, the profit from white sugar would surely be even higher.

It was precisely because of this that the merchants were so eager to get their hands on the white sugar production technology.

“They won’t devour you, but it’s possible they’ll give you tens of thousands of taels of silver notes and pick out a few concubines for you,” Xiao Ming said with a smile as he took the account book from Li Kaiyuan.

Li Kaiyuan said with a tearful face, “Your Highness, please don’t denigrate me. I have always been incorruptible.”

Xiao Ming was, of course, just joking. He paid Li Kaiyuan a high salary precisely to foster integrity with high pay. If it were outside the enfeoffed state, Li Kaiyuan’s position would probably be fiercely contested.

Smiling teasingly, Xiao Ming looked at the account book. This account book recorded the merchants who had purchased white sugar production technology in the past few days.

“Three hundred and seventy-eight people.” Seeing the number of people in the account book, Xiao Ming was somewhat shocked, “So many.”

“Exactly. I have been reminding them not to blindly purchase the technology, but they just wouldn’t listen,” Li Kaiyuan shook his head.

“Since they’ve been reminded, let them be. Whether they lose or earn is up to their own fate, but even with over two hundred people, they will probably make a profit in the initial stage.”

“I also think so. White sugar has never appeared on the market, so the sales volume will be very high. Besides, now that the maritime trade routes are open, merchants can also sell white sugar to Goryeo and Japan,” Li Kaiyuan said.

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this. This number seemed large, but it was only because the white sugar workshops were concentrated in Qingzhou. It was like there was only one small shop in a modern town, but across the entire country, there would be thousands.

Similarly, if these over three hundred white sugar workshops were evenly distributed across the Great Yu Empire, they would be like a drop in the ocean. Moreover, I now want to open up private capital and cannot interfere too much with the behavior of these merchants.

Doing business naturally involves both losses and gains. I only needed to control the overall commercial operations of the enfeoffed state, and the government office would manage the specific details.

“Over three million taels, plus the sale of sulfurous acid, this white sugar Chamber of Commerce is making a net profit. Good, good.”

The numbers on the account book made Xiao Ming smile happily. In fact, he was the one making the most money. He could sell both sugarcane and chemicals, which meant that merchants had to share a portion of their earnings with him.

Besides white sugar, the pendulum clock had not yet been sold. Once it was sold, that would be another substantial income. The previously strained finances due to the frantic military expansion were finally relieved.

Li Kaiyuan’s eyes narrowed with a smile, but he suddenly remembered something and said, “Your Highness, there’s something I almost forgot. After these merchants bought the technology, they complained that they couldn’t find enough craftsmen to be responsible for production, and the slaves in the Qingzhou market are also very scarce, simply not enough for the merchants to divide. I believe this problem will cause some issues for the development of commerce.”

“Hmm, you’re right.” Xiao Ming nodded. It had to be said that Li Kaiyuan’s observation was very accurate.

In fact, he was also pondering this issue. Now, he clearly could not compete with Europe for the slave trade, and engaging in slave trade in Asia was very difficult. After all, neither Japan nor Goryeo existed only in tribal forms like Africa.

However, he already had a specific replacement plan in mind, so he said, "You can tell the merchants to recruit craftsmen from outside the enfeoffed state."

"Recruit craftsmen from other places?" Li Kaiyuan's eyes darted around, and he suddenly smiled. "Your Highness's move is truly brilliant. In this way, whether these merchants buy or trick people from outside, it will be an increase in population for Qingzhou."

Xiao Ming's lips curved into a sly smile. This was precisely the goal he wanted to achieve. After his hint, these merchants, in pursuit of profit, would inevitably traffic people from outside the enfeoffed state to Qingzhou to meet the industrial demand for population.

In his view, this situation was similar to European merchants trafficking African people for profit, except his method was more civilized, akin to modern labor export.

"Exactly, so after you go back, you can discreetly remind the merchants," Xiao Ming said.

Li Kaiyuan nodded, "Yes, Your Highness, I will prepare for this matter when I return."

After sending off Li Kaiyuan, Xiao Ming had a horse prepared. He was going to the military machinery department.

Now, the situation in the Great Yu Empire could take a sharp turn for the worse at any time. He had to prepare in advance, so he had not been idle these past two days, but rather had been considering replacing the equipment of the armies of various prefectures.

After discussing with Niu Ben, he felt that the focus should now be on re-equipping three armies. The first in line was naturally the Youzhou Army.

Comparatively, the Youzhou Army was currently the largest among the enfeoffed state armies, with twenty thousand infantry and twenty thousand cavalry, totaling forty thousand men. The second was the current Dengzhou Army.

After Dengzhou's position became increasingly important, he expanded the Dengzhou Army from ten thousand to twenty thousand men. The last was the Yunzhou Army, which currently had only ten thousand men.

This army was prepared for the resources of Prince Yong's enfeoffed territory. If war broke out in the Great Yu Empire, he might have to deploy this army.

As for the armies in other prefectures, Xiao Ming only kept a standing army of one thousand men. It wasn't that he didn't want to expand the army, but his enfeoffed territory only had a population of two million. The armies of Youzhou, Qingzhou, Yunzhou, and Dengzhou combined totaled ninety thousand men, which was already the limit the enfeoffed territory could bear. This meant that one out of every twenty or so people was a soldier, a very high proportion.

Even so, he couldn't possibly deploy all ninety thousand troops at once. After all, the logistics for a hundred thousand troops would require five to six hundred thousand laborers. If he were to fight like that, his enfeoffed territory would be finished.

So after much deliberation, Xiao Ming felt that he could only improve the army's equipment level, using quality against quantity. It was for this reason that he decided to go to the military machinery department to check on the equipment, urge production, and have Chen Qi deliver the stockpiled equipment to the armies of various prefectures.

Upon arriving at the military machinery department, the sounds of metal clanging echoed. It had been two months since Xiao Ming last visited the military machinery department, ever since his last sea voyage.

Recalling the rifled gun that Song Changping had once sent him, he first headed towards the firearms workshop.

Chapter 512

In the firearms workshop, Song Changping was diligently teaching a craftsman how to rifle a barrel.

A burst of noise came, and he looked out the door. Seeing Xiao Ming, Song Changping was startled and turned to walk towards Xiao Ming.

"Your Highness." Song Changping bowed to Xiao Ming, smiling. "I have been eagerly awaiting Your Highness's return during this time."

"Is that so? So your rifled gun must have made progress, otherwise, I would scold you upon my return," Xiao Ming said with a smile. Before he left, he had told Song Changping about the flaws of the rifled gun

and asked him to improve it. He wondered how Song Changping had improved it in the past two months.

Song Changping was also a taciturn person. He chuckled twice and said to Xiao Ming, "I haven't been idle. Your Highness, please see, this is the current rifled gun bullet."

Song Changping spread his hand, and at this time, on his palm was a conical bullet, which was the Minie ball of later generations. It was the invention of this type of bullet that changed the disadvantage of flintlock guns being difficult to load.

"Minie ball, you've manufactured it?" Xiao Ming said in surprise.

Song Changping nodded, "With Your Highness's guidance and the drawings in the books, if I still can't produce it, I can go home and farm."

"Hmm, that's true. After such a long time, there should be progress." Xiao Ming said, "Now, bring a rifled gun. I want to test the power of the rifled gun with a Minie ball."

Song Changping immediately had his craftsman fetch a rifled gun for Xiao Ming. Holding the rifled gun, Xiao Ming went to the military machinery department's training ground.

In Zeelandia, Claire had used a rifled gun to intimidate him, and now his rifled gun was much more advanced than theirs.

Placing the rifled gun vertically on the ground, Xiao Ming loaded the gunpowder in order, and finally smoothly inserted the bullet, whose caliber was slightly smaller than the barrel, into the barrel.

The advantage of the Minie ball over the lead ball lay here.

After loading the ammunition, Xiao Ming raised the rifled gun. Like cannons, the current rifled guns also had a front sight and a rear sight. Through the rear sight and front sight, he could aim at the target ahead.

“Your Highness, our rifled gun can fire a distance of five hundred meters, and its effective range can reach three hundred meters, so Your Highness can directly shoot at the target three hundred meters away,” Song Changping said confidently.

“Five hundred meters.” This number pleased Xiao Ming. This range was already half the distance of a Minie rifle. He was very satisfied with this data.

“Bang.” Aiming at the target, Xiao Ming pulled the trigger. After a flash of fire and white smoke, the bullet flew towards the target three hundred meters away, drilling a hole outside the bullseye.

After the gunshot, the craftsman responsible for verifying the target quickly signaled with a flag: one ring.

Song Changping then said, “Your Highness, how is this rifled gun?”

“Quite interesting.”

Xiao Ming picked up a bullet and reloaded it, saying this, but he was already extremely pleased. The biggest difference between a rifled gun and a smoothbore gun was accuracy.

Compared to the deviation of smoothbore gun bullets, soldiers could accurately kill enemies with rifled guns after training, which was absolutely terrifying in this era.

“Bang.” Xiao Ming’s shot this time was more accurate, the bullet landing outside the seven-ring target.

“Your Highness, are you satisfied with this rifled gun?” Song Changping’s face grew more confident.

Xiao Ming nodded. It had to be said that this rifled gun had met his required standards. Although the range was a bit short, before progress was made in gunpowder, the range could only be this much.

After all, the more gunpowder exploded, the higher the demands on the barrel’s endurance, and for this, alloy technology still needed to be improved.

Satisfied with the gun, the next focus was the production speed of the rifled gun. He said, “The gun is good, but how about the production of the bullets and guns?”

At this, Song Changping’s face looked a little unnatural. He said, “Your Highness, the bullets are nothing; they can be made by pouring into molds. But rifling is really arduous. In these two months, I have only produced one hundred and twenty rifled guns.”

“Smoothbore guns can produce four or five thousand a month,” Xiao Ming said. With the increasing orders, the number of craftsmen in the firearms workshop had increased significantly, which also greatly boosted the production of the firearms workshop.

Compared to the number of smoothbore guns, the number of rifled guns was really too small.

After a pause, he continued, “But don’t worry, you’ll overcome the rifling problem soon.”

“Overcome?” Song Changping asked, puzzled, “Does Your Highness have another method?”

Xiao Ming nodded. He was naturally talking about the steam engine, but he didn’t want to mention it yet, as the application of the steam engine still had to wait.

He said, “The specific method will come soon. How about this, you send all these rifled guns to the Qingzhou Army. In addition, how many flintlock guns are still in the warehouse?”

“Reporting to Your Highness, since the last time three thousand flintlock guns were sent to the Youzhou Army, I have been stepping up production as per Your Highness’s instructions. Currently, there are already nine thousand flintlock guns accumulated in the warehouse.”

“Five thousand for the Youzhou Army, three thousand for the Dengzhou Army, and the remaining one thousand for the Yunzhou Army,” Xiao Ming divided them according to priority.

Now, the armies of various prefectures were clamoring for weapons, and the military machinery department's current output couldn't keep up. Thinking of this, he felt that he needed to get the steam engines running as soon as possible, otherwise the enfeoffed territory's production capacity would soon be out of sync with demand.

As the two were discussing firearms, Chen Qi, seemingly attracted by the gunshots, walked out of the artillery workshop.

"Your Highness."

Seeing Xiao Ming and Song Changping together, Chen Qi immediately ran over.

Compared to two months ago, Chen Qi looked a bit haggard. Xiao Ming asked, "What's wrong? You look like you've been working very hard these past two months."

"Your Highness, it's all because Song Changping forced me. The rifled guns he produces now have a range of up to five hundred meters, which is almost catching up to cannons. How can I lose to him? So, during this time, I've been thinking about how to increase the range of cannons," Chen Qi said.

"Oh? What ideas do you have?" Xiao Ming said.

Chen Qi continued, "Your Highness, I think that if gun barrels can have rifling, why can't cannons have rifling? If cannons had rifling, would it be able to increase their range?"

“It definitely can increase it,” Song Changping said to Chen Qi, “Rifled guns have already proven that.”

Chen Qi then looked at Xiao Ming again.

Being stared at by Chen Qi, Xiao Ming said, “You can research in that direction. It might succeed.”

Chapter 513

“Your Highness, since that’s the case, I will now proceed with the research following the design of the rifled gun.”

In the military machinery department, Chen Qi’s resolve was strengthened by the encouragement of Song Changping and Xiao Ming.

“Go ahead and try boldly. The power of cannons is immense, something firearms cannot replace. In future battlefields, field guns will become increasingly important,” Xiao Ming said to Chen Qi.

During this period, Chen Qi had suddenly felt that the status of cannons seemed to have declined, which made him feel a bit sour, believing his research to be of little value.

But now, Xiao Ming’s words once again ignited a surge of motivation in his heart.

Having specified the future research direction for cannons to Chen Qi, Xiao Ming asked, "Let's put that aside for now. How many field guns have you produced? The army is clamoring for equipment every day, and the situation is unpredictable. I need the army to start practicing the coordination of field guns and infantry from now on."

"Reporting to Your Highness, we have now produced ninety-six 6-pound field guns and forty-two 12-pound field guns. As for naval cannons, we have also been continuously producing them and can meet the needs of the warships that are about to be launched. In addition, there are the city-defense cannons needed by various prefectures and counties. During this time, we have provided two hundred cannons to Yunzhou city, three hundred cannons to Dengzhou, and one hundred and eighty cannons to Yizhou in the south. Besides these, there are also export-model cannons," Chen Qi rattled off like a household inventory.

Xiao Ming was slightly satisfied with the cannon production. One thing he was very confident about was that his current cannon casting technology was definitely more advanced than Europe's, because Europe was still using lost-wax casting technology.

This technology required continuous mold manufacturing, while his iron mold casting technology eliminated this step, truly realizing assembly-line production for artillery.

For this reason, he believed that his cannon production would not be inferior to that of European countries.

"Thirty-six 6-pound field guns and twelve 12-pound field guns will be kept for the Qingzhou Army, and the remaining field guns will be sent to the Youzhou Army," Xiao Ming said after a moment of contemplation.

The Qingzhou Army could be said to be his guard army, so Xiao Ming naturally had to prioritize them, and the Youzhou Army directly faced the barbarians, so they also needed special attention.

As for the Dengzhou Army, the coastal defense cannons would be enough to withstand attacks from Japanese pirates and the direction of Goryeo, and the Yunzhou Army facing Prince Yong basically had nothing to worry about.

After allocating all the military supplies in stock, Xiao Ming and the two discussed production matters before he returned.

Now, the number of his troops had reached its limit, and the next priority was to replenish their equipment. After all, apart from the Qingzhou Army, the armies of the other prefectures were basically still purely cold weapon forces.

These cold weapon forces did not have much advantage when war broke out. He had personally come today because of his anxiety.

Although the military machinery department had not been idle in the slightest, the equipment still could not meet the needs of the armies of various prefectures, and the situation in the Great Yu Empire was not very good right now; perhaps war was not far off.

And as he was worrying about the future, his battle report finally arrived in Chang'an.

When the Qingzhou postal envoy delivered the memorial from Qingzhou to the imperial palace, he was stopped by the imperial guards.

"This is Prince Qi's memorial. Why are you stopping it?" the postal envoy said angrily.

Emperor Xiaowenxuan had once promised Xiao Ming that memorials could be delivered directly to the imperial study, without going through the layers of review by the Secretariat. It was for this reason that the postal envoy was so angry.

The imperial guard commander at the palace gate frowned upon hearing this. He said, "The Emperor issued an edict yesterday, ordering His Royal Highness the Crown Prince to supervise the state immediately. From now on, memorials from enfeoffed states must pass through the East Palace before being handed to the Emperor."

"The Crown Prince supervising the state?" The postal envoy was slightly surprised, but recalling Chief Minister Pang's words before his departure, he took out the memorial. "In that case, please hand the memorial to the East Palace, General."

When he left, Pang Yukun had told him to be careful in Chang'an and avoid causing trouble, and this memorial was originally intended for Empress Zhao and the Crown Prince anyway.

The imperial guard commander took the memorial and nodded.

After delivering the memorial, the postal envoy rode away. At this moment, a eunuch, accompanied by a group of eunuchs, walked towards the palace gate. Stopping at the gate, the leading eunuch asked in a soft voice, "What just happened?"

Seeing the newcomer, the imperial guard commander was startled. This was Wang Xi, the highly influential Imperial Secretary and Empress's confidant in Chang'an. He immediately bowed and said, "Reporting to Imperial Secretary Wang, this is a memorial from Qingzhou."

“A memorial from Qingzhou?” Wang Xi’s eyes narrowed, making his triangular eyes instantly become a line.

“Yes.” The imperial guard commander presented the memorial with both hands.

Wang Xi took the memorial, directly tore off the outer envelope, and after scanning the contents of the memorial, Wang Xi’s face turned somewhat ugly. He said, “I will hand this memorial to Empress Zhao.”

The imperial guard commander’s forehead broke out in a cold sweat. He smiled fawningly and nodded continuously.

Tucking the memorial into his sleeve, Wang Xi raised his head and walked into the palace. Now that the Emperor was seriously ill in bed, all major and minor affairs in the court were handled by the Empress acting on his behalf. The Crown Prince, without the Emperor’s supervision, was now indulging in pleasures and paid no attention to the ministers.

Watching Wang Xi’s figure disappear into the palace gate, the imperial guard commander breathed a slight sigh of relief. However, he was a little worried. From Wang Xi’s demeanor, it seemed he didn’t care about Prince Qi at all.

And now, who didn’t know Prince Qi’s status in the Great Yu Empire?

Inside the palace, Wang Xi took the memorial directly to Empress Zhao’s residence. At this time, Empress Zhao was dressing up.

"Your Majesty, I met Qingzhou's postal envoy at the palace gate, delivering a memorial to His Majesty, so I intercepted it," Wang Xi's expression instantly changed from arrogant to obsequious.

"Prince Qi's memorial." Empress Zhao's body trembled slightly, clearly showing great emotional fluctuation. "Let me see it."

"Yes."

Wang Xi walked over with a smile, dismissed the palace maid who was combing Empress Zhao's hair, and began combing Empress Zhao's hair himself.

Taking the memorial and glancing at it, Empress Zhao suddenly chuckled, "This barbarian attack on Shanhai Pass is indeed timely. I'm afraid it's a false pretense by the barbarians, and his real intention is to build up his own military power."

"Indeed. In my opinion, this Prince Qi is clearly threatening Your Majesty and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince. His intentions should be condemned," Wang Xi said indignantly while carefully combing her hair.

Empress Zhao sighed, "With the Emperor's illness, all the princes are restless. I think that this pledge of allegiance is just a piece of waste paper."

“Your Majesty, I believe that this pledge of allegiance still has some use. If the pledge of allegiance is proclaimed to the world, then if these princes harbor ill intentions, it would be disloyal and unjust,” Wang Xi said with a smile.

“But if princes’ rebellion is disloyal and unjust, then if the Crown Prince intends to kill other princes in the future, wouldn’t that also be disloyal and unjust?” Empress Zhao frowned deeply.

Wang Xi continued, “Your Majesty, this is not difficult. At that time, simply accuse these princes of rebellion, and wouldn’t that not violate the pledge of allegiance? In short, this pledge of allegiance is entirely beneficial to us and has no harm. I considered this point when I first came up with this idea.”

Chapter 514

“Father sending you to my side indeed makes some sense.”

Empress Zhao revealed a smile, looking at herself in the glass mirror. She was no longer as beautiful as she once was, crow’s feet had appeared at the corners of her eyes, and even a white hair had appeared on her head.

Wang Xi then picked up a golden hairpin to tidy Empress Zhao’s hair. He said, “Your Majesty overpraises me. I only have a few petty tricks; how can I compare to Your Majesty’s wisdom? However, Your Majesty, Prince Qi is now guarding Shanhai Pass, and his army is capable in both conquest and combat. This is indeed a hidden danger. Perhaps Prince Qi will not dare to risk rebellion because of his pledge of allegiance, but there is no guarantee that his descendants will not rebel.”

“I am also thinking about this. The reason Prince Qi defeated the barbarians twice is because of firearms. I believe the imperial court should now focus on developing firearms. If Prince Zhao’s army and the Imperial Guards are all equipped with firearms, what capital does Xiao Ming have to fight the imperial court? And what is there to fear from the barbarians?” Empress Zhao pondered.

Wang Xi chuckled twice upon hearing this. He walked in front of Empress Zhao and said as if claiming credit, “Your Majesty, I am here today to bring Your Majesty the method for forging firearms.”

“What!” Empress Zhao exclaimed, looking at Wang Xi. “This is not the time for nonsense.”

Wang Xi said sternly, “Your Majesty, I am not speaking nonsense. As the saying goes, ‘under a heavy reward, there are always brave men.’ During this time, I have been having blacksmiths research the forging method for matchlock guns, and indeed, one craftsman has found a way to manufacture matchlock guns.”

“Really?” Empress Zhao looked shocked.

Now Xiao Ming monopolized all firearm trade in the Great Yu Empire, and this huge profit made everyone’s eyes red. Therefore, imitation never stopped after firearms appeared.

In fact, the intentions of many vassal princes in purchasing weapons from Xiao Ming were not simple: firstly to equip their armies, and secondly for imitation.

“Your Majesty, I would not dare to speak nonsense. This craftsman has indeed forged a matchlock gun. Although its power is not as great as Qingzhou’s matchlock gun, its appearance is basically the same, and it can still kill people after being loaded with gunpowder,” Wang Xi said.

Empress Zhao was excited. She said, “Does anyone else know about this?”

“No, only I know.”

“Very good. Now, immediately hand over this method of forging matchlock guns to my father so he can imitate them. Now, various forces within Chang’an city are intricately intertwined. In the end, I fear only my father leading troops into Chang’an can stabilize the Crown Prince’s throne,” Empress Zhao said.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Wang Xi nodded. He had personally witnessed the imitation matchlock gun. According to the craftsman, he used two layers of rolled iron to forge the barrel, with one layer of rolled iron inside and another layer outside.

The rolled iron openings were staggered to prevent gunpowder leakage, but the production of this matchlock gun was very slow. A single barrel required repeated forging and took a month to manufacture one matchlock gun.

It had been more than half a year since Xiao Ming sent matchlock guns to Chang’an. Now that the imitation was successful, Empress Zhao felt a great sense of relief.

Although he didn’t say it, Xiao Ming was now her greatest concern. As long as Xiao Ming was not eliminated, the Crown Prince’s throne would not be stable.

“Matchlock guns are no problem. If cannons can also be imitated, we will no longer fear Xiao Ming,” Empress Zhao suddenly sighed slightly after her excitement.

Regarding cannons, Wang Xi also had a considerable headache. Emperor Xiaowenxuan had also sent people to imitate matchlock guns last time, but the final result ended in failure.

Prince Zhao also had craftsmen imitate cannons, but the cost of these cannons was even higher than the cost of purchased cannons, and the imitated cannons were not as powerful as Qingzhou’s cannons.

Therefore, after deliberation, all the vassal princes decided to purchase Qingzhou cannons, as it saved both money and effort.

“Your Majesty, I also have no way with cannons, but if we bring the firearms camp under our command, wouldn’t we have enough cannons?” Wang Xi said.

Empress Zhao agreed deeply, but she said, “However, the current chief general of the firearms camp is Luo Hong. If we move Luo Hong, wouldn’t that offend Luo Quan and his son Luo Xin, and Luo Quan has always been on good terms with Prince Qi, which would also offend Prince Qi.”

“Your Majesty, once we control the firearms camp, plus our matchlock guns, what is there to fear from Prince Qi? Before the Crown Prince ascends the throne, we must eliminate Prince Qi’s influence in Chang’an and leave no hidden dangers,” Wang Xi’s eyes flashed with a hint of viciousness. “Not just Prince Qi, but the influence of the Second Prince, Third Prince, and Fourth Prince must all be uprooted one by one. For the Crown Prince to ascend the throne smoothly, Your Majesty must not have too many concerns.”

Empress Zhao was somewhat swayed by Wang Xi’s words, but after a brief contemplation, she immediately became alert and said, “Other princes are fine, but if Prince Qi allows the barbarians to enter the pass, wouldn’t the world fall into the hands of the barbarians?”

Speaking of this, Wang Xi smiled triumphantly. He said, “Your Majesty is overthinking. Prince Zhao has sent word that he has dispatched envoys to the barbarians. The Khan of Heaven has promised Prince Zhao that as long as His Royal Highness the Crown Prince ascends the throne and restores the annual tribute, they will assist His Royal Highness the Crown Prince in conquering the world.”

“Barbarians! Has father gone mad? This is inviting a wolf into the house, it’s simply outrageous!”
Empress Zhao’s face suddenly turned extremely ugly.

Wang Xi said unhurriedly, “Your Majesty, you are mistaken. How did the Emperor ascend the throne back then, and how did he use the barbarians to get rid of Prince Kang? Since the Emperor did it, why can’t the Crown Prince do it? It’s just that Prince Kang of yesteryear has become Prince Qi of today. Though the people are different, the situation is always the same.”

“No, ever since the Emperor ascended the throne, he has always felt guilty about this. If it weren’t for his momentary lapse of judgment back then, the barbarians wouldn’t have seized Youzhou, and he would have lived in constant fear ever since. I don’t want the Crown Prince to also humble himself before the barbarians like the Emperor did.”

“Your Majesty, which is more important, the world or temporary pride? What the barbarians want is nothing more than some land in the north. What does it matter if we give it to them? The Great Yu Empire is vast and rich in resources; this small amount of land is nothing. Moreover, once the Crown Prince’s position is stable, we can reclaim it with our firearms,” Wang Xi advised. Back then, Prince Zhao sent him into the palace to stay by Empress Zhao’s side to transmit messages and advise Empress Zhao.

For him, his master was Prince Zhao, not Empress Zhao. Now, everything he did was for the Zhao family to rule the Central Plains, which was what the Zhao family had been planning for generations.

Now that Prince Zhao finally saw hope, how could he change his plans because of Empress Zhao’s thoughts?

So he continued, “His Royal Highness Prince Zhao said, please cooperate with his plan, Your Majesty. Only then can the Crown Prince’s position be stable. Otherwise, you and the Crown Prince should just pray for yourselves.”

As Wang Xi's words fell, Empress Zhao's face suddenly turned pale. She said angrily, "Are you threatening me?"

Chapter 515

"Your Majesty, how could Prince Zhao, being your own father, coerce you? Everything His Highness does is for you and the Crown Prince."

Wang Xi said with a smile, while placing the last golden hairpin in Empress Zhao's hair.

Empress Zhao scoffed twice, a hint of weariness suddenly appearing on her face. She said to Wang Xi, "You may withdraw. I am going to visit His Majesty."

"Yes." Wang Xi's face still held a faint smile.

Supported by palace maids, Empress Zhao turned and left Fengming Palace, heading directly to Bishui Pavilion. After Emperor Xiaowenxuan fell seriously ill, he had been recuperating in Bishui Pavilion, diligently cared for by Consort Zhen.

Logically, I, as the Empress, should have been the one to care for him, but at this time, Emperor Xiaowenxuan had issued an imperial decree to recuperate in Bishui Pavilion, which made me, the Empress, lose face, and because of this, palace rumors increased.

Among them, the rumor that angered me most was that the Emperor's serious illness this time was directly related to me. Thinking of this, a wave of anger surged in my heart.

“Your Majesty.”

Upon reaching Bishui Pavilion, Empress Zhao directly entered the inner chamber. Seeing Empress Zhao enter, Consort Zhen bowed.

Empress Zhao nodded, her eyes no longer holding the familiar intimacy of sisters. With Emperor Xiaowenxuan, the person who maintained the veil of shame between them, falling ill, the imperial concubines in the palace revealed their true colors.

They used every means at their disposal to plan for the rest of their lives.

“You may leave. I have something to say to His Majesty,” Empress Zhao said to Consort Zhen in a commanding tone.

Consort Zhen wanted to say something, but seeing Empress Zhao’s cold gaze, she finally sighed and walked out.

On the bed, Emperor Xiaowenxuan’s face was sallow, his lips pale, and he was so weak that he couldn’t even utter a single word.

At this moment, his gaze fixed on Empress Zhao was unusually complex, yet he still remained silent.

“Your Majesty, why is this?”

Empress Zhao looked at Emperor Xiaowenxuan, her eyes filled with confusion and bewilderment. She had never disliked Consort Zhen before, but because of this incident, she hated her like never before.

Emperor Xiaowenxuan's eyes shifted, and his expression suddenly became somewhat fearful. He dared not look into Empress Zhao's eyes, but desperately searched for Consort Zhen's figure.

A wave of sorrow suddenly swept through Empress Zhao's heart. Her eyes reddened slightly, and she said heartbreakingly, "Do our decades of affection now mean less than Consort Zhen? Even if I am old and faded, and you are unwilling to acknowledge me, even for the sake of the Thirteenth Prince, you should not treat me like this."

Upon mentioning the Thirteenth Prince, Emperor Xiaowenxuan's eyes suddenly became dazed. He looked at Empress Zhao and, for the first time, said weakly, "My life will probably fall into your and the Thirteenth Prince's hands."

"Your Majesty, the Thirteenth Prince is but an infant. How could he harm your life?" Empress Zhao said sharply. "Does Your Majesty dislike me so much that you won't even give a decent excuse?"

"Hehehe..." Emperor Xiaowenxuan suddenly let out a hoarse laugh, but this laughter was filled with despair.

Two months ago, Empress Zhao gave birth to the Thirteenth Prince. That day was the happiest day for him in years. This joy even surpassed Xiao Ming's capture of Shanhai Pass.

Over the years, he and Empress Zhao had a deep affection and always supported each other. Empress Zhao's child was his most beloved child, and it was for Empress Zhao's sake that he always supported the incompetent Crown Prince.

But he never expected his life to one day fall into the hands of Empress Zhao and her son.

Ever since Empress Zhao gave birth to the Thirteenth Prince, the Crown Prince, citing filial piety, had sent blood swallow's nests to Empress Zhao. Because there was too much of this blood swallow's nest, Empress Zhao would always send a bowl to Emperor Xiaowenxuan to nourish his body.

After all, he was now old, and his health was deteriorating day by day.

But he never expected that after drinking it for a month, his body became increasingly weak, until one day he suddenly fainted, and after that, his health declined day by day, until he was finally confined to bed.

After much thought, he grew increasingly suspicious that something was wrong with the bird's nest, because only this blood bird's nest did not come from the Imperial Kitchen.

Thinking of this, he secretly ordered Feng Deshui to investigate, but Feng Deshui never returned after going. Since then, he found that his imperial orders could not leave Bishui Pavilion at all.

At this point, he finally despaired. In his opinion, Empress Zhao must have been impatient to have the Crown Prince ascend the throne.

Because he had once jokingly told her that he would make the Thirteenth Prince the Crown Prince when he grew up. After all, the Thirteenth Prince was also born to Empress Zhao, and was also a legitimate son.

“Your Majesty, you must be delirious from illness.” Empress Zhao’s heart grew heavier. The current Emperor Xiaowenxuan was simply unreasonable to her.

“Cough, cough!”

Emperor Xiaowenxuan coughed violently twice. During this time, he felt his body becoming increasingly weak, and he probably didn’t have much time left. Looking at Empress Zhao, he pleaded, “If you want me to die, I have nothing to say, but do not involve the innocent. Prince Qi is the only one who can stop the barbarians from marching south. If you send Consort Zhen to Qingzhou, Prince Qi will surely remember your kindness. Even if he does not support the Crown Prince, he will not allow the barbarians to enter the pass.”

Empress Zhao grew more and more confused. She said, “Your Majesty, what are you talking about? How could I want Your Majesty to die?”

Emperor Xiaowenxuan looked steadily at Empress Zhao. Ever since he fell ill, he had been wary of Empress Zhao and had never said anything to her. Now that Empress Zhao spoke so sincerely, he suddenly had a thought and asked, “Let me ask you, where did Feng Deshui go?”

“Feng Deshui.” Empress Zhao was suddenly startled. She said, “Didn’t Feng Deshui retire and return to his hometown?”

“Retired and returned to his hometown?” Emperor Xiaowenxuan sneered repeatedly, “I sent him to investigate the matter of this blood swallow’s nest, but now he has suddenly disappeared. Do you think he retired and returned to his hometown?”

Empress Zhao’s expression grew uglier and uglier. Thinking of Wang Xi’s face, a chill suddenly ran down her spine. During this time, it had always been Wang Xi who conveyed the political orders, and everything she heard was what Wang Xi said.

Now, looking back, it seemed that things had changed since she gave birth to the Thirteenth Prince, and the blood swallow’s nest that Emperor Xiaowenxuan mentioned was what he had asked Wang Xi to send.

Before, Wang Xi was very honest by her side, but now Wang Xi seemed to have changed into a different person.

“This is what Wang Xi told me,” Empress Zhao said hesitantly.

Upon hearing this, a hint of understanding suddenly appeared in Emperor Xiaowenxuan’s eyes. He understood that Empress Zhao was probably innocent in this matter. He said, “It’s too late. Everything is too late now. He has already acted. Wanrong, trust me, this is all your father’s conspiracy. Listen to me, take Consort Zhen and the Thirteenth Prince to Qingzhou to seek refuge with Prince Qi. I will now make the Thirteenth Prince the Crown Prince.”

“Father Emperor! You really intend to make the Thirteenth Prince the Crown Prince.”

Just then, a voice suddenly sounded from outside the inner chamber. The Crown Prince walked in with a gloomy face.

Empress Zhao was not a foolish person. At this moment, through Emperor Xiaowenxuan's few words, she had already guessed something. She said angrily, "So it was you, unfilial son! Your Father Emperor suddenly fell ill, and it turns out it was all because of your secret collusion with Wang Xi. This is regicide!"

Chapter 516

The atmosphere in Bishui Pavilion was so oppressive that it felt difficult to breathe.

Outside the inner chamber, Liuli was supporting Consort Zhen. The conversation inside the inner chamber fell clearly into their ears, and Consort Zhen was so shocked that she could barely stand.

Inside the inner chamber, the Crown Prince's face was twisted: "Father Emperor, you are truly ruthless. I have been the Crown Prince for thirty years, and even now you are still thinking of deposing me. I should have believed my maternal grandfather's words long ago, and not waited until today."

"Bastard!" Empress Zhao's body trembled with rage. She raised her hand to slap the Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince instantly grabbed Empress Zhao's hand. He angrily pushed Empress Zhao back, causing her to fall heavily to the ground. He sneered, "From now on, no one can order me around. This Great Yu Empire is mine, and I am the future Emperor!"

"Rebellious son!" Emperor Xiaowenxuan coughed violently, his face turning crimson.

The Crown Prince looked at Emperor Xiaowenxuan and suddenly smiled mischievously. He said, "Father Emperor, didn't you want to know the truth? I will tell you the truth. You guessed it right, the poison was given by my order through Wang Xi. This poison is a chronic poison that will slowly destroy the body over time. But don't worry, you won't die yet. After all, you are still somewhat useful while alive. Once your son has eliminated all other forces in Chang'an, then you can die."

"Also, weren't you wondering where Feng Deshui went?" The Crown Prince suddenly said viciously, "Your son chopped him into minced meat and fed him to the dogs, hahaha!"

"Rebellious son! Rebellious son!" Emperor Xiaowenxuan struggled to get up, but his body was too weak to rise. In his extreme rage, he violently spat out a mouthful of fresh blood.

"Your Majesty!" Empress Zhao exclaimed.

The Crown Prince looked at Emperor Xiaowenxuan with a cold smile. He glanced around Bishui Pavilion, then said, "Father Emperor, you may rest assured and recover in this Bishui Pavilion. From today onwards, no one is allowed to enter or exit Bishui Pavilion without my command."

After a pause, he looked at Empress Zhao: "Mother Empress, if you support your son, then the position of Grand Empress Dowager will still be yours, and your son will let bygones be bygones. If you remain stubborn like Father Emperor, then do not blame your son for being unfilial."

"You rebellious son!" Empress Zhao knelt on Emperor Xiaowenxuan's body, sobbing.

But when her gaze met Emperor Xiaowenxuan's, she saw that familiar look.

In an instant, she suddenly stopped crying. She said, "Now that the overall situation is settled, what else can I choose? I only hope you can spare your younger brother's life."

"So, Mother Empress supports your son." The Crown Prince smiled gently.

Empress Zhao nodded with difficulty.

The Crown Prince was overjoyed. He said, "Since that's the case, Mother Empress, you may return to the palace. This place shall be left to him and Xiao Ming's lowly birth mother."

Empress Zhao turned back to look at Emperor Xiaowenxuan again, then she turned and walked out without hesitation.

The Crown Prince, on the other hand, sneered at Emperor Xiaowenxuan and followed Empress Zhao with Wang Xi. As he passed Consort Zhen, the Crown Prince said mockingly, "Consort Zhen, don't be afraid. You are very useful. I am counting on you to make Xiao Ming enter Chang'an!"

"You're dreaming!" Consort Zhen's willow-like eyebrows shot up, and she spat fiercely.

The Crown Prince was unconcerned. He was now riding high, and he smiled triumphantly. He said, "I will let you personally witness Xiao Ming's death at my hands."

With that, he said to the imperial guards outside Bishui Pavilion, "From today onwards, give them only coarse tea and plain food. If I see a single piece of meat in their meal, I will cut off your heads."

"Yes, Your Highness," the imperial guards said tremblingly.

Nodding with satisfaction, the Crown Prince looked at Du Heng, who was standing outside the door. He said, "General Du, the safety of this palace is now in your hands."

"Your Royal Highness, rest assured. I know every rat hole in this palace clearly. There will be no mistakes," Du Heng said loudly.

The Crown Prince nodded with satisfaction, then walked out of the palace with Wang Xi.

As they walked out, Wang Xi looked back at Du Heng. He said to the Crown Prince, "Your Highness, I still don't feel at ease with Du Heng. This Du Heng has always been loyal to His Majesty, and his relationship with Prince Qi is also close. His son, Du Boyuan, and Xiao Ming are even close friends. Letting him monitor the Emperor, I fear there will be a mishap."

"Imperial Secretary Wang, you're thinking too much. Yang Zhen was also Father Emperor's confidant, and now isn't he also serving under my command? Now that Father Emperor's life hangs by a thread, these generals and officials see clearly that in a few months, or at most a year or two, I will ascend the throne. Du Heng, like those generals, is just a fair-weather friend. Moreover, he only commands three thousand palace guards; he is nothing to fear."

"Your Highness, that's where you're wrong. The Imperial Palace is the center of the Great Yu Empire. Whoever controls the Imperial Palace controls the world. I advise Your Highness to replace the general

in charge of the Imperial Guards,” Wang Xi advised. Back then, Prince Zhao sent him into the palace to stay by Empress Zhao’s side to transmit messages and advise Empress Zhao.

For him, his master was Prince Zhao, not Empress Zhao. Everything he did now was for the Zhao family to rule the Central Plains, which was what the Zhao family had been planning for generations.

Now that Prince Zhao finally saw hope, how could he change his plans because of Empress Zhao’s thoughts?

So he continued, “His Royal Highness Prince Zhao said, please cooperate with his plan, Your Majesty. Only then can the Crown Prince’s position be stable. Otherwise, you and the Crown Prince should just pray for yourselves.”

As Wang Xi’s words fell, Empress Zhao’s face suddenly turned pale. She said angrily, “Are you threatening me?”

In Bishui Pavilion, the maids serving Consort Zhen kept sobbing. They had been crying non-stop after the Crown Prince left.

“Why are you crying? If you want to cry, go outside and cry!” Liuli said angrily to the maids. Consort Zhen was already sad about this, and these maids, instead of comforting her, were making things worse.

A palace maid said, “How can we not cry? We all heard the Crown Prince’s words. This means we all know this secret. Can we still live knowing such a thing?”

“Exactly, anyone who hears such a secret as regicide will die.”

“Wuwu...”

Liuli was speechless upon hearing this.

Consort Zhen then said, “I’m sorry, it’s my fault for involving everyone. If you hadn’t served me, you wouldn’t have suffered. Here, I apologize to you.”

“Your Majesty!” The palace maids were shocked and immediately helped Consort Zhen up.

A palace maid said, “Your Majesty has treated us with immense kindness. How can we accept Your Majesty’s profound bow? We are merely heartbroken, but even so, we will definitely stand with Your Majesty through thick and thin.”

Consort Zhen sighed. With such a huge change happening in Chang’an city, getting the news out was the most important thing, otherwise, Xiao Ming being kept in the dark might be detrimental to him.

If she could tell him the news, Xiao Ming could prepare earlier.

Chapter 517

Subtle sobs from Bishui Pavilion reached outside the courtyard.

The imperial guards standing at the gate looked at each other. The captain in charge of guarding Bishui Pavilion said to Du Heng, "General, we are enough here. As long as we are here, Consort Zhen can't escape."

"Hmm, there must be no mistakes. You all heard clearly how His Royal Highness the Crown Prince instructed you," Du Heng said coolly, his gaze sweeping over Zhao Yujie. Zhao Yujie was the deputy commander of the inner palace imperial guards.

Having given these instructions, Du Heng turned and headed out of the palace. It was already getting late, and it was Zhao Yujie's turn to stand guard tonight, so he could go back to rest.

Watching Zhao Yujie's figure disappear at the end of the pebble path, Zhao Yujie, who had been respectfully expressions, suddenly revealed a cold smile.

At this moment, one of the soldiers said, "Captain, why doesn't His Royal Highness the Crown Prince hand over the command of these inner palace imperial guards to you? This Du Heng is a close confidant of the Emperor, which is worrying."

Zhao Yujie said coldly, "It is precisely because of this that His Royal Highness the Crown Prince sent us to guard Bishui Pavilion. It shows that His Royal Highness the Crown Prince also does not trust him. However, only he can mobilize these inner palace imperial guards. If we were to move against him now, it would inevitably lead to a massacre. Moreover, this Du Heng, like Yang Zhen, actively pledged allegiance to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince also has doubts."

“Hehe, I used to think this Du Heng was a loyal minister, but I didn’t expect him to be nothing more than a fence-sitter,” another soldier mocked.

“Loyal minister? How many loyal ministers are there left in this Great Yu Empire? Being able to protect one’s status and wealth is what truly matters,” Zhao Yujie said lightly. Initially, according to the plan, they were supposed to kill Du Heng and take control of the inner palace.

However, they never expected Du Heng to pledge allegiance to the Crown Prince first, and because of this, they smoothly gained control of the inner palace.

‘It’s a pity I was a step too late.’ Zhao Yujie felt a little annoyed. He was just one step away from becoming the commander of the inner palace imperial guards, and now he still had to be subservient to others.

However, he believed he wouldn’t have to wait too long. Once the Crown Prince ascended the throne, Du Heng would surely die, so he should make himself known to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince now.

Thinking of this, he looked into Bishui Pavilion and said sternly, “Keep your eyes wide open and watch carefully. Not even a fly can get in, otherwise, watch your heads.”

“Yes,” the imperial guards at the gate said in unison.

Outside the palace gate, Du Heng mounted his horse and headed home.

At this time, Chang’an city was still prosperous and as peaceful as usual, showing no signs of abnormality, and the common people were completely unaware.

But what they didn't know was that great changes had already taken place within the imperial palace.

Turning from Zhuque Avenue to Fang Street, then entering the civilian quarters, Du Heng instinctively felt a hint of danger when passing a crossroads in the quarter.

Just as he reined in his horse, preparing to escape, sixteen people suddenly appeared in front of and behind him.

He vigilantly looked at these sixteen faces, five of whom were actually Chang'an common people who had always lived in this residential area.

"Who are you!" Du Heng drew his sword and said angrily.

As soon as he finished speaking, a voice sounded, "General Du, our Prince has treated you well, so why did you pledge allegiance to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince? This is truly disheartening."

Du Heng looked towards the source of the voice. At this moment, the young man stepped aside, and a person walked out, stroking his chin.

"Li San!" Du Heng was greatly surprised to see the newcomer.

"It is me." Li San's smile was somewhat eerie. "General Du, let's talk. You should understand what they are holding. Your martial arts, however high, are useless."

Du Heng's eyes swept over the hands of Li San and the others. These were all short, stick-like weapons, and he immediately understood what they were.

"Firearms." Du Heng knew he couldn't resist at all. He had seen the power of these firearms; armor simply couldn't stop them.

Li San gestured, and a secret guard member immediately blindfolded Du Heng with a cloth.

Then Du Heng only felt himself getting into a carriage and traveling a long distance. When he could see again, he found himself in a woodshed, with Li San facing him.

"General Du, let's get straight to the point. How are His Majesty and Consort Zhen now?" Li San asked coldly. To rescue Consort Zhen, he had to use every means necessary.

Du Heng looked steadily at Li San. He did not answer Li San's question but said, "I didn't expect Yang Zhen's words to be true. This secret service indeed exists."

"Yang Zhen." Li San showed a hint of disdain. "Yang Zhen of Lijing Gate? Truly a traitorous dog who changes allegiances with the wind."

“That’s wrong. Whether it’s a treacherous official or a loyal one, who isn’t trying to survive in these troubled times?” Du Heng’s voice was a little hoarse.

Li San said contemptuously, “So General Du and those who betray their country for glory in court are all the same. In that case, I can kill you with a clear conscience.”

With that, Li San raised his short-barreled firearm and aimed it at Du Heng.

“Kill me, and who will rescue Consort Zhen and the Emperor from the Imperial Palace?” Du Heng looked directly at Li San, seemingly having guessed Li San’s thoughts.

Li San suddenly chuckled upon hearing this, then he slowly put down his firearm. “General Du is indeed a clever man, but sometimes cleverness can lead to mistakes. Do you think I can’t rescue Consort Zhen without you?”

“If that’s the case, why did you come to me?” Du Heng still looked confident.

Li San said leisurely, “It’s for purging the corrupt officials and removing the wicked ministers!”

As soon as he finished speaking, Li San raised his firearm and aimed it at Du Heng’s forehead, “General Du, you should have expected this day.”

“Wait!” Just as Li San was about to pull the trigger, Du Heng suddenly spoke.

“What, does General Du have any last words? Or are you scared...” Li San said contemptuously.

Du Heng looked at Li San, seemingly having made a great decision. He said, “If the Emperor told me to feign allegiance to the Crown Prince, would you believe it?”

“The Emperor told you to feign allegiance to the Crown Prince?” Li San’s expression changed slightly.

Du Heng sighed softly. He had not intended to reveal this secret, but now Li San made it impossible for him to remain silent. Otherwise, if he died before achieving success, how could he face Emperor Xiaowenxuan?

“What’s going on?” Li San’s expression became confused.

Du Heng then slowly said, “After the Emperor’s first faint, he already suspected the East Palace and the Empress. When he woke up, he secretly summoned me to discuss this.”

The Emperor knew well that if the Crown Prince dared to act like this, he must be fully prepared, and there must be people planted by the Crown Prince within the inner palace guards.

In order to control this palace, the Crown Prince would definitely kill me. Rather than that, it’s better to feign allegiance to the Crown Prince, perhaps I can save my life and act when the opportunity arises.”

After a pause, Du Heng continued, “Moreover, a father knows his son best. In the Emperor’s view, the Crown Prince is incompetent, conceited, and arrogant.”

After I pledged allegiance, the Crown Prince was indeed extremely happy and did not make things difficult for me. However, what the Emperor truly worried about was not the Crown Prince, but Prince Zhao.

Now, all the schemes and intrigues within the palace bear Prince Zhao’s shadow. Once Prince Zhao enters the capital, with his cunning and foresight, it will be impossible to reverse the situation.

Although I really want to see Chancellor Fei and General Luo, Yang Zhen has pledged allegiance to the Crown Prince, and his spies are everywhere in Chang’an. I am also a key person under his surveillance, so I simply cannot transmit the news.”

Chapter 518

“Yang Zhen!”

Du Heng’s words made Li San frown. He carefully examined Du Heng’s eyes, trying to determine if Du Heng was lying.

After a moment of contemplation, Li San said, “If you want me to believe you, show me evidence.”

Du Heng sneered, and countered with a question, “How can I trust you? You and Yang Zhen both walk in the dark. Yang Zhen can betray the Emperor, and you might not be able to betray Prince Qi.”

Li San was startled by Du Heng's words.

"General Du, Li San's words are not credible, but are my words credible?" While the two were staring at each other, a voice suddenly came. Du Heng then looked outside. A graceful figure entered his sight, and he was greatly surprised, exclaiming, "Princess Pingyang, what's going on? Why is Princess Pingyang with Li San?"

The person who arrived was none other than Princess Pingyang. She sighed slightly and said, "I know everything that happened in the palace. Last night, Yang Zhen let slip when he was drunk here, otherwise I would still be kept in the dark. Hmph, this Crown Prince is simply rebellious."

Du Heng's spirits were instantly lifted. In his opinion, Princess Pingyang's influence in Chang'an was much greater than Xiao Ming's. He was overjoyed and said loudly, "Princess Pingyang, now only you can save the Emperor!"

"General Du overestimates me. To speak of it, I am merely a woman. At a time like this, who would be willing to lose their life for a woman? Moreover, Prince Zhao's army will arrive outside Chang'an city in a few days. How can I turn the tide? In my opinion, the only way to save one's life now is to stay far away from Chang'an city."

Li San looked at Princess Pingyang and nodded. This was exactly the result of their discussion overnight.

Last night, while he was planning the rescue of Consort Zhen, Princess Pingyang suddenly arrived at his residence, led by a Chang'an secret guard.

At that time, he was so shocked that he almost shot Princess Pingyang, but when Pingyang explained her purpose and told him about the palace affairs, he hesitated and decided to cooperate with Pingyang.

Because his purpose this time was only to rescue Consort Zhen, Emperor Xiaowenxuan was not included, but Princess Pingyang requested to rescue the Emperor as well.

At this moment, he naturally couldn't say that Xiao Ming's order was only for Consort Zhen, so he had to nod in agreement, because even if his plan had Princess Pingyang's help, it would be perfect.

And tonight, Princess Pingyang had the coachman drive Yang Zhen's carriage to help him capture Du Heng. Although there were many informants at Lijing Gate, no one dared to monitor Yang Zhen.

After all, Yang Zhen did not want anyone to know about his secret meeting with Princess Pingyang.

And to rescue Consort Zhen and the Emperor, the two discussed kidnapping and threatening Du Heng, but they didn't expect Du Heng to say what he had just said.

"Entering the capital in a few days." Du Heng's face was ashen. He said, "There is indeed Prince Zhao's shadow in this."

"It's too late to talk about Prince Zhao now. Let's think about how to rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen. But Du Heng, can I trust you now?" Princess Pingyang asked hesitantly.

When she learned from Yang Zhen that the Crown Prince was attempting regicide, she was greatly alarmed. The Crown Prince poisoning Emperor Xiaowenxuan was a minor matter, but the Crown Prince falsely issuing an imperial decree to summon Prince Zhao's army into the capital was a major one.

Born into the royal family, she naturally saw through court affairs. In her opinion, the real threat now was not the Crown Prince but Prince Zhao.

If the Crown Prince ascended the throne, the empire would still be named Xiao, but if Prince Zhao entered the capital, the empire would be named Zhao from then on, and the Crown Prince would probably not live long. The final result would be that Prince Zhao would support the Thirteenth Prince, who was still in swaddling clothes, and he would manipulate the entire court from behind the scenes.

Thinking of this, she also broke out in a cold sweat. If Chang'an were controlled by Prince Zhao, her current status and dignity would be completely lost, and her fate would probably only be that of a prostitute in the entertainment quarter.

Precisely because of this, after a brief thought, she decided to help Li San rescue Consort Zhen.

Ever since she experienced the comfortable life in Qingzhou last time, she had fallen in love with that place.

There were no enemies or friends in the court. Now she quite liked her nephew, Xiao Ming. So after learning about a secret agent's residence from Yang Zhen, she went to find this secret agent, and then had this secret agent take her to Li San's residence.

"Princess Pingyang, on my chest is a secret letter personally written by His Majesty to His Royal Highness Prince Qi. It is only because there are too many informants at Lijing Gate that I have no way to send the secret letter out."

“Secret letter?” Li San heard this and reached into Du Heng’s clothes, indeed finding a letter from within.

Princess Pingyang looked up at the handwriting on the envelope and nodded, “This is indeed His Majesty’s handwriting.”

For safety, Li San then opened the letter and briefly read its contents. The handwriting matched the handwriting on the envelope. Only then did he slowly nod.

The situation in Chang’an was very complex now, and Li San dared not trust anyone lightly. This secret letter was indeed for Prince Qi, because in the letter, Emperor Xiaowenxuan clearly explained the situation in the palace to Xiao Ming.

“General Du, I was rash.” Li San called a secret guard and handed him the secret letter, instructing him to send it to Qingzhou.

Du Heng sighed. He said, “No matter, the situation in Chang’an is complex now, so it’s normal for you to be careful. However, time is short. How can just the three of us rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen?”

“General Du, what we worry about most is the inner palace. It is precisely because of this that we risked capturing you. Now, the lives of the Emperor and Consort Zhen are in the hands of the inner palace imperial guards, so we dare not act rashly,” Li San said.

Princess Pingyang nodded. “We have already informed Grand General Luo Quan and Chancellor Fei about the palace affairs in detail. As long as General Du can protect the Emperor for two hours, the firearms camp can cooperate from inside and outside to rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen.”

"Firearms camp!" A glimmer of light seemed to flash in Du Heng's eyes. At this moment, he couldn't help himself. He sighed that Emperor Xiaowenxuan was truly far-sighted, having entrusted the firearms camp to Luo Hong before this incident.

In his opinion, perhaps Emperor Xiaowenxuan already had a hint of doubt, but he never expected his beloved Crown Prince to commit regicide.

After a moment of contemplation, Du Heng said, "Since that's the case, we must rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen before Prince Zhao enters the capital. But with the city defense camp in the Crown Prince's hands, even if we rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen, how will we escape Chang'an?"

Li San then chuckled, "You don't need to worry about that. I naturally have a way. General Du only needs to withstand the attack for half a two hour."

Du Heng looked at Li San, only to see Li San's confident demeanor. So he said, "Li San, this matter is of great importance. We are all risking our lives, so there must be no mistakes."

Chapter 519

In the woodshed, Li San's expression was solemn.

"General Du, I dare to stake my life on it."

Princess Pingyang then said, "Don't dawdle any longer, General Du. Even without you, we will still act adventurously tomorrow morning. However, with you, we have a better chance of success."

“Since that’s the case, I will certainly pledge to cooperate with Princess Pingyang until death. However, I have one more request for Princess Pingyang,” Du Heng said hesitantly.

“Please speak, General Du.”

“I have now put life and death aside. My only concern is my wife and children. I hope Princess Pingyang can take my unworthy son and wife to Qingzhou tonight to seek refuge with His Royal Highness Prince Qi.” Du Heng’s eyes held a hint of determination.

Princess Pingyang sighed, she said, “I promise you.”

Du Heng nodded. He said, “In that case, I will have no regrets, and will only wait to act with Princess Pingyang tomorrow morning.”

“Then you can stay at the Princess’s mansion tonight. If you go back alone now, it will surely arouse suspicion. Tomorrow morning, I will send someone to escort you into the palace.”

With that, Princess Pingyang led Li San out of the woodshed.

When they got outside, Princess Pingyang said to Li San, “I will send someone to escort you back now. Tomorrow’s rescue will depend on you.”

“Yes, Princess Pingyang.” Li San bowed in response.

At this time, Princess Pingyang called the mansion's coachman, and Li San boarded the carriage and headed towards his residence.

The carriage gradually receded with bumps. At this time, Li San couldn't help but fall into deep thought. Ever since he arrived in Chang'an, he had been planning the rescue of Consort Zhen to prevent any unforeseen circumstances.

However, he never expected the court situation to undergo such a significant change, so much so that he had to rescue Consort Zhen immediately.

But being in Chang'an, and being outnumbered, he was well aware that his plan carried risks, yet he could not afford any risk at all.

Because once he failed, he might face the death of Consort Zhen.

So when Princess Pingyang found him, after weighing the situation, he quickly decided to cooperate with Princess Pingyang, which would make his plan even more secure.

However, despite this, he didn't fully trust Princess Pingyang and Du Heng. This trip to Chang'an, he was already prepared for sacrifice, and this was not his ultimate dead-end plan.

He was well aware that he had been targeted by the Lijing Gate upon entering Chang'an. He was using himself as bait to mislead the Lijing Gate, and beyond him, the secret police had a separate rescue plan.

And Princess Pingyang's joining was merely icing on the cake.

"Many people will probably die tomorrow." Li San looked at the Chang'an streets gradually shrouded in night, his expression grim.

At the Princess's Mansion, Princess Pingyang went straight back to her sleeping quarters after Li San left. At this time, Yang Zhen had woken up, his face filled with panic.

"Princess Pingyang, why is this?"

Yang Zhen was now tied up tightly with five ropes. Ouyang Mu stood in front of him like an iron tower, his sharp sword pointing at Yang Zhen's chest.

"Why?" Princess Pingyang, at this moment, showed none of her usual grace and charm, her face only as cold as winter. "Betraying the Emperor and pledging allegiance to the Crown Prince, isn't that enough for me to punish you?"

Yang Zhen's head still ached a little. He tried hard to recall the events of last night and finally remembered telling Princess Pingyang everything about the palace after getting drunk. "You put a sedative in my wine."

"Of course, otherwise how would you have told me everything?" Princess Pingyang sneered.

A hint of panic flashed in Yang Zhen's eyes, but after a moment of thought, he suddenly said, "Princess Pingyang, a wise man submits to circumstances. The Emperor is deeply poisoned, and his life is now merely hanging by soup and medicine. He won't live much longer. Moreover, Prince Zhao's troops are about to enter the capital. If you follow me, I can guarantee you glory and wealth for the rest of your life. Otherwise, your end will be miserable. Prince Zhao's troops are all like wolves and tigers, and Princess Pingyang will not be able to serve them!"

"Bastard!" Ouyang Mu was furious upon hearing this. He kicked Yang Zhen in the chest, sending Yang Zhen flying two meters away.

Princess Pingyang's face also turned pale with anger, but she understood that Yang Zhen could not die yet. She needed Yang Zhen to remove all the informants near the firearms camp.

"Cough, cough."

Ouyang Mu's strength was immense. With that kick, a trickle of blood flowed from Yang Zhen's mouth.

Princess Pingyang said, "Yang Zhen, you have misunderstood me. Do you truly believe I am merely a person who indulges in pleasures? And do you truly believe I would fancy you? Whether I can escape from Prince Zhao's grasp is my business, but you will not live to see the day you meet Prince Zhao."

Yang Zhen's face changed. He was filled with regret at this moment, having never expected to be ruined by Princess Pingyang.

"What exactly do you want?"

"It's simple. You immediately order the withdrawal of all informants near the firearms camp," Princess Pingyang said.

Yang Zhen immediately realized something. "You are planning an uprising!"

"You are so rebellious, you should have expected this day," Princess Pingyang said sternly. "Give the order, or I will kill you now."

As if responding to Princess Pingyang's command, Ouyang Mu's long sword, pressed against Yang Zhen's chest, exerted a little more force. Yang Zhen felt a sharp pain, and the fear of death clutched his heart.

"Princess, you can't defeat Prince Zhao," Yang Zhen still refused to give up and continued to persuade.

Princess Pingyang remained cold and indifferent. She said to Yang Zhen, "You still don't understand. I never participated in the struggles between the princes simply because no matter who won, the Great Yu Empire would still be named Xiao. But Prince Zhao's wild ambition is known to all. How could I live under his power? I will give you one last chance. Even if you don't withdraw your informants, the firearms camp will still launch an uprising. It just means more obstacles."

At this point, Yang Zhen finally understood Princess Pingyang's intentions. 'I never expected that even a princess would remember the royal ancestral teachings.' "Alright, I'll have the informants monitoring the firearms camp withdrawn."

"Give him paper and pen," Princess Pingyang said coldly.

At this time, the servants of the Princess's mansion immediately placed paper and pen in front of Yang Zhen. After hesitating for a moment, Yang Zhen took up the brush and wrote a handwritten order to withdraw the informants, which he handed to Princess Pingyang.

"Princess Pingyang, are you satisfied now?" Yang Zhen asked.

Glancing at the content of the handwritten order, Princess Pingyang slowly nodded. "I will send someone to deliver the handwritten order. Your Lijing Gate is full of tricks. To prevent any unforeseen circumstances, you will have to remain here."

Yang Zhen nodded dejectedly. Just then, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck, and then lost consciousness.

Ouyang Mu withdrew his hand and said to Princess Pingyang, "Your Highness, what's the use of keeping Yang Zhen? It's better to kill him."

"No, keeping him still has some use," Princess Pingyang said, frowning. This time, rescuing Consort Zhen and the Emperor was a desperate gamble for her, but at the same time, she needed to secure a retreat for herself.

Chapter 520

In the night, Chang'an was so quiet that a dropped needle could be heard.

A dark figure emerged from the Princess's mansion and headed towards the location of the firearms camp. Carrying Yang Zhen's handwritten order, the Princess's mansion servant passed through several rounds of checks by patrolling soldiers and proceeded towards the firearms camp.

Meanwhile, Li San had returned to his residence. Unlike the streets outside the residential area, there were no soldiers patrolling inside the residential area. As night fell, Li San blew out the candle in his room.

Groping in the dark, Li San lifted his bed board. A faint light came from beneath the bed board. This was a secret tunnel that connected Luo Quan's and Fei Ji's residences.

After the secret police entered Chang'an, this secret tunnel had already begun to be excavated, so that Fei Ji and Luo Quan could secretly discuss the changes in Chang'an city and how to deal with them.

And because Luo Quan's residence and Fei Ji's residence were only two hundred meters apart, the excavation of this secret tunnel was not difficult, but even so, this secret excavation still took almost three months.

Every day, the secret agents responsible for the excavation would pretend to be grain merchants, storing grain and then transporting it out, but in reality, what was being transported out was nothing more than the earth from the secret tunnel.

Following the secret tunnel downwards, Li San headed towards one end of the tunnel, which was Luo Quan's residence.

"Thump thump thump, thump thump thump."

Upon reaching the exit, Li San knocked six times consecutively. This was their secret signal. After the sound, the exit was opened, and the butler of the general's mansion was standing guard nearby. Follow current novels on novelfire(.)net

"Commander Li, the Grand General has been waiting for a long time. Please come in quickly," the old butler said solemnly.

Li San nodded and followed the old butler to the main hall of the general's mansion. He saw Luo Quan, clad in armor with a sharp sword hanging at his waist, examining the Chang'an map on the wall.

"Grand General." Li San bowed respectfully. Chang'an was in extreme decay now, and the only people he could truly trust in Chang'an were Luo Quan and Chancellor Fei. After all, one had a son in the Qingzhou Army, and the other was Prince Qi's father-in-law.

Luo Quan turned to look at Li San and asked, "How is Du Heng? Did you kill him?"

"No, General Du claimed to be acting under His Majesty's orders, and he is still in the Princess's mansion," Li San said.

Luo Quan frowned upon hearing this, "At this time, truth and falsehood are hard to distinguish. We cannot blindly trust him."

"The Grand General is absolutely right. Therefore, to prevent Du Heng from leaking secrets, the Princess kept Du Heng in the Princess's mansion. Now there are secret guards secretly watching in the Princess's mansion. If anything unexpected happens, with my people there, neither Du Heng nor the Princess will survive," Li San said.

Out of caution, he did not expose the secret guards in the Princess's mansion, but had them constantly monitor the Princess's mansion. As Luo Quan said, at this time, no one could be fully trusted.

"Hmm, as expected of Prince Qi's people, their thoughts are indeed meticulous." Luo Quan then looked at the map of Chang'an city again. He said, "The firearms camp currently only has eight thousand musketeers, while the Right Guard has fifty thousand troops. The outer palace imperial guards number twenty thousand, but these outer palace imperial guards are very troublesome. Alas, it's a pity that the Jinwu Guard is stationed outside the city. If they were to assist, we wouldn't have to worry."

Li San said, "Grand General, our purpose this time is only to rescue Consort Zhen and His Majesty. Breaking into the palace is secondary. The real purpose is to attract the forces of the inner and outer palace imperial guards, and with the cannons of the firearms camp, the city gate can be shattered in an instant."

Luo Quan sighed, "You're right. This time, as long as we can rescue Consort Zhen and His Majesty, then with the support of His Royal Highness Prince Qi, we can rise again. For this, even if I sacrifice my life, it would not be a loss."

"Don't be afraid, Grand General, I'll be with you."

Just then, a voice sounded, and it was Fei Ji walking towards them.

Luo Quan said, "It's a pressing matter now. Why are you only just arriving?"

"I have to stir up chaos in Chang'an city, otherwise how can I take the opportunity to rescue the Emperor and Consort Zhen?" Fei Ji said.

Li San had already understood everything. He explained, "Today, Chancellor Fei personally wrote letters informing the Third and Fourth Princes about the palace affairs. The Third and Fourth Princes have been suspicious during this time. Now that Chancellor Fei has personally informed them, coupled with the firearms camp attacking the city tomorrow, they will have no choice but to believe it."

"Hmm, that makes sense. Many of the generals in the Left Guard are people of the Third and Fourth Princes. Tomorrow, even if they don't want to help, they will certainly flee for their lives. Once Prince Zhao enters the capital, they will only be reduced to hostages," Luo Quan said.

Fei Ji then said, "We cannot control the actions of the Third and Fourth Princes. The most reliable is still ourselves. I have already gathered all the guards in my mansion, just waiting to attack the city with the firearms camp tomorrow morning."

"All the guards in my mansion are also ready," Luo Quan's face showed a hint of determination. Then he looked at Li San, "Li San, our families are entrusted to you."

Li San's expression became solemn. He nodded heavily.

Having settled this, the three continued to discuss the siege of the city for the next day, and then also agreed to spread the news of the Crown Prince's regicide throughout Chang'an city early tomorrow morning to create chaos.

While the three were secretly discussing this matter, the Third Prince and the Fourth Prince were also like ants on a hot pan.

They were already suspicious of Emperor Xiaowenxuan's serious illness, and now Fei Ji's letter suddenly made them panic.

"Third Brother, this time we should help each other. The Crown Prince committed regicide and usurped the throne, and he will definitely kill us both next. Prince Zhao's one hundred thousand Xuanjia Iron Cavalry are about to besiege the city. If we don't act now, it will be too late." Today, the Fourth Prince used the excuse of a banquet to stay at the Third Prince's mansion, and the two had been discussing this matter.

Pacing back and forth, the Third Prince said impatiently, "What's the rush? What if this is Xiao Ming's conspiracy? We should just watch from the sidelines now. Consort Zhen is trapped in the palace, and Xiao Ming should be the most anxious. If he doesn't move, we can't move."

The Fourth Prince's anxious expression did not diminish. He said, "What if it's true? How should we deal with ourselves from now on?"

"How to deal with ourselves? If Prince Zhao enters the capital, this empire might be named Zhao instead of Xiao in the future. You and I can only return to Yan and Chu respectively."

The Fourth Prince noticed the change in the Third Prince's wording. He now understood the Third Prince's thoughts. He said, "Our imperial concubines are also in the palace. Even if we go our separate ways, we should take them with us, after all, this is our imperial concubine's maternal family."

The Third Prince nodded, "So I said we should just watch and wait for Xiao Ming's people to move first. Only then will we have a chance to win."

"Since that's the case, we'll continue to wait," the Fourth Prince sighed, then he sat down, his eyes fixed on the burning candle.

As time passed little by little, the night gradually receded. Just as the two were feeling very drowsy, a roar of cannons suddenly sounded.

The Third Prince and the Fourth Prince stood up at the same time. The Third Prince said, "Let's each dispatch our troops to attack the Imperial Palace."