

## I. Dynasty 531

### Chapter 531

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Everyone’s voices were impassioned, and the tea on the table seemed to tremble.

At this moment, the officials and generals in the government office were all boiling with enthusiasm, because the young man in front of them was not only the ruler of the fief, but also the future monarch of Great Yu Empire. However, for this path to monarchy, they still needed to assist him.

After briefly discussing the last will with everyone to gain the moral high ground, Xiao Ming said to Niu Ben, “Commander Niu, the situation is urgent. Military training must not be relaxed. War could break out at any time.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I have already moved the Qingzhou Army to Yunzhou. Yunzhou is the gateway to the fief. If the Prince of Zhao attacks, he must pass through Yunzhou. We can block the invading enemy outside the fief there.” Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming nodded and then said to Pang Yukun, “Chief Grand Councillor Pang, now you must immediately inventory the reserve grain in all prefectures and counties. Grain is the lifeblood of the army and there must be no mistakes.”

Then he turned to Zhan Xingchang, “This time, the Prince of Zhao and the barbarians are in collusion. The Prince of Zhao might use barbarian soldiers to sweep across Great Yu Empire. You will go to

Youzhou tomorrow to take charge of the command and must hold back the barbarians. If necessary, use offense as defense.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Zhan Xingchang said loudly.

After giving these instructions, Xiao Ming dismissed everyone. The situation in Chang’an was still unclear, and he didn’t know what the Prince of Zhao and other vassal kings would do next.

However, in this situation, he could not be idle. In the next two days, he would dispatch Fiji and Luo Quan to Jinling City and Jizhou City respectively.

He needed to ascertain the attitudes of the Prince of Wei and the Prince of Yong to determine his strategy towards them.

As he was deep in thought, a charming voice suddenly rang out, “Nephew, what are you thinking about?”

“Aunt?”

It was Princess Pingyang who had arrived. Xiao Ming was slightly surprised. He hadn’t seen Princess Pingyang disembark at the pier earlier and thought she had remained in Chang’an.

“What? Did you think Aunt was captured by the Prince of Zhao?” Princess Pingyang said with a smile on her face.

Xiao Ming chuckled awkwardly, "I didn't see Aunt on the ship, so I really thought Aunt had stayed in Chang'an."

"Aunt isn't that foolish. How could the Prince of Zhao treat me well if he entered the capital?" Princess Pingyang sighed, then she said, "Alas, now that Great Yu Empire has suffered this calamity, Aunt has nowhere to go. I wonder if nephew can take Aunt in?"

As she spoke, Princess Pingyang looked at Xiao Ming with a pitiful expression.

Li San had already told Xiao Ming about Princess Pingyang's role this time. It could be said that if Princess Pingyang had not discovered the Crown Prince's conspiracy in advance, Concubine Zhen and a group of ministers would not have been able to escape Chang'an at all.

So he said, "This time, Aunt deserves great credit for rescuing Mother Concubine. I am grateful beyond words, so how could I not welcome Aunt?"

"At least you have some conscience." Princess Pingyang said in her usual languid manner, "Since that's the case, Aunt will give you another gift."

With that, Princess Pingyang clapped her hands, and Yang Zhen was escorted in by Ouyang Mu from outside.

"Nephew, do you recognize this person?" Princess Pingyang said.

“Of course, isn’t this Commander Yang Zhen of Lijinmen? This Commander Yang betrayed Father Emperor and sided with the Crown Prince. I remember it clearly.” Xiao Ming said bitterly.

Yang Zhen was already in despair. In Chang’an, Princess Pingyang had used his identity to escape Chang’an City in the middle of the night, and now she was giving him to King Qi as a gift. Check latest chapters at [novel~fire~net](#)

Princess Pingyang smiled, “Nephew, how’s this gift?”

“Aunt, this gift is too grand. How can I repay Aunt?” Xiao Ming said. Princess Pingyang’s gesture of goodwill must mean she wanted something. This aunt was a shrewd person.

“Aunt has no other requests, just wishes for a place to settle in Qingzhou and live a peaceful life here from now on,” Princess Pingyang sighed.

Xiao Ming understood. He said to Princess Pingyang, “The mansion Aunt requested last time is already prepared. If Aunt doesn’t mind, you can move in tonight.”

Princess Pingyang had only just escaped to Qingzhou today, and was both tired and exhausted. Hearing this, a broad smile appeared on her face. She said, “In that case, Aunt will trouble you. With so many officials fleeing to Qingzhou, you must be having a headache.”

Xiao Ming indeed needed time to sort things out now. He didn’t try to make her stay and said, “Aunt, please.”

Nodding, Princess Pingyang and Ouyang Mu were led by guards to her mansion.

At this time, Xiao Ming sent someone to call Li San over.

“Yang Zhen! Princess Pingyang has arrived?” Li San was a bit surprised.

“That’s right, she just left, and she even left Yang Zhen for me.” Xiao Ming said. This Princess Pingyang indeed had some ability, and this time, judging by her appearance, she seemed to be planning to stay in Qingzhou permanently. If so, he would have to send secret guards to keep an eye on her, lest she cause any trouble in Qingzhou.

Li San exclaimed, “Her Royal Highness Princess is indeed an extremely shrewd person. By sending this Yang Zhen to Qingzhou, she is essentially giving Lijinmen to Your Highness. After all, only Yang Zhen knows how to contact the members of Lijinmen, and Yang Zhen holds a large amount of confidential information.”

This was exactly what Xiao Ming was thinking. Lijinmen was spread throughout Great Yu Empire, and it had been developing secretly since the founding of the dynasty by Emperor Gaozu. Although Xiao Ming was very confident in his secret guards, he had to admit that in terms of coverage, they were inferior to Lijinmen.

Hearing Li San and Xiao Ming’s conversation, Yang Zhen hurriedly said, “Your Highness, spare my life, Your Highness, spare my life! As long as Your Highness spares me, I am willing to hand over Lijinmen to Your Highness.”

“Hmph, whether your dog’s life can be spared depends on whether you can reveal Lijinmen and the secrets of Great Yu Empire.” Xiao Ming said, then he said to Li San, “Yang Zhen is yours.”

Li San excitedly said, “Yes, Your Highness.”

Yang Zhen was also full of gratitude, “Thank Your Highness for not killing me, thank Your Highness for not killing me.”

Waving his hand, Xiao Ming dismissed Li San with Yang Zhen as if shooing flies. He could spare Yang Zhen’s life, but he didn’t say he would free him. Life imprisonment was still an option.

After dealing with these complicated matters, Xiao Ming then headed to the royal residence. Concubine Zhen and the others were still waiting for him at the royal residence. Moreover, some princes and princesses had also come with Concubine Zhen this time, and he still had to comfort them.

After all, he was now the most authoritative person in this large family.

Under the protection of Zhao Long and Zhao Hu, Xiao Ming arrived at King Qi’s residence. At this time, Lu Luo and Ziyuan were waiting at the gate.

Upon seeing Xiao Ming, Ziyuan said, “Your Highness, Her Highness and the princesses and princes are all waiting for Your Highness in the main hall.”

Xiao Ming nodded and walked straight to the main hall. In the main hall, Concubine Zhen was sitting below the main seat, and the princes and princesses were gathered around Concubine Zhen. Fei Yue'er was also accompanying Concubine Zhen, saying something.

Upon seeing Xiao Ming, Princess Xiangcheng was the first to cry and run towards him, shouting, "Seventh Brother!"

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"Seventh Brother..."

Cries suddenly filled the main hall. Princess Xiangcheng's voice immediately ignited the fear that had been haunting these princes and princesses for days.

Princess Xiangcheng cried all the way to Xiao Ming, grabbing his arm and holding on tightly.

Other princes and princesses also came to his side, looking as if they had been bullied and were seeking their elder brother for justice.

"It's alright. Now that you're in Qingzhou, Seventh Brother won't let you be bullied." Xiao Ming comforted them. These princes and princesses who fled to Qingzhou were usually not highly regarded in the palace.

Like Consort Zhen, the birth mothers of these princes and princesses had no significant background; those with connections had already been taken away.

Concubine Zhen also stood up at this moment. It seemed she had been crying all the way back. At this point, she said to Xiao Ming, “Ming’er, now that Great Yu Empire has suffered this calamity, these younger siblings of yours can only rely on you to take care of them. Although they are your half-siblings, they still carry the royal blood in their veins. As the saying goes, ‘many hands make light work.’ You, alone, will always need some trustworthy people to assist you.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Concubine Zhen’s words were meant for him, but more so for these princes and princesses, to put their minds at ease.

“Yes, Mother Concubine, I will follow Father Emperor’s last wishes and take care of my younger siblings.” Xiao Ming said.

Hearing this, the mothers of these princes and princesses showed relieved expressions. At this moment, the only thing everyone who came to Qingzhou worried about was their future fate.

With Xiao Ming’s assurance, they felt more at ease.

Concubine Zhen now showed a hint of a smile. Then, she took out a golden-covered imperial edict from her sleeve and said to Xiao Ming, “Ming’er, this is the last will your Father Emperor left for you. Take it.”

Receiving the imperial edict, Xiao Ming opened it and scanned it. It indeed stated his appointment as Crown Prince. He quietly breathed a sigh of relief and slipped the imperial edict into his sleeve.

Xiao Wenxuan was indeed clear-headed in his final moments. Without this last will, it would have been difficult for him to gain the full allegiance of so many former officials, and his future enthronement would also be legitimate.



Putting away the imperial edict, he said, "Mother Concubine, the matter of the Prince of Zhao's rebellion will be handled by me. From now on, you can live peacefully in Qingzhou. I will arrange a residence for Mother Concubine and the concubines."

"That would be troublesome for you," Concubine Zhen said. Due to Xiao Wenxuan's death, she was still a bit down.

Xiao Ming sighed. He knew no amount of comfort would help Concubine Zhen right now.

Seemingly realizing something, Concubine Zhen continued, "Ming'er, now that such a great chaos has befallen the world, you will surely be very busy. State affairs are paramount. You don't need to worry about Mother Concubine. Go and deal with state affairs. Yue'er is here to keep me company. You can leave these miscellaneous tasks to her."

In Concubine Zhen's view, Fei Yue'er was already the legitimate Empress, and these matters of the inner palace naturally fell to Fei Yue'er.

Xiao Ming understood. He said to Fei Yue'er, "Princess Consort, I'll leave this to you."

Fei Yue'er nodded, "Yes, Your Highness."

After comforting the princes and princesses for a while, Xiao Ming left the main hall with the last will. As Concubine Zhen said, he could not waste time on these trivial matters now. After all, if Qingzhou could not be defended, he would only be able to jump into the sea with everyone.

Outside the door, Xiao Ming instructed Lu Luo and Ziyuan to assist Fei Yue'er with these miscellaneous affairs of the inner palace. He, meanwhile, took the last will to the government office and handed it to Pang Yukun.

"That's right, this is His Majesty's handwriting."

When Xiao Ming first spoke of the last will, he had been anxious. Now that he saw the last will, a weight was lifted from his heart.

"The matter of this last will should temporarily only be spread among the officials of the fief. There's no need for others to know about it." Xiao Ming said to Pang Yukun.

"Yes, Your Highness." Having confirmed the matter of the last will, Pang Yukun's face turned red with excitement.

He paused, then said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness has returned to the government office, presumably having thought about how to settle these officials?"

"That's right. On my way back to the royal residence, I thought of a method. In a couple of days, I will gather these officials. At that time, I will show them the last will, and then I will propose that they go to Bowen Academy to study. If they succeed in their studies and pass the examination, they will remain in official positions. If they fail, they can only shed their official robes. How does that sound?"

Pang Yukun said, "This is a good method, and it can also accumulate officials. This way, every time Your Highness conquers a place, you can quickly establish a government office there and bring it under Your Highness's administration."

“Hmm, that’s exactly what I am thinking.” Xiao Ming said.

Actually, for him, the training of these officials was still for colonization, because he found that truly achieving the industrial revolution was impossible without the accumulation of wealth from overseas colonization.

Both resources and manpower would become constraints on the industrial revolution.

And what worried him most was the current situation in Great Yu Empire. If large-scale wars occurred, a decrease in population was inevitable.

Thinking of this, he said to Pang Yukun, “Has Liang Dahai returned?”

“No, probably in two more days.” Pang Yukun said. Liang Dahai had been selling slaves at sea these days. Some of these slaves came from Goryeo, some from Japan, and others were slaves from Great Yu Empire.

Xiao Ming said, “When he returns, have him come see me. There’s a big business deal that needs him.”

Pang Yukun was stunned for a moment. He understood one thing: the only business Liang Dahai and Xiao Ming could be discussing was human trafficking.

Just as he thought, Xiao Ming was preparing to have Liang Dahai traffic people from Great Yu Empire to Qingzhou. Rather than watching these common people die in war, it would be better to mobilize merchants to frantically traffic people to Qingzhou at this time. And Ryukyu also needed a large population for development.

During wartime, human lives were cheap as dogs. His decision was cruel, but also the greatest mercy.

...

Chang'an City, now completely under the control of the Prince of Zhao.

In the Chengqing Hall, the Prince of Zhao sat on the iron throne of the Great Yu Empire's emperors, with the officials of Chang'an City bowed before him.

At this moment, these civil and military officials all lowered their heads, trembling under the Prince of Zhao's gaze.

Zhao Yuanliang stood in front of the officials. He said to the Prince of Zhao on the throne, "Father King, Chang'an City is now stable. Should we proceed with the Thirteenth Prince's enthronement ceremony and the late Emperor's funeral?"

The Prince of Zhao stroked his chin, looking displeased at the officials. Fiji, Luo Quan, Du Heng, and all the other important ministers were gone. What remained were just some insignificant opportunists.

If it weren't for the fact that these people still had some use, he would have killed them all. So he said, "What do you all think?"

A Ministry of Rites official immediately said obsequiously, "Your Highness, a nation cannot be without a monarch for a day. I believe that the late Emperor's state funeral can be simplified, but the Thirteenth Prince's enthronement ceremony must be grand."

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"Your humble servant seconds the motion!"

"Your humble servant also seconds the motion!"

"..."

A group of ministers successively echoed the Ministry of Rites official. Now that the Prince of Zhao's army occupied the entire Chang'an City, and the Crown Prince who committed regicide was imprisoned, they could only follow the Prince of Zhao, as no one wanted to lose their head.

The Prince of Zhao on the throne smiled. These ministers were all very pragmatic. He didn't care about Xiao Wenxuan's funeral; he could just be buried in the imperial tomb according to custom. He didn't even want to spend an extra penny on this matter.

As for the Thirteenth Prince's enthronement, it was merely a formality. Now that the imperial seal of Great Yu Empire was in his hands, he effectively held supreme power.

Just as the hall was filled with flattery and obsequiousness, an official suddenly walked to the center and cursed the assembled ministers, “A bunch of cowardly, spineless people who acknowledge thieves as their fathers! The spirit of the late Emperor has not yet rested in peace, yet you disregard propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame to welcome such rebels!”

As soon as these words were uttered, all the civil and military officials in the court angrily said, “Nonsense! What does a petty censor like you know!”

“Audacious! You are being disrespectful to the Prince of Zhao!”

“Shut up! How dare you act so presumptuously in the court!”

“...”

The Prince of Zhao’s smile gradually solidified at this moment. He looked at the official standing at the very end and asked, “Who are you? And what is your position?”

The young man who had angrily denounced the ministers said, “I am a ninth-rank censor, surname Sun, given name Li!”

“Censor!” The Prince of Zhao chuckled disdainfully. He said, “There truly are no decent officials left in Chang’an City if even a petty censor can enter the court.”

Sun Li sneered, “A rebellious traitor still dares to sit on the dragon throne. This court is merely a den of iniquity. If I were not here to denounce you rebels face to face, I would not have come!”

“Bastard! Guards, seize this man and hack him to death!” Zhao Yuanliang had been suppressing his anger since Sun Li’s first sentence, and now he finally couldn’t hold back anymore.

Sun Li looked up at the sky, utterly fearless. He said to the Prince of Zhao, “The Crown Prince’s regicide is an act of great rebellion, but the Thirteenth Prince should also have the late Emperor’s last will. If not, how can you, Prince of Zhao, by your word alone, establish the Thirteenth Prince as ruler?”

The Prince of Zhao’s eyes narrowed, like a beast choosing its prey. He stood up and walked from the throne to Sun Li.

“By this sharp sword in my hand.”

The Prince of Zhao’s face suddenly twisted, and he plunged his sword into Sun Li’s chest.

“Traitor, you will surely die a horrible death!” Sun Li spat out a mouthful of blood, his eyes wide with fury.

The other officials trembled with fear at the sight, and some even collapsed to the ground.

“This Sun Li actually dared to offend His Royal Highness the Prince of Zhao! He deserves to die!”

“Yes, he deserves to die!”

“...”

The officials cheered tremblingly.

The Prince of Zhao’s face was cold, then he suddenly burst into laughter. He held up his precious sword, pointing one by one at the ministers in the court. Any minister pointed at immediately turned pale.

Seeing this, the Prince of Zhao became even happier and couldn’t help but laugh loudly, “Hahaha, my dear ministers, don’t worry. As long as you wholeheartedly assist me, I will surely keep you safe.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” The loyal officials immediately shouted loudly.

The Prince of Zhao nodded and then said, “Since that is the case, let us swear an oath of allegiance. If any of you dare to betray me, your fate shall be like this person’s.”

The officials looked at Sun Li lying on the ground, growing more afraid.

After a pause, the Prince of Zhao said, “Yuanliang, go fetch bowls. Today, all of you will drink this Sun Li’s blood with me.”



“Yes, Father King.”

With that, Zhao Yuanliang sent someone to get porcelain bowls. Before long, the guards came back with porcelain bowls. After filling them with Sun Li’s fresh blood, the guards handed the bowls to the ministers.

Then, some other guards held wine jars and poured wine into each official’s bowl.

Seeing that every minister had a bowl in hand, the Prince of Zhao raised his wine, mixed with fresh blood, and drank it in one gulp, then violently smashed the bowl to the ground.

The officials looked at each other, and not one dared to drink at that moment.

“Hmm!” The Prince of Zhao then let out an angry grunt.

Under the Prince of Zhao’s intimidation, the ministers gritted their teeth, closed their eyes, and drank the wine.

At this point, the Prince of Zhao was slightly satisfied. He said, “Tomorrow, the late Emperor will be buried in the imperial tomb, and the day after tomorrow will be the Thirteenth Prince’s enthronement ceremony.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The ministers responded.

Waving his hand, the Prince of Zhao ordered the officials to leave. After the civil and military officials departed, Zhao Yuanliang and Wang Xi walked to the Prince of Zhao’s side.

“Father King, this move was truly brilliant. I doubt anyone in Chang’an will dare to oppose us from now on.” Zhao Yuanliang said.

Wang Xi also said, “Indeed. A mere ninth-rank censor dared to insult Your Highness like that. It’s simply rebellious.”

“Such minor officials are best suited for ‘killing the chicken to scare the monkeys.’ No need to take them to heart.” The Prince of Zhao sneered. Then he asked, “Yuanliang, have the Chang’an treasury, grain, and weapons all been tallied and cleared?”

“Father King, they have all been tallied. The treasury contains one million taels of gold, twelve million taels of silver, and seven million shi of grain...” Zhao Yuanliang listed all the various supplies in the national treasury.

The Prince of Zhao nodded with satisfaction. He said, “With this national treasury as our foundation, why should I worry about not unifying the world? It’s just a pity that half of these supplies must be given to the barbarians.”

"It is indeed a pity." Zhao Yuanliang said, "If we had known that Chang'an City could be taken so easily, why would we have borrowed troops from the barbarians in the first place?"

"Not so. With the fifty thousand iron cavalry of the barbarians, we have an advantage in contending for the world, and each city we conquer will provide us with a large amount of money and grain. This business is still worthwhile." The Prince of Zhao said.

Upon hearing this, a hint of hatred flashed in Zhao Yuanliang's eyes. He recalled the humiliation Xiao Ming had inflicted upon him and then said, "Father King is right. There are still many cities outside Chang'an, especially Qingzhou. If we take it, we won't have to worry about the casting of firearms and cannons."

"You mean to attack Qingzhou?" The Prince of Zhao frowned.

"Yes, Father Emperor."

Wang Xi saw the Prince of Zhao's displeasure and thought that the Prince of Zhao must have other ideas. So he said to Zhao Yuanliang, "Your Royal Highness the Heir Apparent should not be impatient. This King Qi is not a simple person, and the current situation in the world is constantly changing. If we rashly go to war with King Qi, we might only suffer losses in troops and greatly diminish our strength, allowing other vassal kings to reap the benefits."

The Prince of Zhao's frown relaxed. This was what he had in mind. All the matchlock guns and cannons in the world came from Qingzhou. Coupled with the barbarians being defeated twice by Xiao Ming, he was not eager to directly conflict with Xiao Ming at this time.

In his opinion, not only should he not fall out with Xiao Ming now, but he should also appease Xiao Ming. This way, he would have time to seize control of the imperial family's land.

After dealing with the other vassal kings, he would then turn his attention back to completely annihilate Xiao Ming with an overwhelming military advantage, with the help of the barbarians.

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"Father King, did I say something wrong?"

Zhao Yuanliang looked at his father uneasily. He had always been very afraid of his father.

After a moment of thought, the Prince of Zhao slowly said, "Yuanliang, now is not the time to deal with Xiao Ming. Wang Xi sees this clearly."

"Father King, if we don't annihilate Xiao Ming now, I'm afraid Xiao Ming will take the opportunity to grow stronger. Your son has interacted with Xiao Ming, and he is very cunning, so we must be vigilant."

"Then what if other vassal kings seize the opportunity to attack Chang'an when we are fighting Xiao Ming?" The Prince of Zhao's gaze was sharp.

Zhao Yuanliang immediately broke into a cold sweat. Back then, even Beishan's tens of thousands of iron cavalry were continuously defeated by Xiao Ming. This time, if they were to use troops against Xiao Ming again, they would certainly have to go all out.

If at this time other vassal kings took the opportunity to attack Chang'an and the heartland of Zhao, they would be doomed.

"Your son understands. Now we should first appease the other vassal kings." Zhao Yuanliang said.

"Hmm, that's right. Now go and arrange Xiao Wenxuan's state funeral and the Thirteenth Prince's enthronement. After the new Emperor ascends the throne, the attitudes of the other vassal kings will become clear, and it will not be too late to prepare then." The Prince of Zhao slowly said.

"Yes, Father King."

Zhao Yuanliang bowed and retreated.

Wang Xi also turned to leave, but at this moment, he was called back by the Prince of Zhao, who asked, "How is Wan Rong now?"

"Reporting to Your Highness, Her Highness is still not eating or drinking. If this continues, Her Highness might not make it." Wang Xi said.

The Prince of Zhao sighed slightly, "It truly pains her for Father King's last wish. I feel truly ashamed."

"Your Highness, contending for the world cannot be done with a soft heart. Your Highness is not wrong." Wang Xi said cautiously.

The Prince of Zhao nodded and asked, "I asked you to issue a proclamation to the other vassal kings. Have they responded?"

"Your Highness, so far, not a single vassal king has responded. It is estimated that they will not come to Chang'an to attend the late Emperor's funeral and the new Emperor's enthronement."

"Do I truly have to deal with these vassal kings one by one?" The Prince of Zhao's voice was tinged with anger.

Wang Xi sighed, no longer speaking.

Although they had taken control of Chang'an, there was still a long way to go to gain control of the world.

With a cold snort, the Prince of Zhao waved his hand, signaling Wang Xi to leave.

Three days later, Xiao Wenxuan's state funeral was held in Chang'an City. Along Vermillion Bird Avenue, Xiao Wenxuan's coffin was carried to the imperial tomb outside Chang'an City. The next day, the six-month-old Thirteenth Prince ascended the throne, appointing the Prince of Zhao as the Grand General overseeing the state, in charge of national affairs.

News from Chang'an spread, causing an uproar throughout the world.

Just a few days later, the King of Chu proclaimed to the world, vehemently denouncing the Prince of Zhao as a rebellious traitor. Immediately, he assisted the Third Prince in ascending the throne as Emperor and declared independence in Lin'an. At the same time, the King of Shu recognized the Third Prince as sovereign. The southern lands changed hands in a single day.

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Qingzhou, messages from all over Great Yu Empire flowed into King Qi's residence one by one.

These days, besides settling the former officials and nobles from Chang'an, Xiao Ming was pondering the situation of Great Yu Empire.

When the Prince of Zhao was enacting his enthronement farce in Chang'an, Fiji and Luo Quan successively went on diplomatic missions to Jinling City and Jizhou City. The Prince of Zhao's conspiracy was exposed by the two.

And when the King of Chu assisted the Third Prince in declaring independence, Fiji and Luo Quan also returned to Qingzhou from the fiefs of the Prince of Wei and the Prince of Yong, respectively.

"Your Highness, the Prince of Wei's attitude is ambiguous. He seems unwilling to ally with Your Highness to jointly address the current crisis." Fiji was travel-worn and filled with anxiety.

Luo Quan had returned two days earlier than Fiji. He said to Fiji, "My trip to Jizhou was quite fruitful. The Prince of Yong is very indignant about the Prince of Zhao's rebellion and implicitly expressed his willingness to ally with Your Highness to face the Prince of Zhao's military threat."

“Alas, it’s a pity that we valued the Prince of Wei so much back then. I didn’t expect that the Prince of Wei had long harbored rebellious intentions. His unwillingness to ally with Your Highness this time clearly shows his ambition to contend for the world.” Fiji slammed the table heavily.

Xiao Ming was not surprised by this result at all. He said, “Councillor Fei, there’s no need to sigh. For me, it might not be a bad thing. As for the alliance, it only needs the Prince of Yong’s agreement. After all, the Prince of Yong is the western shield of the fief. As long as the Prince of Yong is there, he can block the Prince of Zhao’s and barbarian soldiers’ attacks from the west for me. As for the Prince of Wei, I am just looking for an excuse to admonish him.”

Pang Yukun said, “Wei’s land is prosperous and populous. If Your Highness can annex Wei’s land, your strength will surely increase greatly.”

Niu Ben, on the other hand, said, “If Your Highness wants to take Wei’s land, you must first take Pengzhou. Pengzhou controls a vital transportation hub. Southward, it can attack Jiangnan, and westward, it can enter the central plains heartland. Moreover, Pengzhou is surrounded by mountains, making it easy to defend and difficult to attack, truly a place that strategists must contend for.”

Fiji sighed upon hearing this. Now, the Prince of Zhao, assisting the Thirteenth Prince’s enthronement, had the momentum of controlling the Emperor to command the feudal lords. Meanwhile, the King of Chu had declared independence in Lin’an, and it was said that he had already sent troops to attack the prefectures and counties that once belonged to the imperial family. The Prince of Ruyang and the Prince of Huainan were also unwilling to be left out, taking the opportunity to annex a large amount of former imperial territory. Thus, it seemed that the situation in the world was irreversible.

Now, even if Xiao Wenxuan were to revive, it would be difficult to stop the ambitions of the vassal kings.



However, he still had concerns, so he said, “Your Highness, I believe that the greatest threat in the world is the Prince of Zhao. After all, the Prince of Zhao borrowing troops from the barbarians is like inviting a wolf into the house, and the barbarians are eyeing Your Highness covetously, eager to overthrow Qingzhou immediately. So, in my old minister’s opinion, we should prioritize preventing the Prince of Zhao.”

Pang Yukun said at this time, “However, the Prince of Zhao seems unwilling to go to war with Your Highness right now. Two days ago, a so-called imperial decree came from Chang’an, commending Your Highness.”

“Oh?” Fiji showed a surprised expression.

Xiao Ming then gave the imperial decree to Fiji. He said, “The Prince of Zhao consorts with barbarians and will eventually suffer for it. As for this imperial decree, we can just look at it; we cannot fully trust it, after all, plans can’t keep up with changes.”

Everyone nodded upon hearing this.

After a pause, Xiao Ming said, “The Prince of Zhao has calculated everything, but the vassal kings of this world are not fools either. Since the world is already in chaos, they can only rely on their own abilities.”

“In that case, Your Highness is really preparing to take Pengzhou?” Fiji asked.

Xiao Ming nodded. This Pengzhou of Great Yu Empire was modern-day Pengcheng, which is Xuzhou in northern Jiangsu, the starting point of Han Emperor Liu Bang.

His decision to use troops this time was not a whim. It was precisely to guard against the attacks of the barbarians and the Prince of Zhao that he was preparing to annex Pengzhou. After all, historically, Shandong and Henan had always been disaster areas with severe food shortages. If he didn't find a stable food production area for himself, it would severely limit his ability to launch expeditions.

Moreover, Pengzhou and its subordinate prefectures and counties had a population of over five hundred thousand, which would provide him with a large amount of manpower. Most importantly, as the closest territory to his fief belonging to the Prince of Wei, the secret guards naturally prioritized infiltrating it. Furthermore, Qingzhou's folk theater also had a considerable influence in Pengzhou. It could be said that the people there yearned for Qingzhou. The only problem that needed to be resolved was the local prominent families.

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A lingering sound of zither strings, carrying a hint of melancholy, drifted into the main hall.

Everyone discussing state affairs immediately fell silent.

After listening carefully for a while with his eyes closed, Fiji said, "Your Highness, this zither music must be from Her Highness the Concubine, I presume. Such a great calamity indeed makes it difficult for one to calm down immediately."

"Yes, but thankfully Father Emperor has been laid to rest in the imperial tomb. This news has brought some peace to Mother Concubine." Xiao Ming said.

At the mention of past events, Fiji and Luo Quan both felt a touch of sadness.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming said, "Councillor Fei, you have returned at just the right time. All the officials and their families from Chang'an have now been settled. However, these officials cannot remain idle forever, so I plan to have them go to Bowen Academy to study governmental knowledge to adapt to Qingzhou's administrative system."

Fiji had also been worried about this matter these past few days. As soon as he returned, many officials came to inquire about news. At this moment, he couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. He said, "Your Highness, Qingzhou's administrative system is vastly different from Great Yu Empire's old system. Do you intend to continue using this administrative system?"

"Precisely. In my opinion, Great Yu Empire's official system is already outdated, and many officials are too ignorant. If they cannot understand the changes in the current world, they might as well go home and take care of their children." Xiao Ming's tone was decisive.

Now that the world had entered the Age of Exploration, Great Yu Empire's backward system and ideology severely lacked competitiveness. He did not want his fief to regress again because of the arrival of these officials.

Precisely because of this, he intended to send these officials to Bowen Academy to study, allowing them to understand the current cutthroat world.

At the same time, at Bowen Academy, he could also boldly introduce more knowledge, as everything was now up to him, and he didn't have to worry about Chang'an's reaction.

Fiji glanced at Pang Yukun. This former petty censor had now become the Chief Grand Councillor of the fief. At this moment, Pang Yukun smiled slyly, as if Xiao Ming's handling of the officials pleased him greatly. He had been bullied by these officials quite a bit in the court back then.

Circumstances had changed, and now his own position was quite awkward. According to Great Yu Empire's official ranks, his position was higher than Pang Yukun's, but according to Qingzhou's official ranks, Chief Grand Councillor seemed to be the highest position.

In official circles, equivocating was an essential skill. Fiji was well aware of the current situation, so he decided to firmly stick to equivocating to avoid saying anything wrong, "Your Highness's actions must have Your Highness's reasons. I am of shallow talent and dare not comment rashly."

Xiao Ming rolled his eyes. He knew Fiji would say that. Compared to Pang Yukun's sharp tongue, Fiji was clearly more cunning.

However, he also had a way to deal with it, so he said, "Councillor Fei, since Great Yu Empire's old official system is no longer suitable, I must arrange a position for you. There are still eight missing in the Nine Grand Councillors. If Councillor Fei doesn't mind, how about serving as one of the Nine Grand Councillors?"

"Your Highness, what virtue or ability do I possess to hold the position of Grand Councillor? Wouldn't this displease the officials of Qingzhou?"

Although Fiji said this, he quietly breathed a sigh of relief in his heart. He had been left out these past few days, and what he feared most was being sent home to retire. He never expected Xiao Ming to put him in the Cabinet with a single sentence.

Although the title wasn't as grand as Chief Grand Councillor, he knew that the Chief Grand Councillor was merely an organizer, and there wasn't much difference in power. Secondly, Xiao Ming's arrangement probably also had the intention of balancing Pang Yukun's power.

Having held a high position for so many years, he clearly understood that what a monarch most feared was a single party dominating the court, because this would severely limit the monarch's power and even sow the seeds of rebellion.

And according to his understanding, back then, due to the extermination of powerful families, officials were scarce, and Pang Yukun recommended a large number of officials to enter Qingzhou's bureaucracy. Now, these officials implicitly formed a small group led by Pang Yukun.

Although Pang Yukun was upright and incorruptible, this was definitely a hidden danger for Xiao Ming. Precisely because of this, he guessed that Xiao Ming intended to diversify the composition of the bureaucracy to make it more complex.

"Councillor Fei worries too much. The Fei family has served as high officials for four generations, and your disciples and former subordinates are all over the world. Furthermore, you have never formed factions for personal gain, and you are also my father-in-law. The position of Grand Councillor is certainly not unwarranted." Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Pang Yukun also said, "Councillor Fei's reputation precedes him. If you cannot hold this position, who else can?"

"This..." Fiji hesitated, then said, "Your Highness's kindness is too great, I can only accept it without humility."

"Hahahaha..." Xiao Ming laughed heartily, "In that case, the matter of the Chang'an officials studying at Bowen Academy will be entrusted to you."

“Uh...”

Fiji froze for a moment, revealing a bitter expression. Unknowingly, he had fallen into Xiao Ming’s trap.

These officials from Chang’an had always been a headache for everyone. Even Pang Yukun sometimes found it inconvenient to deal with them, as the conflict of official ranks was quite awkward.

Now, after a circle, this hot potato still landed in his hands.

Pang Yukun suppressed a smile. These days, they had all seen Fiji’s intentions. This elaborate plan finally made Fiji have to brace himself and accept the task. Furthermore, Fiji’s entry into the Cabinet was also an encouragement to other officials.

And with Fiji in the Cabinet, they could also feel at ease going to Bowen Academy to study.

After discussing Fiji’s matter, Xiao Ming looked at Luo Quan, who was chatting animatedly with Niu Ben. Niu Ben and Luo Quan were both famous generals of Great Yu Empire in the past. Now, with Niu Ben and then Luo Quan, these two famous generals were both in his army.

Moreover, the generals from the Firearm Battalion came with Luo Quan this time, which precisely compensated for the shortage of generals in the army. Furthermore, according to the current situation, expanding the army and preparing for war was imperative.

Having taken Pengzhou this time, he might have to recruit some soldiers from Pengzhou to supplement his military strength.

Since war was inevitable, he could only sustain war with war. Precisely for this reason, he chose the Prince of Wei as his first target. After all, the Prince of Yong's fief was short on food after the drought and was also very barren, truly a burdensome asset.

Moreover, to obtain weapons, the Prince of Yong had been exporting various minerals to Qingzhou, so occupying it or not was essentially the same.

"General Luo, these days, you haven't mentioned serving in the army. Have I been remiss in some way?" Xiao Ming asked at this time.

Luo Quan bowed upon hearing this and said, "Your Highness has been very considerate to me, so there is no question of neglect. It is simply because I can no longer keep up with Your Highness's army. Rather than that, it would be better to let Luo Xin and Luo Hong show their skills. I will just retire to the countryside in Qingzhou."

Chapter 536

"General, why do you belittle yourself after decades of battles?"

Xiao Ming did not expect Luo Quan to decline his offer at this moment.

"Your Highness, I am not belittling myself. Ever since the last battle in Jizhou, I have been pondering this matter. Qingzhou's firearms and cannons have made me realize that war is no longer what it used to be. Relatively speaking, Luo Hong will be more receptive to musketeers than I." Luo Quan said with a sigh.

Seeing Luo Quan's firm stance, Xiao Ming nodded. He said, "Since that is the case, I will not insist, General."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Luo Quan seemed relieved.

Fiji's eyes flickered. The army was different from the bureaucracy. Luo Quan's decision was well thought out. He had discussed it with him on the way here. Even if he had accepted Xiao Ming's request, the soldiers in the army might not have supported him.

Most importantly, if he entered the army, the Firearm Battalion from Chang'an or the Jinwuwei who would later defect to Qingzhou would look to him for leadership, which would undoubtedly create factions within the army.

Officials could bicker with each other, but the army had to maintain unity. Considering this, he decided not to wield military power anymore. And with Niu Ben's qualifications, he was sufficient to suppress these soldiers from Chang'an, so integrating the army would not be a problem.

Having initially resolved the issues of officials and generals, the discussion then turned to Pengzhou for a while. This time, Fiji's diplomatic mission to Jinling City meant that since the Prince of Wei had ambitions for supremacy, he would not hold back.

Moreover, Fiji had also hinted that King Qi had inherited the great succession, but the Prince of Wei still ignored it, which was simply a betrayal of the royal family.

After settling the matter of annexing Pengzhou, everyone dispersed. However, Niu Ben left Xiao Ming with a dilemma before leaving: which army would be responsible for attacking Pengzhou.



Currently, the Youzhou Army was guarding Shanhai Pass and naturally could not be moved. A portion of the Qingzhou Army was in Yunzhou defending against the Prince of Zhao's and barbarian attacks, and another portion was on Ryukyu Island.

The Dengzhou Army, on the other hand, had to guard against possible attacks from Goryeo and Japan. After much thought, he could only mobilize the Cangzhou Army, Yizhou Army, and Laizhou Army to attack Pengzhou. However, because these three armies were not stationed at the borders like other prefectures, the combined strength of the three prefectures' armies was only fifteen thousand, and they had almost no equipment.

However, during this period, these three armies had been training in the firearm troop formation. Since the army had training firearms, they could quickly form into an army once given equipment.

Thinking of this, he felt a headache coming on. It was again the problem of equipment. What he lacked most right now were firearms and cannons.

At the same time, a sense of crisis arose in his heart. Although Qingzhou's industry far surpassed Great Yu Empire's, the population shortfall was still fatal.

Human wave tactics were enough to destroy everything he had built.

As he was worrying about equipment, a servant from the royal residence suddenly reported that Lin Wentao requested an audience.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming was delighted. The person he most wanted to see right now was Lin Wentao. The speed of equipment production depended entirely on him. Follow current novels on [novelfire\(.\)net](http://novelfire(.)net)

“Let him in,” Xiao Ming said excitedly.

The servant left, and Lin Wentao arrived at the main hall, looking excited.

“Your Highness, I and Zhang Liu have resolved the problem of one steam engine driving multiple machines. Using crankshafts and connecting rods, the steam engines in the machine tool workshop can now drive a row of twelve drilling machines. We have now installed five more steam engines, so now a total of seventy-two drilling machines use steam power.” Lin Wentao said excitedly.

Pausing, Lin Wentao continued, “During this period, the steam engine workshop produced a total of sixteen steam engines. According to Your Highness’s request, six were given to the machine tool workshop. Of the remaining twelve, four were given to the textile workshop, and the remaining six will be given to the firearm workshop in the military factory for rifling the barrels of rifled guns.”

“Good, very good.” For Xiao Ming, this was undoubtedly a timely relief, because with insufficient population in his fief, what he could truly rely on was the steam power provided by steam engines.

Now Lin Wentao had successfully overcome the problem of one steam engine driving multiple machines, which would save him a lot of labor.

Moreover, once Lin Wentao mastered the problem of one steam engine driving multiple machines, it meant that the technical difficulties of steam locomotives had been initially resolved.

Lin Wentao was naturally very excited. He said, “Your Highness, although the steam engine is performing well now, there is still a drawback: the degree of piston leakage is still somewhat serious. I saw something called ‘rubber’ in the books Your Highness provided. It is said that rubber pistons are soft and can ensure airtightness, but I am unsure what this rubber actually is?”

“Lu Tong knows about this rubber, but this material is not found in Great Yu Empire. It only exists along the southern coastlines. However, I have already started trading with the Dutch, and I will find a way to obtain some rubber.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Lin Wentao said happily.

Xiao Ming was a little helpless. This was the importance of colonization. Without colonization, potatoes, sweet potatoes, chili peppers, and tomatoes would not have spread to Europe and Asia. Without colonization, rubber would not have been discovered and applied to industry.

What frustrated him was that he was preparing to sail to the sea, but unexpectedly, such chaos occurred domestically.

For him, this internal strife was no less than the Thirty Years’ War and the Great Northern War in Europe.

Sighing, Xiao Ming said to Lin Wentao, “By the way, these steam engines are not just single-cylinder steam engines; there are also twin-cylinder steam engines and even four-cylinder steam engines. With some improvements, this steam engine will have enough power to drive more machines. You need to

delve deeper into this and research it. Also, you should also study the steam locomotive in the books, as the principles won't differ much."

Xiao Ming threw out so many tasks at once that Lin Wentao was somewhat stunned. He said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, these tasks are too many. I am afraid I can't handle it all. I humbly request Your Highness to allow me to select some students from Bowen Academy to establish a steam engine workshop laboratory, how about that?"

"Of course you can." Xiao Ming smiled. This Lin Wentao had finally seen the light, finally understanding that working alone was not enough; research required more people.

Lin Wentao nodded, "In that case, I will go to Bowen Academy to select students."

With that, Lin Wentao bowed and walked out.

Watching Lin Wentao leave, Xiao Ming felt a wave of relief. How effective would the steam engine's implementation be? Among these, what he was most concerned about was the rifling in the firearm workshop.

If the steam engine made rifling simpler, then he could mass-equip the army with rifled guns.

Thinking of this, he eagerly headed towards the military factory. During this time, he had been so overwhelmed by the chaos in Chang'an that he had neglected military production. Now, to prepare for the attack on Pengzhou, he had to personally push for it.

“Hmph, hmph...”

The continuous sound of the steam engine pulling the hook knife to cut metal resonated.

Song Changping and the craftsmen in the firearm workshop looked at the steaming steel monster in front of them with some shock. Although the craftsmen in the steam engine workshop had used steam engines to power the craftsmen in cutting rifling two days ago, this unprecedented machinery still made it difficult for them to psychologically accept it for a while.

“Workshop Supervisor Song, now that we have this steam engine, won’t cutting rifling leave us with nothing to do?”

Song Changping watched the hook knife extend and retract in the gun barrel. One craftsman was responsible for rotating the gun barrel, allowing the hook knife to draw perfect rifling in the barrel.

“How could we have nothing to do? Even if this steam engine replaces us in pulling the hook knife, we still have to carefully watch this machine to ensure the rifling is cut correctly.” Song Changping said.

“My point is, this steam engine is so powerful, won’t it leave many craftsmen without work in the future?” The craftsman asked worriedly. I wasn’t talking nonsense.

In fact, due to the use of steam engines in the lathe workshop, a large number of craftsmen who used to work there became idle. These craftsmen were then transferred to their workshop to be responsible for the production of flintlock guns.

Now that the steam engine had appeared here again, they couldn't help but worry.

"Your worry is excessive. Qingzhou is currently severely lacking firearms. So far, we have only produced forty-five thousand flintlock guns. Firearms and cannons have not been popularized in most of the fief's armies. Now, with the current situation in Great Yu Empire, more firearms will certainly be needed in the future." Song Changping said. He understood why these craftsmen would have such thoughts.

Currently, the military factory craftsmen's salaries were very high. Even though most craftsmen were still slaves, none of them wanted to lose their current work.

"Song Changping is right. Even if steam engines replace some craftsmen, the military factory's current output is insufficient. What you should be worried about now is how to meet the army's equipment procurement needs."

Xiao Ming's voice suddenly came from outside.

Hearing this sound, Song Changping and the craftsmen turned around, only to see Xiao Ming walking towards them, fanning himself.

"Your Highness."

Song Changping led the craftsmen in bowing to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming told everyone to dispense with the formalities. He walked towards the steam engine and hook knife assembly that was cutting the rifling. At this time, the steam engine was pulling the hook knife back and forth in a linear motion through a connecting rod.

Each time the hook knife entered and exited the gun barrel, it would pull out a shallow mark. The craftsman in charge supervised the rifling process. With the steam engine, there were now over thirty gun barrels, and the six steam engine hook knives greatly increased the efficiency of rifling.

“How is it? How many rifled gun barrels can be produced in a day now?” Xiao Ming asked.

Song Changping replied, “Compared to one per month previously, the steam engine can now produce one per day. Lin Wentao has now enabled thirty hook knives in the military factory to cut rifling using steam engines. If there are no defective products, nine hundred per month is not a problem.”

“Hmm, that quantity is sufficient. For now, the main focus should still be on producing smoothbore flintlock guns, understood?” Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction. Whether produced by humans or machines, there was always a reject rate. He saw some scrapped gun barrels discarded to one side. Song Changping said nine hundred gun barrels if there were no rejects, but if rejects were factored in, it would probably be seven or eight hundred rifled gun barrels a month.

Xiao Ming was already very satisfied with this number. Currently, his equipment plan was still based on smoothbore guns, supplemented by rifled guns. After all, he didn’t have much time to wait for equipment upgrades. What he needed more now was quantity to cope with the current crisis.

As for mass-equipping rifled guns, it could only be a gradual replacement during the war.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Song Changping said.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, “By the way, I have allocated another batch of craftsmen to you this time. Now your firearm workshop can expand into another workshop, with two workshops simultaneously producing flintlock guns.”

“Another batch of craftsmen?” Song Changping was somewhat excited, and the other craftsmen also breathed a sigh of relief. This proved that there was indeed a severe shortage of firearms in the fief now.

Liang Dahai had not yet returned, but the first batch of slaves had already been delivered. According to Liang Dahai’s subordinates, Liang Dahai would arrive with the last batch of slaves.

After being at sea for such a long time, Liang Dahai brought back eight thousand slaves this time. Before Qingzhou merchants could divide this batch of slaves, five thousand of them were assigned to this military factory.

Although these people currently knew nothing, it would not take long for them to learn through experienced craftsmen teaching new ones. After all, assembling flintlock guns was not a high-level skill.

“Five thousand people. This time, I have prioritized your firearm workshop. You must keep up with the production of flintlock guns. The fief might face war at any time. If I lose, everything in the fief will vanish.” Xiao Ming frowned and said.

Song Changping’s expression became serious. He suddenly felt a heavy burden. Patting his chest, he said, “Your Highness, even if I don’t eat or drink, I will definitely complete this batch of equipment on time and in quantity.”



“Hmm, I trust you. By the way, a portion of the flintlock guns produced from now on should be distributed to the armies of Cangzhou, Yizhou, and Laizhou.”

Song Changping responded with a “yes.” New NOVEL chapters are published on [novel-fire.net](http://novel-fire.net)

After instructing on firearm production, Xiao Ming suddenly asked, “How many rifled guns do you still have here?”

“Reporting to Your Highness, there are still sixty rifled guns.” Song Changping said.

“Sixty?” Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed. The range and accuracy of rifled guns were incomparable to smoothbore guns, making them suitable for use as sharpshooters in the army.

After all, even in cold weapon armies, a batch of archers would be selected to handle special tasks, and he, on the other hand, needed rifled guns even more to complete special operations missions.

“Bring this batch of sixty rifled guns to me. I have a use for them.” Xiao Ming showed a faint smile.

Hearing this, Song Changping had the craftsmen bring out three long wooden boxes. These contained the rifled guns.

Xiao Ming's purpose for this personal visit was to inspect the production of the rifled guns, to discuss the matter of the slaves, and to urge Song Changping to increase production.

After a quick tour, he no longer disturbed the workshop's production, and had his accompanying guards carry the flintlock guns back.

Ever since the Prince of Zhao entered Chang'an, besides Zhao Long and Zhao Hu, Xiao Ming also had a hundred elite soldiers responsible for protecting him. In times of chaos, enemies might use any means.

Especially assassination. This method was low-cost and high-reward. He did not want to die before achieving success, so he agreed to Pang Yukun's suggestion and added a hundred personal guards to protect his safety.

Chapter 538

Qingzhou Barracks.

After leaving the military factory, Xiao Ming went directly to the Qingzhou Barracks with the rifled guns.

Compared to the lively training scenes of the past, the Qingzhou Barracks were somewhat deserted at this time. After a portion of the Qingzhou Army was stationed in Ryukyu and another portion went to Yunzhou, only five thousand soldiers were now stationed in the Qingzhou Barracks, responsible for guarding the security of Qingzhou.

However, in addition to these current five thousand Qingzhou soldiers, there were also remnants of soldiers who had escaped from Chang'an now in the Qingzhou Barracks. These soldiers totaled three thousand and were settled in the western training ground of Qingzhou.

When he arrived at the Qingzhou Barracks, the Qingzhou Army soldiers were conducting their usual loading drills. Luo Hong and other generals from Chang'an looked enviously at the Qingzhou soldiers, who were wearing neat military uniforms and carrying bayoneted flintlock guns.

In contrast to the Qingzhou Army soldiers, the Firearm Battalion from Chang'an seemed out of place.

"Your Highness."

Xiao Ming's arrival quickly alerted the generals who were observing the training. Luo Hong, leading the generals of the Firearm Battalion, bowed to Xiao Ming.

"Dispense with the formalities." Xiao Ming helped Luo Hong up.

That day, Luo Quan had refused him, and afterward, Fiji had told him the reason. This made Xiao Ming deeply feel that Luo Quan was a man of great righteousness, and it was no wonder that through all the ups and downs over the years, Luo Quan's position in the court had remained very stable.

Niu Ben now came over with generals like Lu Fei, Luo Xin, and Qi Guangyi. After saluting, Niu Ben said, "Your Highness, we are demonstrating the firearm formation to them."

Upon entering, Xiao Ming had already figured out what they were doing. He said to Luo Hong, "What do you think of our Qingzhou Army?"

“The training of the Qingzhou Army is probably beyond the Firearm Battalion’s ability to catch up, and furthermore, the firearms equipped by the Qingzhou Army seem to be different from those of the Firearm Battalion.” Luo Hong shook his head.

At the mention of the flintlock gun, Niu Ben and Xiao Ming immediately felt a bit awkward. At that time, he had sold matchlock guns to the court and other vassal kings, and the secret of the flintlock gun had always been kept confidential. Now that Luo Hong was stationed at the Qingzhou Barracks, he finally noticed the discrepancy.

However, he mentioned it very subtly, but he must have had his own calculations in mind, knowing that Xiao Ming had held back something back then.

“Actually, the difference between a flintlock gun and a matchlock gun isn’t very significant. One uses a flintlock mechanism, the other a matchlock to ignite, and in terms of range and accuracy, there’s almost no difference. The only difference is the stability of firing, and another difference is the bayonet on it.”

Given the circumstances, there was no need for him to conceal the flintlock gun anymore, so he laid out the facts about it.

As he spoke, he had Niu Ben bring over a flintlock gun, then brought a matchlock gun from the Firearm Battalion, and demonstrated the firing mechanisms and bayonets of both to Luo Hong.

Holding a flintlock gun in one hand and a matchlock gun in the other, Luo Hong called two soldiers to experiment with a matchlock gun and a flintlock gun respectively. He found that apart from the flintlock gun being slightly faster from loading to firing, there wasn’t really much difference.

After this experiment, he didn't think Xiao Ming had deceived Xiao Wenxuan, because in his opinion, there wasn't much difference. After all, whether it was a matchlock gun or a flintlock gun, as long as the enemy charged forward under fire, they would still have to engage in close combat.

Relatively speaking, he thought the bayonet was very important.

However, even so, he still looked eagerly at the flintlock gun, his meaning obvious. Even if the difference was small, who wouldn't want something slightly better?

"Your Highness, I, leading all the officers and soldiers of the Firearm Battalion, pledge loyalty to Your Highness."

Compared to Luo Xin's smooth talk, Luo Hong was more composed and taciturn. However, even the most honest person had a mind of their own. Luo Hong directly expressed his stance to Xiao Ming in front of the Qingzhou Army generals.

"Cough, cough." Xiao Ming looked at Luo Hong and the kneeling generals of the Firearm Battalion and said, "Everyone, please rise. Since you are willing to follow me, I will naturally not treat you differently. I hope you will all assist me greatly in the future."

Luo Hong did not rise, but instead said, "I have heard that Your Highness intends to campaign against Pengzhou to punish the Prince of Wei for his rebellion and treason. If Your Highness trusts our Firearm Battalion, we are willing to go for Your Highness."

“This...” Xiao Ming’s heart stirred slightly.

Luo Quan’s words were still due to his concern that Xiao Ming did not trust them, and thus he wanted to prove his loyalty through military achievements.

As for Xiao Ming, he was indeed tempted.

The armies of Cangzhou, Laizhou, and Yizhou combined were only about fifteen thousand strong. Now, with the Firearm Battalion joining, they would have twenty thousand soldiers, which would reduce the numerical gap with the Pengzhou defenders.

After all, Pengzhou was the northern gateway to Wei territory, and the Prince of Wei had a large population and abundant land, with an army at least four times his size, and this did not include the private armies of local powerful families. Moreover, once a state of war was entered, it would be impossible to not fight to the death.

After a moment of hesitation, Xiao Ming said, “Since that is the case, I will not decline. After all, since you are my army, you should be treated equally. Now is indeed the time for me to use troops, and this battle of Pengzhou will include you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Luo Hong was overjoyed, and the other generals of the Firearm Battalion also looked pleased. Xiao Ming’s words meant he had accepted them.

Shaking his head, Xiao Ming had Luo Hong and the others rise. Since Luo Hong had brought up the matter of campaigning against Pengzhou, Xiao Ming asked, “Commander Niu, have the armies of these three prefectures been notified?”

“Reporting to Your Highness, I have already issued military orders to dispatch the Cangzhou Army and Laizhou Army to Yizhou for rendezvous. Including the preparation of grain and supplies, it will take about twelve days to depart for Pengzhou, but what about the equipment?” Niu Ben stopped speaking there.

Xiao Ming knew Niu Ben would bring this up. He said, “I have just returned from the military factory. Song Changping will prioritize providing weapons to the soldiers of the three prefectures. In one month, at least half of the soldiers can be equipped. Besides, can’t we fight without firearms? How did we fight the barbarians in the Battle of Cangzhou?”

Niu Ben was stunned for a moment. He then realized that the entire army was now somewhat blindly worshipping firearms and had forgotten their original skills. He immediately understood, “I understand. Later, I will transport the plate armor, swords, and sabers to Yizhou.”

Xiao Ming nodded gently. In an era dominated by firearms, forgetting the skills of cold weapons combat was very dangerous. In fact, while firearms were still the mainstream in the current world, battles often involved a few volleys followed by a bayonet charge for close combat.

For example, the most renowned British Redcoats of the time, their method of operation was still to get within fifty meters for a volley, then launch a charge. Newest update provided by Novel-Fire.net

Precisely because of this, Xiao Ming was not arrogant enough to believe that equipping himself with flintlock guns would allow him to single-handedly defeat Great Yu Empire. After all, strictly speaking, he was still in the transitional phase of cold and hot weapons. Every battle required extreme caution and not the slightest carelessness.

The bugle calls for the Qingzhou Army's training continued.

After inquiring about the military deployment, Xiao Ming now pointed to the wooden box behind him and said to Niu Ben, "Commander Niu, these are sixty rifled guns that I obtained from Song Changping. Select sixty soldiers with excellent marksmanship, give these to them, and have them train daily."

"Rifled guns?" Niu Ben was slightly surprised. He had tried the first rifled gun when it appeared, but the firearms were immediately taken by the secret guards. He had always coveted these rifled guns and was now excited. "Your Highness, I have been looking forward to these rifled guns!"

Luo Hong and the others fell into confusion again. They had just figured out the difference between flintlock guns and matchlock guns, and now another "rifled gun" appeared.

Ordering his attendant to bring the wooden box, Xiao Ming handed the rifled guns to Niu Ben and said, "Since that is the case, Commander Niu, you must train sixty excellent musketeers for me."

Niu Ben and the generals of the Qingzhou Army eagerly opened the box and took out a rifled gun. While examining it, Niu Ben guaranteed, "Your Highness, if I cannot even do such a small thing, I might as well go back and retire with Luo Quan."

"If you all go back and retire, then no one will be in charge of the army."

Xiao Ming was a little helpless. He valued Niu Ben and Luo Quan not because of their past military achievements, but because they had a knack for managing the army. Coupled with their sufficient prestige, they could manage the armies of the various prefectures in an orderly manner. As for direct battles, he still relied on younger generals like Lu Fei, Qi Guangyi, and Luo Hong.



Having delivered the rifled guns, Xiao Ming did not linger. Niu Ben had brought out the Qingzhou Army to correct errors in the Firearm Battalion's training.

Now that the campaign against Pengzhou was moved up the agenda, the Firearm Battalion still needed rigorous training, so he would not interfere.

Leaving the Qingzhou Barracks, Xiao Ming now looked towards Jinling City. It was one of the most prosperous cities in Great Yu Empire. Thinking of the owner of Jinling City, the Prince of Wei, he wondered what this cunning figure was planning.

...

Jinling City, Prince of Wei's residence.

"Achchoo, achchoo."

The Prince of Wei, who was holding a cup of hot tea and about to take a sip, suddenly sneezed twice. The Prince of Wei had caught a slight cold these past two days and had a runny nose, and all his snot immediately sprayed into the tea.

Gagging disgustedly, the Prince of Wei threw the tea aside. At this moment, the mansion's servant again served new tea.

"Ever since Fiji left, I have been feeling unwell. Tell me, everyone, did I make a mistake this time?" The Prince of Wei said, wiping his nose.

Mi Wenyi, the chief clerk of the Prince of Wei's residence, who was seated below the Prince of Wei, said, "Your Highness worries too much. This Fiji is now nothing but a stray dog. Now that he has come to Wei's territory to make a few barks, why should Your Highness be anxious?"

Sitting to the left and below the Prince of Wei was Xiao Qi. He said to the Prince of Wei, "Royal Uncle, this Fiji is not as simple as a stray dog. He was dispatched by King Qi Xiao Ming. This alliance matter was truly a bit reckless of Royal Uncle. In my opinion, Royal Uncle should have agreed to King Qi. This way, with three kings standing, even if the Prince of Zhao comes with barbarian cavalry, he will not be able to harm us."

The Prince of Wei frowned upon hearing this. He said, "Although that's true, Fiji implicitly suggested that Xiao Ming holds the late Emperor's last will. This clearly tells me that Xiao Ming is the one to inherit the great succession. If I were to agree to Fiji, wouldn't that mean I would have to submit to Xiao Ming?"

Mi Wenyi seized the opportunity and said, "Your Highness is right. Now the Prince of Zhao says the Thirteenth Prince is the Emperor, and the King of Chu has directly enthroned the Third Prince as Emperor. Perhaps the Prince of Yan will enthrone the Fourth Prince next. And now there's Xiao Ming. It's difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. The only thing certain is that the world is now in chaos. As the saying goes, 'heroes emerge in troubled times.' Your Highness has plotted for so many years, how can you humble yourself before that young Xiao Ming?"

The Prince of Wei nodded upon hearing this. Mi Wenyi had spoken directly to his heart. Ever since the Prince of Ning was killed, he had lived in fear. Hadn't he worked diligently all these years precisely so that one day he would not live in Xiao Wenxuan's shadow?

Now that Xiao Wenxuan was finally dead, he no longer had to worry or be afraid. At the same time, his ambitions continued to swell, and he too wanted to experience the feeling of being above all others.

Xiao Qi wanted to persuade the Prince of Wei again, but seeing the fervor in the Prince of Wei's eyes, he finally gave up. For these people, the Prince of Wei treated him like his own son. Now, whatever the Prince of Wei wanted to do in the next five or six years, he should fully assist him.

So he said, "Since Royal Uncle has ambitions for the world, now is the time to gather and prepare the army to guard against unforeseen circumstances. Although I have only interacted with Xiao Ming once, he is definitely not an easy person to deal with. If Royal Uncle refuses to ally with him, you must be prepared for war."

"You mean King Qi will attack Wei's territory?" The Prince of Wei frowned tightly.

Xiao Qi said lightly, "Royal Uncle, don't forget how Xiao Ming was treated in the Battle of Cangzhou and the Battle of Jizhou. Back then, Xiao Ming merely used those weaknesses to gain some benefits, but he must still bear a grudge against Royal Uncle. After all, Royal Uncle almost caused the entire Qingzhou Army to be annihilated back then."

The Prince of Wei's face suddenly darkened. In both the Battle of Cangzhou and the Battle of Jizhou, he had thought of the idea that it was better for a poor monk to die than a fellow Taoist. In fact, he had always wanted to take the opportunity to eliminate this threat from the north.

Before, he still had scruples about Xiao Wenxuan. Now that the world was in chaos, only strength mattered, and he no longer had any qualms.

"If King Qi has that idea, he will surely attack Pengzhou," Mi Wenyi suddenly said.

The Prince of Wei also nodded. He looked at Mi Wenyi, "Chief Clerk Mi, Pengzhou is your hometown. The Mi family is the largest family in the area. The matter of King Qi slaughtering the powerful families of the six prefectures is still fresh in our minds. If Pengzhou falls, I am very worried about the local powerful families."

Mi Wenyi's face turned pale. He said, "To be frank with Your Highness, when King Qi slaughtered the powerful families of the six prefectures back then, some of the powerful family members fled to Pengzhou for refuge. To be honest, this slaughter of powerful families was merely King Qi's conspiracy, and definitely a rebellion by the powerful families. I believe that this matter should be announced to the world to make all powerful families abandon any thoughts of King Qi. This way, powerful families in various regions will surely view King Qi as a monstrous threat, and if King Qi attacks, they will certainly resist to the death."

"Excellent! Very excellent!" The Prince of Wei was overjoyed upon hearing this. He said, "I have fifty thousand troops stationed in Pengzhou. If the local powerful families can unite and resist together, the military strength will be more than the apparent fifty thousand. At that time, I will send an additional ten thousand cavalry to assist, and we will surely leave Xiao Ming utterly defeated."

Xiao Qi looked cold. He said, "Royal Uncle, Xiao Ming's army is renowned throughout the world for its firearms. If Royal Uncle wants to defeat Xiao Ming, you must also focus your efforts on this matter."

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"Firearms!"

The Prince of Wei lightly uttered these two words.

Thinking of this, his mood became somewhat gloomy. He said, "I had craftsmen imitate matchlock guns, but so far there has been no progress. It's truly a headache."

Mi Wenyi said, "Your Highness need not worry. While firearms and cannons are indeed powerful, they are by no means invincible. Otherwise, why does Xiao Ming guard Shanhai Pass and not venture out? This shows that even with firearms, Xiao Ming still fears the barbarian cavalry. Moreover, King Qi has fewer people while your highness has more, King Qi is poor while King Wei is rich. As long as Pengzhou can be defended, King Qi's army will have to retreat within a few months."

Xiao Qi frowned. What Mi Wenyi said seemed reasonable, but the Battles of Cangzhou and Jizhou had both proven the ferocity of the Qingzhou Army. Although King Wei had vast land and many people, and was very wealthy, its people had always lived in peace, and the Wei army had not experienced a major war for seven or eight years. If the two sides were to engage in battle, the outcome would be unknown.

Hesitating for a moment, he said, "Royal Uncle, I believe we should continue sending envoys to the Dutch, Japan, and even southward to seek methods for forging cannons and firearms. Now that other vassal kings have witnessed the power of firearms, they have all seen their might. We must not be careless in this matter."

"Chief Clerk Mi and my virtuous nephew both speak sense. Since that is the case, Chief Clerk Mi will be responsible for the defense of Pengzhou, and my virtuous nephew will be responsible for the method of forging firearms, how about that?"

Mi Wenyi and Xiao Qi exchanged glances and replied in unison, "Yes, Your Highness."

The Prince of Wei nodded with satisfaction. He was just thinking of going out for a stroll in the city with the two when a guard suddenly rushed to the main hall.

"Your Highness, the intelligence from Chu reports that King Chu's army has reportedly taken Quanzhou and other former royal territories." The guard said.

“Quanzhou!” The Prince of Wei was startled. “In such a short time, King Chu’s fief has doubled in size. If this continues, won’t the southern lands all be occupied by King Chu?”

“That’s not surprising. King Chu has painstakingly managed the south for years, and he has long bought off officials from many surrounding prefectures and counties. Now that the world is in chaos, these officials immediately defected to King Chu.” Xiao Qi analyzed.

The Prince of Wei felt a bit sour. “Hmph, this King Chu is truly cunning. He occupied a good place. It’s a pity that the Prince of Yan and King Qi around me are not easy to get along with.”

It must be said that King Chu was now in the most favorable position in terms of timing, geographical advantage, and popular support. Although the two had no good feelings for King Chu, they had to admit this point.

Mi Wenyi sighed and said, “Most importantly, King Chu’s navy dominates the river. This is a natural moat, and no one can do anything about him.”

The Prince of Wei snorted upon hearing this. He said, “This matter is quite disheartening, so let’s not mention it. King Chu is wealthy, and I am no worse than him. It’s not yet decided whose world this will be.”

Mi Wenyi nodded. He suddenly remembered something and said, “Your Highness, I just recalled something. King Qi’s warships need to stop in Tongzhou for resupply every time they go south. This could be leverage we can use against King Qi. After all, without Tongzhou, it would be quite difficult for their warships to go south.”

The Prince of Wei's eyes lit up. He gently stroked his beard and said proudly, "Chief Clerk Mi has truly reminded me. Hmph, in that case, we might as well make an issue out of Tongzhou. If Xiao Ming dares to covet Pengzhou, he should not blame me for prohibiting his warships from docking for supplies."

"More than that, Your Highness, perhaps we can even demand that King Qi send us some cannons and firearms," Mi Wenyi said.

The more the Prince of Wei thought about it, the more he found Mi Wenyi's words reasonable. He said, "Hmm, in that case, I will send someone to Qingzhou to discuss this matter."

With that, the Prince of Wei laughed heartily.

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Qingzhou, after Xiao Ming left the Qingzhou Barracks, he went directly to the government office. As soon as he arrived, Li San followed him in.

"Is there any important intelligence?" Li San seemed to be in a hurry, Xiao Ming couldn't help but ask.

Currently, Xiao Ming was completely in the dark about matters outside Qingzhou and could only rely on Li San and Wang Xuan to collect information and analyze the current situation.

Li San said with a chuckle, "Your Highness, Yang Zhen has honestly confessed all the Lijinmen's informants and secret codes. I have even unearthed quite a few Lijinmen members in Qingzhou."

"He confessed so quickly. It seems this Yang Zhen is nothing but a coward who fears death," Xiao Ming said disdainfully.

"Your Highness is right. I just mentioned the ten great tortures, and he wet his pants before the torture instruments were even used, hehe." Li San seemed very proud.

"Get to the point," Xiao Ming glared at him. This kid still hadn't changed his glib tongue.

Li San chuckled and said, "All these Lijinmen people have been arrested by me. Upon learning that Your Highness holds the last will, these people, persuaded by Yang Zhen, are willing to obey my dispatch. Moreover, I have already sent people to incorporate other Lijinmen personnel."

After a pause, Li San continued, "Your Highness, this Lijinmen is truly ubiquitous, spread throughout Great Yu Empire. Yang Zhen confessed that there are Lijinmen spies around every vassal king. This way, we will be able to keep abreast of the situation in other vassal states at all times."

"Besides that, did Yang Zhen not provide any other valuable intelligence?" Xiao Ming was most concerned about this.



Li San said, "Yes, Yang Zhen said that the barbarians agreed to the Prince of Zhao's condition for sending troops: to obtain half of the spoils of war. And the Prince of Liang also pledged allegiance to the barbarians in exchange for their support."

"Prince of Liang? Hmph, another one who acknowledges thieves as his father." Xiao Ming said angrily. He now understood more clearly why the Great Ming Dynasty fell. Internal strife and external threats, coupled with so many Han traitors leading the way, how could it not fall?

However, thinking of his current predicament, he felt the situation was even more difficult.

"Yang Zhen also said that the barbarians promised not to interfere with the conflict between the two, meaning if the Prince of Zhao and the Prince of Liang clashed, the barbarian troops would not participate. However, if they were to use troops against Your Highness, the barbarians promised to fully support them."

Xiao Ming frowned. He had originally wanted to play a proxy war, but he didn't expect the barbarians to start playing it first. He clearly understood the barbarians' intentions: they undoubtedly wanted to use the Prince of Zhao and the Prince of Liang to deplete his forces, while they themselves would wait behind them for an opportune moment to strike.

"However, Your Highness, the Prince of Zhao seems more interested in the King of Shu, while the Prince of Liang has quite a bit of criticism regarding the Prince of Zhao's occupation of Chang'an," Li San said again.

"The Prince of Zhao doesn't seem to be foolish. The land of Shu is known as the 'Land of Abundance' and is a major grain-producing area of Great Yu Empire. If he takes Shu, he won't have to worry about grain. Emperor Qin Shi Huang also first took Guanzhong, then Bashu, and only then unified the six states. It seems the Prince of Zhao is quite keen on learning from the First Emperor."

Li San said, "That's right. This Prince of Zhao has always called himself the 'Little Qin Emperor'."

With a cold sneer, Xiao Ming dismissed the topic and asked, "If the Prince of Zhao has that intention, it buys me time to conquer Wei's territory. Tell me about the situation in Pengzhou."