

I. Dynasty 541

Chapter 541

Li San recalled the information about Pengzhou in his mind.

Xiao Ming intended to conquer Pengzhou, so as the intelligence-gathering secret service, they naturally had to scout Pengzhou first.

And ever since he became the commander of the secret service, he had gradually come into contact with the informants of other vassal kings. However, overall, he was very confident in the secret service he had established, as they had many classic books to study.

“Your Highness, Pengzhou is surrounded by mountains. Pengzhou City is basically located in what Your Highness often calls a basin. In my opinion, due to the many mountains, it is difficult for large-scale armies to gather and deploy outside the city, making it difficult to pose a threat to the city. Furthermore, outside Pengzhou City, the Bian River and Sishui River converge and flow southward. These two rivers now serve as natural moats for Pengzhou City. Overall, Pengzhou is bordered by mountains on two sides and water on the north.”

Xiao Ming frowned upon hearing this. What Li San said was consistent with the geographical location of Xuzhou in his technology crystal.

Historically, the Bian River and Sishui River had long been encroached upon by the Yellow River. Due to the limitations of the surrounding mountains in Xuzhou, the river channels had also remained very stable. The Bian River came from the west, while the Sishui River flowed into the vicinity of Pengzhou City from Xiao Ming’s fief.

Now, these two rivers served as both a moat and a waterway for Pengzhou City. The Grand Canal of Great Yu Empire, which passed through Pengzhou City, utilized the Bian River and Sishui River channels. Even the merchant ships of the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce had to pass through here when heading south.

Simply put, one could go north along the Sishui River to Qinzhou and directly to Youzhou. Along the Bian River, one could go south to Jinling, Yangzhou, and even enter the Yangtze River to reach the King of Chu's fief. From the west, one could reach Chang'an, Luoyang, and other Guanzhong areas. Its location could be said to be a hub connecting north, south, east, and west.

Precisely for this reason, Xiao Ming's first reaction after the Prince of Wei refused to ally was to take Pengzhou City. After all, such an easily defensible yet crucial transportation hub in the Prince of Wei's hands was truly disgusting, as it meant he would constantly face the risk of the Prince of Wei stabbing him in the back.

But if he took this place, it would be equivalent to tearing open the gateway to Wei's territory. From then on, Wei's territory would be flat, allowing him to maneuver freely and easily switch from defense to offense.

"Your Highness, besides the terrain being easy to defend and difficult to attack, the people of Pengzhou are also extremely fierce. The people of Pengzhou are brave and skilled in combat, no less than the people of Qinzhou. Moreover, there are fifty thousand elite troops stationed in Pengzhou City. These soldiers are all local people of Pengzhou, and many of the military generals come from the powerful local families of Pengzhou. Coupled with the private armies of these powerful families, the military strength within this city is not a small number." The more Li San spoke, the more worried he became.

Not only was Pengzhou City easy to defend and difficult to attack, but the army in the city was also not weak.

"Pengzhou has been a strategically contested area since ancient times, and its soldiers are formidable, as I understand. Precisely because of this, it is even more necessary for me to take Pengzhou. Otherwise, if the Prince of Zhao and the barbarians attack, I will surely be attacked from both sides." Xiao Ming's expression was firm.

Li San nodded solemnly. With Xiao Ming saying so, he felt that Pengzhou City was indeed very important.

After a pause, he continued, "Your Highness, I also inquired about the situation of the local powerful families. The largest family in Pengzhou City is the Mi family, and the eldest son of the Mi family head, Mi Wenyi, is currently the Chief Clerk of the Prince of Wei's residence. Besides that, the second largest family is the Lu family..."

Xiao Ming listened and nodded. Li San had a very detailed grasp of the information about Pengzhou City. He now understood Pengzhou City very well.

"You are to compile all this intelligence into a book. In addition, I need a detailed topographical map of Pengzhou City." Xiao Ming pondered for a moment. As the saying goes, 'know yourself and know your enemy, and you will win a hundred battles.' Before the war comes, he must have detailed information.

However, this was only part of the work. He said to Li San, "How do the local powerful families view me?"

"As Your Highness expects, the powerful families of Pengzhou are very hostile towards Your Highness and often speak disrespectfully. This is also what I am concerned about. If Your Highness attacks Pengzhou City, these local powerful families will probably resist to the death."

Xiao Ming smiled bitterly. Back then, to eradicate the powerful families that were hindering Qingzhou, he had indeed been ruthless. Now, his actions from back then had become heinous acts of treason in the eyes of these powerful families. But even so, he still did not regret his decision at that time.

Great Yu Empire had been numb for too long under the rule of these powerful families. If these tumors could not be completely eradicated, they would continue to drain Great Yu Empire of its lifeblood.

Thinking of this, he made a decision in his heart. So he said to Li San, "If that's how the powerful families are, what about the common people?"

"The common people speak highly of Your Highness," Li San said with a smile. He was quite proud of this.

"Then can the secret guards incite the common people to rebel?" Xiao Ming asked.

Li San understood when he came that Xiao Ming's main point was this. He said, "Reporting to Your Highness, this matter is very difficult. The common people have lived under the oppression of powerful families for a long time, or rather, the local common people have become dependents of powerful families. They dare not act rashly when they are unsure whether Your Highness can break through Pengzhou City."

"Hmm, in that case, try again when I attack Pengzhou City." Xiao Ming said. Since Li San said so, he must have bought off some people.

He didn't expect these people to decide the outcome of the war, but if they could distract the Pengzhou City army, it would be good.

Having grasped the detailed intelligence, Xiao Ming sent Li San back.

Three days later, Li San returned again. This time, he handed Xiao Ming a complete topographical and troop deployment map of Pengzhou City, and Xiao Ming had the craftsmen of the machinery department make a sand table overnight. The rightful source is Novel_Fire(.)net

The next day, he gathered the generals participating in this siege to observe the map of Pengzhou City and formulate a detailed attack plan. He didn't want any mistakes in such an important war.

Like Xiao Ming, when Niu Ben and the others saw the map, they immediately frowned.

"Your Highness, this Pengzhou City seems like a tough nut to crack. We can only attack Pengzhou City from the front, and the land in front of Pengzhou City is narrow, very unsuitable for the soldiers' linear formations." Niu Ben analyzed.

Luo Xin directly said, "Pengzhou City has neither cannons nor a musketeer unit. It seems the Prince of Wei treats the equipment he bought as family treasures. Since that's the case, we'll adopt the method used to attack Shanhai Pass: mortar shells with lime bombs, and explosives to breach the city."

"Luo Xin is right, just use cannons directly." Lu Fei's temperament remained unchanged, direct and decisive.

Niu Ben snorted and said, "It sounds simple, but there's a very wide moat outside Pengzhou City. Tell me how you're going to bury explosives."

Luo Xin hadn't looked closely at the sand table just now, but now he saw it and immediately chuckled sheepishly.

Niu Ben then turned to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, I have a method, please dispatch two to three warships to assist in the battle."

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"Warships?"

Niu Ben's suggestion made Xiao Ming nod slightly. Although the Bian River wasn't wide, the three warships if commanded southward would have more than enough room to pass through. After all, these three warships were only Fifth-Grade warships, equivalent to the size of ordinary merchant ships.

"That's a plan, but currently these warships are patrolling at sea. I need to gather them first," Xiao Ming mused.

Pengzhou City on the sand table was built by the water. To enter Pengzhou City, one could only pass through the wooden bridge in front of the gate. But by then, Pengzhou City's army would surely have demolished the bridge.

At this point, three warships patrolling the river could transport soldiers to the other side and provide artillery support for the attack.

“That’s no problem; the three prefectural armies also need some time to gather and train,” Niu Ben said happily. He had always been eyeing warships because the further south they went, the more cities were built by water. Without naval protection, they wouldn’t even be able to cross rivers.

While everyone was observing the sand table, a guard came in from outside the door and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, the Prince of Wei’s envoy has arrived.”

Lu Fei chuckled upon hearing this, “Your Highness, is the Prince of Wei regretting it and wants to ally with Your Highness again?”

“The Prince of Wei is ambitious and won’t surrender to Your Highness so easily. Perhaps he has some malicious intentions,” Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming frowned and said, “I will know once I go. You all continue to observe the sand table and formulate the battle plan, then submit it to me for review.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Niu Ben and the generals responded.

With that, Xiao Ming followed the guard to King Qi’s residence. In the main hall of the residence, a middle-aged scholar was waiting for him.

Upon seeing Xiao Ming, the middle-aged scholar bowed and said, “Your Royal Highness King Qi, I have been dispatched by the Prince of Wei to discuss the matter of Tongzhou with Your Highness.”

“Tongzhou?” Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed, thinking that what had to come, had come. He knew the Prince of Wei would make an issue out of Tongzhou.

Sitting in the main seat, he said, "The Prince of Wei's thoughts, feel free to speak them."

The middle-aged scholar said, "His Royal Highness the Prince of Wei said that the world is in chaos now, and as members of the imperial clan, we should support each other. Therefore, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wei is willing to continue providing supplies to Qingzhou warships, but hopes that Your Highness can provide twenty thousand matchlock guns and three hundred cannons as rental fees."

"The Prince of Wei truly drives a hard bargain." Xiao Ming snorted coldly. He said, "What if I don't agree?"

"Then His Royal Highness the Prince of Wei cannot continue to provide supplies for Your Highness in Tongzhou. I hope Your Highness will think twice," the middle-aged scholar said indifferently. "Your Highness, if you lose the Tongzhou port, it will be difficult for your warships to go south."

The middle-aged scholar's arrogant tone made Xiao Ming flare up. He hated being threatened by others the most. Given this, he decided he would teach the Prince of Wei a lesson, making him realize the vastness of heaven and earth.

He said, "Go back and tell the Prince of Wei that if he stops supplies to Tongzhou, I will certainly make him pay the price."

Xiao Ming's tone was severe, which startled the middle-aged scholar. This time, the Prince of Wei had come with full confidence. After all, Tongzhou was within Wei territory, and Xiao Ming had no way to deal with it.

“Your Highness, you must weigh the pros and cons carefully.” The middle-aged scholar didn’t expect Xiao Ming to be so unyielding and for a moment didn’t know what to do.

Xiao Ming stood up at this moment and said to the middle-aged scholar, “I have considered it very clearly. You go back and tell the Prince of Wei that I remember the Battle of Cangzhou and the Battle of Jizhou. Now that he disregards the kinship of the imperial family and refuses to ally, I have been benevolent and righteous enough to him. From now on, he needn’t hold back against me, and I will not hold back against him either.”

The middle-aged scholar had been quite calm, but now Xiao Ming’s words thoroughly frightened him. In his view, Xiao Ming was formally declaring war on the Prince of Wei.

“I... I take my leave.” Having been rebuffed, the middle-aged scholar wiped the sweat from his forehead and walked out without looking back. He was afraid that if he left any later, Xiao Ming would execute him as a warning.

After sending off the Prince of Wei’s envoy, Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed. He had held a glimmer of hope for the Prince of Wei, but now the Prince of Wei’s true colors had completely disappointed him.

Moreover, he was not the original Xiao Ming; he didn’t care about royal bloodlines. He only knew one thing: if this continued, Great Yu Empire would probably truly be doomed.

Therefore, before these vassal kings could ruin Great Yu Empire’s population from one hundred million to only a few million, he had to adopt an aggressive stance. He would seize as much land as possible, especially prosperous and populous areas like Wei’s territory.

After driving away the Prince of Wei's envoy, Xiao Ming immediately ordered Yue Yun to dispatch three warships from the fleet to Qingzhou to assist in the campaign against Pengzhou City. At the same time, he and Niu Ben began to intensively plan the attack on Pengzhou City.

And as if to retaliate against Xiao Ming, after the envoy returned to Jinling City, the Prince of Wei quickly cut off supplies to Tongzhou. At the same time, the Prince of Wei ordered that no Qingzhou merchants were allowed to trade in Wei's territory, otherwise they would be executed without mercy.

After the order was issued, three Qingzhou merchant ships that had not had time to withdraw were seized.

"Your Highness, the Prince of Wei is simply too hateful! He let our people come back, saying that if we want to redeem the merchant ships, we have to pay five hundred thousand taels of silver." Li Kaiyuan said indignantly. Business was already difficult due to the war.

He never expected the Prince of Wei to suddenly pull such a move at this time. The goods transported on these three merchant ships, plus the value of the merchant ships themselves, were worth more than two hundred thousand taels. Li Kaiyuan couldn't help but feel heartbroken.

The retaliatory measures taken by the Prince of Wei indeed caught him off guard. According to Li Kaiyuan, some powerful families in Wei's territory seized the opportunity to make trouble for merchants from Qingzhou.

Although it was superficially just expulsion, in fact, the Prince of Wei and some powerful families had long harbored malicious intentions. The seizure of these three merchant ships already indicated the problem.

It must be said that this matter indeed bothered Xiao Ming greatly. These merchant ships belonged to the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce. Although he had ordered them to withdraw when he fell out with the Prince of Wei, they still didn't have time to leave.

It wasn't that the merchants withdrew too slowly, but that the Prince of Wei had planned this long ago and had seized these three merchant ships even before issuing the order.

"Your Highness, business for the Chamber of Commerce is difficult now. What should be done?" Li Kaiyuan sighed.

"If domestic business in Great Yu Empire is difficult, then do foreign business. Do you think I painstakingly opened up maritime routes for fun? I planned ahead precisely to deal with this kind of situation. Now you should shift your focus to maritime trade."

"Yes, Your Highness." Li Kaiyuan said. Hesitating, he said, "Your Highness, what about these three merchant ships?"

"Hmph, he took three of my merchant ships, so I will take three of his cities." Xiao Ming slammed the table.

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June 27th.

Qingzhou's weather gradually grew hotter, but under the scorching sun, the transport team belonging to the Qingzhou Army was still busy.

Today, the transport team received an order from Niu Ben to transport flintlock guns and ammunition from the military factory to Yizhou. This batch of military supplies was prepared for the attack on Pengzhou City.

Following closely behind the transport team were thirty-six field cannons. Sixteen of these field cannons were six-pound field cannons, and twenty were siege field cannons. Pulled by horses, the artillerymen followed the cannons south.

At Qingzhou pier, three galleons also set sail southward at this time. The preparations for the battle for Pengzhou City were in full swing.

“Over a month has passed, and it’s finally time to act.”

Lu Fei’s expression at the bow of the ship was comfortable. He had been training continuously during this period, and the days were dull and boring. Now that the war was about to begin, he was finally invigorated.

Luo Xin did not go with the artillery this time; he was also preparing to head south with the galleons. He said, “If we capture Pengzhou City this time, who do you think His Highness will entrust the military affairs of Pengzhou City to?”

“What? Do you have any ideas?” Lu Fei squinted at Luo Xin.

Rolling his eyes, Luo Xin said, “Heh heh, I knew you had that thought. Don’t worry, I won’t compete with you. The land we’re going to conquer in the future is vast.”

“Even if you tried, you wouldn’t win against me. His Highness said that once Pengzhou City is taken, he’ll make me the governor of Pengzhou. Heh heh, after following His Highness for so long, I’m finally getting promoted!” Lu Fei said with deep emotion.

In the past three years, he had achieved many merits and committed many offenses, but through all the ups and downs, he remained a cavalry commander.

He hadn’t thought about these things before, but after the chaos in Chang’an, every general in the Qingzhou Army had their own ideas.

Although Xiao Ming had not yet declared himself Emperor, in their hearts, he was already the Emperor. The only thing he lacked was the actual power to unify Great Yu Empire.

Therefore, they were all eagerly clamoring for war. Expanding territory was a great merit, and in the future, they would surely be rewarded for their achievements and their names would be immortalized.

His command of the army to attack Pengzhou City this time made many generals in the army envious, all of them staring at his command authority with red eyes.

“Hmph, now you can be smug, but during the battle, you’ll be begging me.” Luo Xin raised his eyebrows.

Lu Fei immediately grinned upon hearing this. He said, “Luo Xin, we’ve been through life and death together for two years now. You can’t drag your feet this time.”

Just as he finished speaking, Lu Fei's peripheral vision suddenly caught sight of someone walking towards him. He turned his face and saw that it was Xiao Ming boarding the ship.

"Your Highness, are you also going to Yizhou?"

Lu Fei and Luo Xin walked towards Xiao Ming, speaking with some excitement.

"Yes, I am worried that you might cause trouble on the battlefield, so I've come to supervise personally," Xiao Ming said seemingly casually.

Lu Fei felt wronged upon hearing this and said, "Your Highness, you still don't trust me."

Xiao Ming chuckled and said, "I was just joking. Commander Niu told me that you will have no problem leading troops independently now. This battle of Pengzhou is very important. I specifically came to see you all and boost the morale of the soldiers."

Lu Fei breathed a sigh of relief. He said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, please rest assured. If I cannot take Pengzhou City, I will bring my head to you."

"Your head is too big. I would find no place to put it if I used it as a chamber pot, so you keep it yourself." Xiao Ming glared at Lu Fei. This phrase had become his catchphrase for him.

This time, accompanying Lu Fei were Luo Hong and other soldiers from the Firearm Battalion. The three warships were packed with these soldiers.

Originally, Xiao Ming also wanted to go to Yizhou to oversee the battle, but the intelligence Li San had sent over the past two days was somewhat complex, and he needed to discuss it with Fiji and others.

Xiao Ming boarded the warship, which made the soldiers look excited. Never before had a vassal king personally come to send them off to battle.

These soldiers from Chang'an had only heard that Xiao Ming was very approachable, and now they saw it was indeed true.

After exchanging a few words with Lu Fei, Xiao Ming ignored him and instead boarded the three warships one after another, inquiring about the soldiers' well-being. Xiao Ming's actions further boosted the soldiers' morale.

"All of you, brave soldiers, on the day Pengzhou City falls, I will personally host a victory celebration for all of you!" Xiao Ming declared loudly to the ordinary yet endearing soldiers.

"Our glory is loyalty!" The Qingzhou Army soldiers immediately shouted back.

Luo Hong was stunned for a moment, then he also shouted, "Our glory is loyalty!"

Looking at the high-spirited departing soldiers, Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction. He said to Lu Fei, "Depart now."

"Yes, Your Highness." Lu Fei replied.

Disembarking, Xiao Ming watched the three warships set sail from the pier, gradually disappearing into the horizon of the river.

At this moment, Fiji appeared behind Xiao Ming. Also looking at the departing warships, he said, "Your Highness, the King of Chu's envoy says that King Chu is willing to ally with us and divide the empire equally in the future. I wonder what Your Highness's intentions are?"

The reason Xiao Ming didn't go to Yizhou this time was because of the King of Chu's envoy. After he completely fell out with the Prince of Wei, he didn't know whether the King of Chu had received the news or if he had already planned this, but an envoy from Chu arrived this morning.

At that time, he was at the military factory with Song Changping, delivering the produced flintlock guns to the Qingzhou Army. Upon hearing the news, he had Fiji first make contact with the King of Chu's envoy.

"What do you think, Councillor Fei?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Your Highness, I will say something that may displease Your Highness. Over the past month, I have been handling the administrative affairs of the fief with Pang Yukun. In my opinion, even with the advantage of firearms and cannons, Your Highness cannot unify the empire alone." Fiji said.

After a pause, he continued, "From the account books, it is clear that just steel, firearms, cannons, ammunition, and gunpowder consume a huge amount from the government. If they are not replenished in time, I'm afraid the soldiers will face the dilemma of having guns but no bullets in the future. The reason for all this is that the world is in chaos, trade routes are cut off, and various materials from Great Yu Empire cannot reach Qingzhou. If this continues, how can Your Highness unify the north? Your Highness, don't forget the barbarians on the grasslands; they have been eyeing Your Highness covetously."

Fiji's meaning was very clear. He was not surprised at all that the King of Chu sent an envoy this time, because a large portion of the cannons from his cannon trade with the King of Chu had not yet been delivered. If they were to fall out now, the King of Chu would surely be heartbroken.

"You mean to continue maintaining trade relations with the King of Chu?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Your Highness, great people do not bother with minor details. If Your Highness wants to gain control of the northern lands, you must cooperate with the King of Chu. This way, whether it is grain, fodder, or minerals, there will be a source, and Your Highness's goods will also have a place to sell, won't they?"

Xiao Ming nodded. It must be said that Fiji's words resonated with him. He indeed needed a stable market for his goods, otherwise Qingzhou's industry would be finished.

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A gentle river breeze blew, carrying away the summer heat.

Xiao Ming and Fiji walked along the riverbanks of the Xiaoqing River, talking. After a moment of thought, Xiao Ming said, "Since that's the case, we will continue to cooperate with the King of Chu. As Grand Councillor Fei said, my biggest threats are currently the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Liang, the Prince of Yan, and the barbarians. The current priority should be to stabilize the northern lands."

“Yes, Your Highness. Throughout history, founders of dynasties have always campaigned from north to south. It won’t hurt to let the King of Chu have his way for a while,” Fiji, too, was a shrewd figure.

He had discussed this matter with Pang Yukun before coming, and Pang Yukun also supported his idea because, in his opinion, the fief was indeed isolated and had many enemies at the moment, so they should seize this opportunity.

After all, for the King of Chu, all he wanted was the land south of the Yangtze River.

“Hmm, in that case, I will go back and agree to this matter.” Xiao Ming’s brow unfurrowed.

The barbarians, Japan, Goryeo, the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Liang, and the Prince of Yan were Xiao Ming’s main enemies at present. Among them, except for Japan being at sea, the rest of the forces were in the north, and none of them were easy to deal with.

Especially the barbarians, who were a grassland empire stretching from East Asia to Central Asia. In the west, the barbarians were even fighting the Ottoman Empire, which showed the vastness of their territory.

Fighting such a large empire would surely be long and arduous. With Xiao Ming’s current fief’s land and resources, merely consuming the barbarians would be enough to exhaust Xiao Ming.

Therefore, for whatever reason, he had to unify the North, and only then would he have enough manpower and resources to completely defeat the barbarians.

Pondering along the way, Xiao Ming and Fiji headed towards Qingzhou City.

Upon returning to the royal residence, Xiao Ming met the King of Chu's envoy.

"Your Highness." The King of Chu's envoy showed a respectful attitude when he saw Xiao Ming.

This time, besides the King of Chu's envoy, Li Wei was also present. As the person consistently in charge of artillery trade matters in Qingzhou, Li Wei also played a significant role in this alliance.

During this period, Li Wei had been acting as an undercover agent in Chu territory with Xiao Ming's money, and unknowingly, he had cultivated a group of officials close to Qingzhou.

From this, it can be seen that in any era, the allure of money is still infinite.

"Gentlemen, please take a seat. Grand Councillor Fei has already conveyed the King of Chu's intentions to me. After careful consideration, I find the King of Chu's idea to be good."

The envoy sent by the King of Chu this time, Chai Lingfei, held a high position in Chu as the King of Chu's son-in-law, showing the King of Chu's emphasis on this alliance.

Chai Lingfei became nervous as Xiao Ming entered. Unlike the Prince of Wei's ignorance-is-bliss attitude, the King of Chu had witnessed the strength of the Dutch ships and artillery. After being utterly routed by the Dutch in the Battle of Qiantang, the King of Chu decided to focus heavily on developing firearms.

Because of this, the King of Chu was very worried that Xiao Ming would tear up the original trade agreement due to his declaration of independence. This time, he hastily sent Chai Lingfei to plead for an alliance.

“Your Highness is wise. The King of Chu deeply feels that Your Highness is fighting alone in the North and it is very difficult. His Majesty also feels the bond of brotherhood. If Your Highness is willing to ally, both sides can complement each other’s strengths.” Chai Lingfei said excitedly, beaming.

After a pause, Chai Lingfei continued, “Your Highness, His Majesty said that if Your Highness agrees to this alliance, we are willing to continue purchasing fifty thousand matchlock guns. Li Wei will also discuss the specific details of this matter with Your Highness.”

“Fifty thousand matchlock guns. Chu territory truly lives up to its reputation as being the wealthiest in the world, such a grand gesture,” Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

Now that steam-powered drilling machines had replaced water-powered ones, the production speed of matchlock guns had reached a new level, and matchlock guns were simple in structure and extremely easy to manufacture.

Thinking that matchlock guns were extremely easy to imitate, he felt there was no need to refuse this transaction, because Li San had extracted another piece of intelligence from Yang Zhen that made him very displeased.

When Xiao Wenxuan was seriously ill, Wang Xi had already acquired the forging technology to replicate matchlock guns. Although this forging technology produced matchlock guns slowly, the technology had ultimately been replicated.

Rather than letting the King of Chu also find a way to imitate them, it was better for him to sell matchlock guns, which could both earn money and make the King of Chu feel there was no need to imitate them.

Chai Lingfei smiled upon hearing this and said, “Your Highness, the Prince of Ruyang and the Prince of Huainan are taking the opportunity to invade royal lands, and the Prince of Zhao is covetously eyeing Shu. For the sake of Great Yu Empire’s ancestral lands, His Majesty has no choice.”

Xiao Ming’s smile grew wider. At first, Chai Lingfei spoke of the King of Chu, then he brought out the Third Prince.

Now, in Chang’an, the Prince of Zhao had installed an emperor, and in the South, the King of Chu had installed an emperor. He, the true heir to the imperial throne, had become the one they were all vying to win over.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming felt more and more that he was right not to make the last will public. Being able to play both sides was far more important than a title.

But even so, Xiao Ming would not pledge allegiance to the Third Prince. He said, “Since that is the case, I will agree to this matter.”

Chai Lingfei immediately felt relieved. His trip to Qingzhou had successfully achieved its purpose.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Xiao Ming called for Fiji and Pang Yukun and had them formally sign the alliance with Chai Lingfei in the government office. The alliance stipulated non-aggression between the two parties, and that trade between them would remain unaffected and continue normally.

After drafting the agreement, Xiao Ming officially signed and stamped it with his seal, and Chai Lingfei also affixed the seal he brought.

With the agreement reached, Chai Lingfei cupped his hands and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, after this matter, I hope Your Highness can provide more support in terms of firearms. Of course, we will not let Your Highness suffer a loss either.”

Among the various vassal kings, the King of Chu had the deepest understanding of Xiao Ming’s strength. Precisely because of this, he would set aside his pride to win over Xiao Ming.

Of course, the King of Chu had also chosen the right moment to come this time. He had seen Qingzhou’s current predicament and thus dispatched an envoy at the opportune moment. Indeed, as the King of Chu expected, the alliance was successfully concluded.

Xiao Ming handed the alliance agreement to Pang Yukun to keep. He sighed faintly. The cruel reality truly taught him how to play the strategy of allying with distant forces to attack nearby ones.

No wonder even the powerful Russian military of today still had to beg the “Rabbit family” for money. This was all driven by money; no matter how many advanced weapons there were, without financial support, they were just a pile of scrap metal.

And back then, Emperor Wu of Han only truly won the war against the Xiongnu by sending Zhang Qian on a diplomatic mission to the Yuezhi to attack the Xiongnu from both sides.

“Since the alliance has been signed, I will naturally not violate it, and I hope the King of Chu can also abide by the alliance.” Xiao Ming smiled faintly. With this, he had basically completed the first step of allying with distant forces to attack nearby ones, and the war against Wei would have fewer constraints.

And after signing the agreement with the King of Chu, Xiao Ming suddenly had a bold idea, an idea with the same purpose as Zhang Qian’s mission to the Western Regions back then.

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“Send an envoy to the Ottomans?”

After the alliance was signed, Li Wei took the King of Chu’s envoy to Wei Family Restaurant to rest. At this moment, Xiao Ming proposed another plan.

“Your Highness, where is this Ottoman Empire? And what language do they speak? We know nothing at all. How can we possibly send an envoy to the Ottoman Empire?” Fiji and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, both feeling that this plan was very risky, and that the envoy might not even return alive.

Xiao Ming naturally understood what the two meant. Such a shocking plan had only been attempted by Emperor Wu of Han in the past, and Zhang Qian’s return was also due to too many coincidences.

However, this was a different time. The current Age of Exploration was not the environment faced by the Han Dynasty back then. This time, Xiao Ming intended to have the diplomatic mission depart by sea to the Ottoman Empire. As long as the Ottoman Empire could create trouble for the barbarians in Central Asia, the pressure on his side would be greatly reduced.

As for whether it would succeed, one would never know without trying.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming said, “This diplomatic mission to the Ottoman Empire will be prepared by me. You don’t need to worry. As for where the Ottoman Empire is, I know. But you two have been at Bowen Academy for so long, have you not studied the knowledge of other countries?”

“Your Highness, I have only read some maps of Great Yu Empire, Japan, and Goryeo. I haven’t looked at these yet.” Fiji seemed to take it for granted.

Pang Yukun was a bit awkward. He hadn’t looked either, because in his mind, the world had only two parts: Great Yu Empire, and countries outside Great Yu Empire.

As for the history and development of other countries, he had no interest at all.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming had an idea in his mind. After all was said and done, the concept of a Celestial Empire was still deeply ingrained in the minds of these officials in Great Yu Empire; they disdained learning about other countries.

Although he was angry at their lack of ambition, Xiao Ming also understood that people of one era had the thoughts of that era. Compared to people like Fiji and Pang Yukun, some young officials were willing to understand the current world situation. Therefore, he had been planning to insert some promising young officials into the cabinet to counterbalance conservative officials like Pang Yukun and Fiji, lest no one help him argue with these people in the future.

Xiao Ming took full charge of the diplomatic mission, and the two had nothing more to say. They were merely worried, but if a diplomatic mission could truly be sent to the Ottoman Empire, they would be very happy to see it.

The alliance was signed, and the diplomatic mission was finalized. Fiji and Pang Yukun exchanged glances. Pang Yukun spoke first, "Your Highness, the affairs of the fief need to be handled, but shouldn't Your Highness also consider the matter of continuing the lineage?"

"Continuing the lineage? Isn't that my private matter?" Xiao Ming immediately became vigilant. These two old foxes were smiling strangely, a precursor to them working in tandem.

Indeed, after Pang Yukun spoke, Fiji earnestly said, "Your Highness, an emperor's family affairs are state affairs. Continuing the lineage is of utmost importance. For the stability of the fief, I hope Your Highness will think twice."

Pang Yukun hesitated, "Your Highness, speaking of which, it has been almost a year since the Princess Consort entered the residence. Is it necessary to call for the imperial physician to take the pulse of Your Highness and the Princess Consort?"

"No need." Xiao Ming really wanted to kick them. I had no problems at all; these two old men were overly worried.

Fiji's eyes darted around. It seemed he and Pang Yukun had reached an agreement. He said, "Your Highness, this matter is of great importance, and I have absolutely no selfish motives..."

Seeing that the two were endless, Xiao Ming angrily said, "Shut up. I know what I'm doing."

With that, Xiao Ming fled the government office as if escaping, leaving only Fiji and Pang Yukun looking at each other.

“Chief Clerk Pang, do you think His Highness has another woman in mind? Why is His Highness so annoyed about this matter?” Fiji was worried. Fei Yue’er was his daughter, and from every angle, he did not want his daughter to suffer.

Pang Yukun recalled and said, “Impossible. His Highness and the Princess Consort are deeply in love. People often see the Princess Consort and His Highness together, and there has never been any rumor of them quarreling in the royal residence.”

“That’s strange. What exactly is His Highness thinking?” Fiji looked clouded. In his view, this was too abnormal. Many family members were already secretly discussing this matter.

Pang Yukun saw Fiji frowning tightly. He said, “I did mention this to His Highness before, and His Highness also ignored it. However, His Highness doesn’t worry, but as his subjects, we cannot help but think for His Highness. Now that Grand Councillor Fei is here, you and I will bring this up to His Highness every now and then. We aren’t afraid that His Highness won’t agree. After all, this is one of the most important matters.”

This resonated with Fiji’s thoughts. He said, “With Chief Grand Councillor Pang’s words, even if I have to lose face, I will see this matter through.”

The two exchanged glances and suddenly smiled.

Meanwhile, after leaving the government office, Xiao Ming went directly to Bowen Academy. With the world in chaos, the development of the fief could not stop, but rather, the development of education needed to accelerate.

And because of Xiao Wenxuan's death, his last shackle had also been broken. From now on, he could boldly develop astronomy in his fief, popularize the current development of the world, and clarify the concepts of nation and state, without having to worry about anyone criticizing him.

After all, during times of war and chaos, the Confucianists' control over the secular world was always at its weakest. Everyone was trying to survive; who would still cling to classics to find fault with him? In fact, the Kong family in Qufu was also in a state of panic at this time.

Therefore, given this, Xiao Ming officially sent astronomy books and telescopes to Bowen Academy, establishing an astronomy branch, and recruiting talented individuals with knowledge of celestial phenomena from among the common people to participate in astronomical research.

Upon arriving at the gate of Bowen Academy, students wearing white long-sleeved uniforms entered Xiao Ming's sight.

As Lin Wentao, Lu Tong, and other students gained noble titles and private estates, the common scholars gradually moved from resistance to desperately wanting to enter the academy. This change was due to Xiao Ming using the previous incident of scholars causing trouble to cut off the path for scholars without formal education to enter officialdom. At the same time, with the onset of war, scholars no longer had the opportunity to take the imperial examinations.

On the contrary, some scholars seemed to see an opportunity. They eagerly wanted to serve Xiao Ming, hoping that one day Xiao Ming would sit on the dragon throne, so that they could rise to prominence.

Of course, these were just some who craved official positions. Besides this type of scholar, there were also more scholars who liked craftsmanship and technical skills. And under Xiao Ming's deliberate guidance, some children of civilian craftsmen also entered the academy to participate in the study of various scientific knowledge.

And due to two or three years of accumulation, Bowen Academy also had a group of students who mastered various scientific knowledge. Although their level was only at the junior high and high school level, it was more than enough to teach newly enrolled students.

Therefore, Bowen Academy had been unprecedentedly lively during this period, and the number of students had also risen to eight thousand.

Chapter 546

"Your Highness."

Walking through Bowen Academy, the students continually bowed to Xiao Ming, and Xiao Ming returned their bows all along the way.

This time he came to Bowen Academy not to check on the students' learning progress. With the increasing number of students in the academy, he no longer worried about this problem, because as the number grew, the competition among students also became greater. If these students were not ambitious and failed to pass the semi-annual assessment, they would be eliminated and lose the opportunity to study at Bowen Academy.

This was not because Xiao Ming was cruel, but because all students of Bowen Academy received free room and board, and a basic monthly stipend. It could be said that he was supporting these students, so, unlike modern institutions, he did not support waste.

If they couldn't even pass the most basic assessment, they weren't qualified to enjoy these benefits. After all, his assessment was merely a test paper of the current standard, and as long as they could answer 70% of the questions correctly, they passed the assessment. In addition to the traditional written test, there was also a practical assessment.

For example, students of the Chemistry and Physics academies had to be able to independently complete a portion of experiments, testing their hands-on ability to apply what they had learned.

In the first half of the year's assessment, Bowen Academy eliminated more than thirty unlearned and incompetent students. This severely stimulated other students. All students who entered Bowen Academy began to treat their studies seriously, no longer daring to just muddle through in the academy.

Under the protection of his guards, Xiao Ming went directly to the Astronomy Academy classroom. This group of students were all gathered by Xiao Ming from the populace. After passing basic assessments and proving they had some simple understanding of celestial phenomena, they officially became students of Bowen Academy.

"Commoner greets Your Highness."

There were only seven people in the classroom, and these seven people varied in age, from sixteen to sixty.

However, he didn't care about the age issue. His purpose was to tear away the veil of feudal superstition, as long as they could help him establish a basic scientific understanding among the people.

"Dispense with the formalities." Xiao Ming smiled.

It was already evening when he arrived this time, and choosing this time was naturally not without purpose, because it was almost mid-month, which was when the moon was fullest, largest, and easiest to observe with a telescope.

To break down feudal ignorance among the common people, he first had to break down the ignorance in the minds of these seven people, because these seven people's understanding of the stars came only from books on fortune-telling, and they were very familiar with things like ominous stars and malevolent stars.

Among these seven people, the elderly man who spoke first was the most eloquent. His name was Yan Zhengyi. He used to be a fortune-teller who set up a stall on the streets of Qingzhou. Later, when he learned from the newspaper that Xiao Ming needed people who understood celestial phenomena, he volunteered, hoping to become an advisor in King Qi's residence.

Due to the idea of the divine right of kings, generally speaking, both vassal kings and nobles had people around them who were proficient in celestial phenomena. Before wars, these people would also be asked to deduce celestial phenomena to predict good or ill fortune.

"Did Your Highness keep us because you want us to divine good or ill fortune for Your Highness tonight?" Yan Zhengyi's face wrinkled into a broad smile. He was already sixty-five years old. When Xiao Ming chose him, he immediately exclaimed that he was Jiang Taigong meeting King Wen of Zhou, which made Xiao Ming laugh wryly.

Before Xiao Ming could speak, Yan Zhengyi looked up at the gradually darkening sky. At this moment, a full moon had already risen from the east. He stroked his beard and said, "Your Highness's ruling star is the Ziwei Star. This Ziwei Star is the Emperor Star, which proves that Your Highness has the appearance of an Emperor. After the chaos in Chang'an, the Ziwei Star has become even brighter, even overshadowing the other stars, which means that Your Highness is truly a hegemon of the world, and your future is limitless."

“Hahahaha...” It must be said that Yan Zhengyi’s words made Xiao Ming very comfortable, but Yan Zhengyi certainly couldn’t see that he was from a different time and space.

The Ziwei Star in Yan Zhengyi’s words was also known as the North Star, the main star of Ursa Minor. The Big Dipper rotated around it through the four seasons.

If the sky was compared to a funnel, the Ziwei Star would be the tip of that funnel. This Ziwei Star, surrounded by other stars, was then used to symbolize a destiny of an “Emperor descended from heaven.”

Based on the range of stars surrounding it, born into a family meant being the head of the family; born into a country meant being the monarch of the country. Yan Zhengyi was using this method to deceive him.

Seeing Xiao Ming so happy, Yan Zhengyi also echoed his laughter. In his opinion, he had said the right thing.

However, as the two were laughing, one of the young men said disdainfully, “Your Highness, this Ziwei Star is just a star; it actually has nothing to do with destiny. As Chen Sheng and Wu Guang said, ‘Are kings, nobles, generals, and prime ministers born to be such?’ There have been countless people in history who claimed to be born under the Ziwei Star, but none who became rulers of the world were not strategists with great ambitions.”

“Huang Yanqing, what nonsense are you talking about!” Yan Zhengyi’s face suddenly changed. “How dare you slander something passed down by our ancestors!”

Xiao Ming put away his smile. He looked at the slightly plump young man and said, "This theory of celestial phenomena is the study of emperors. Why do you criticize it so?"

"Because Your Highness seeks us not for astrology or divination, but for celestial phenomena itself. Moreover, Your Highness's Bowen Academy is also known for its unique knowledge. If Your Highness needed famous scholars, why would you seek them among the common people? There are naturally those proficient in astrology in famous temples across the world." Huang Yanqing said slowly.

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming nodded. This Huang Yanqing was indeed a smart person, and his words just now also proved that he did not agree with Yan Zhengyi's charlatan stance.

"Hmm, you're right. I didn't ask you to come for astrology or divination, but to let you truly understand what these stars in the sky are?" Xiao Ming said indifferently.

Yan Zhengyi's face changed. Like a swindler, every swindler knows that what they are saying is a lie, but they must make others believe it. Yan Zhengyi had only read two books on physiognomy, and he himself didn't believe what he said.

Now that Xiao Ming spoke directly, he immediately chuckled awkwardly, not knowing whether to speak or remain silent.

Glancing at the now restrained Yan Zhengyi, Xiao Ming looked at the gradually rising moon, then said to the seven people, "Follow me."

Then he led the seven people outside the classroom. At this time, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu had already aimed his telescope at the moon.

Seeing the telescope, all seven showed puzzled expressions. At this point, Xiao Ming stepped forward, adjusted the telescope, and said to Huang Yanqing, "Come and see what the moon in your eyes looks like?"

Huang Yanqing was quite composed and not at all restrained. He walked over, looked through it as Xiao Ming instructed, and then suddenly said, "Why does it look like a pockmarked face? Is this the moon?"

"That's right, this is the moon in the sky," Xiao Ming smiled.

Taking this opportunity, Xiao Ming explained the basic knowledge of the moon, Earth, and the solar system to the seven people. As Xiao Ming spoke, images flashed through the minds of the seven, revealing a shocking truth about the world.

"Alright, that's what I wanted to tell you. If you can accept it, stay. If not, you can leave. I will not make it difficult for you."

Chapter 547

Under the moon like frost and snow, the seven individuals successively viewed the moon through the telescope.

Facing this result, all but Huang Yanqing wore extremely displeased expressions. After some hesitation, five of them chose to leave, leaving only Huang Yanqing and Yan Zhengyi.

Xiao Ming could still accept this outcome. In fact, even before he came, he had a good impression of Huang Yanqing, because Huang Yanqing's elder brother was also in Bowen Academy and had always been influenced by him. Moreover, in the past two days, his elder brother Huang Mingxiang was even selected by Lin Wentao for the laboratory.

This person, who had excelled in the Physics Academy, must have had a significant influence on his family. However, unlike Huang Mingxiang, Huang Yanqing was not interested in physics but had always been very curious about the stars in the sky.

Therefore, after seeing the news in the newspaper, he came to Bowen Academy, and what pleased Xiao Ming was that Huang Yanqing also seemed to have the courage to accept new things.

What he couldn't understand was why Yan Zhengyi, this old charlatan, had stayed.

"Your Highness, I have been greatly harmed by astrology and divination. If it weren't for my dislike for poetry and books when I was young, and my exclusive preference for these celestial phenomena and physiognomy, I would not be so old and still be setting up a stall on the streets to tell fortunes. If Your Highness had not enlightened me today, I would still have believed that the moon was inhabited by Chang'e and the Jade Rabbit. It turns out there's nothing there, just a bunch of craters." Yan Zhengyi's old tears flowed.

Yan Zhengyi's age was quite advanced for Great Yu Empire. Although he looked robust, time spares no one, and his slow movements still showed his age.

He had lived a miserable life, childless, taking each day as it came. Now, seeing that his livelihood was based on falsehoods, causing him to miss his prime, he couldn't help but feel love turn to hatred.

"Your Highness, please accept me. I will diligently study and let the common people understand that the earth is round and revolves around the sun." Yan Zhengyi said.

It is said that the one who hates a certain profession the most is precisely the one who works in that profession. Yan Zhengyi was now embodying this saying.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Since that is the case, this telescope is entrusted to the two of you. The astronomy books are in the classroom. You can verify everything I say against the books. I also await for you to prove it to the common people with facts."

Huang Yanqing and Yan Zhengyi both nodded upon hearing this.

Seeing that it was getting late, Xiao Ming turned and walked out. He hoped that this elder and youth could bring an ideological impact to Qingzhou. This chaos was both a crisis and an opportunity. He hoped to use this opportunity to popularize some simple scientific knowledge, at least to pull some people out of deep ignorance.

It was already eight o'clock when he returned to the royal residence. The pendulum clock in the bedchamber swung gently back and forth, making a "tick-tock" sound. Fei Yue'er was sitting at the table embroidering. Seeing Xiao Ming return, she asked, "Has Your Highness eaten?"

"I ate at Bowen Academy." Xiao Ming stretched.

Fei Yue'er put down her embroidery and came forward, gently massaging Xiao Ming's shoulders, saying softly, "Your Highness has been busy moving about these days, please pay attention to your health. What if you get overtired?"

"I am not that delicate. These matters can still be handled." Xiao Ming squinted, enjoying Fei Yue'er's massage, but as soon as he relaxed, he suddenly remembered what Pang Yukun and Fiji had said during the day.

After a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Grand Councillor Fei didn't say anything to you, did he?"

Fei Yue'er's hand suddenly froze. Xiao Ming thought, 'Oh no, that old fox indeed pushed from the side.'

Indeed, Fei Yue'er said, "Father mentioned older sister today. The Emperor was deposed, and older sister also suffered. He also said that Empress Zhao was also confined by the Prince of Zhao, but later, for older sister and her child, Empress Zhao was forced to acknowledge the Thirteenth Prince's enthronement."

Speaking of this, Fei Yue'er couldn't help but feel a bit sad. She said, "Father also said that older sister is still in great danger, and if anything unexpected happens, his only grandson will be gone."

"Alas, I originally thought Empress Zhao and the Prince of Zhao were in cahoots, but I didn't expect Empress Zhao to be a loyal person. It's just one step wrong, and then every step is wrong. If it weren't for Empress Zhao having rallied so many imperial guards for His Highness, how could the Prince of Zhao have so easily entered Chang'an City by himself?" Xiao Ming sighed.

"It's likely that Empress Zhao was also deceived by the Crown Prince. Now the Crown Prince's fate is what he deserves, but older sister has suffered along with him." Fei Yue'er said this while resuming massaging Xiao Ming's shoulders. Then she continued, "I recall that when older sister first married the Crown Prince, she became pregnant within the first month. Why have I not become pregnant even now? Mother Concubine also asked about this today, and I am anxious. Your Highness, continuing the lineage is a great responsibility for a woman. Is it that I cannot..."

"Don't overthink it. This is my problem." Xiao Ming sighed. After all that, it still came down to this question. It seemed Fiji had not only pressured Fei Yue'er but also Concubine Zhen.

"Your Highness's problem! What should be done!" Fei Yue'er covered her mouth. "Your Highness, many imperial physicians followed us from Chang'an this time. Should we have them take Your Highness's pulse?"

"No need." Xiao Ming looked depressed. I wasn't infertile. As a modern person, couldn't I keep track of dates? Thinking of this, he explained to Fei Yue'er.

Fei Yue'er was stunned, then she finally understood that Xiao Ming had done it on purpose.

"In short, I am also doing this for your good. After all, you were still young then. However, I have also considered it. Chief Grand Councillor Pang and Grand Councillor Fei's words also make sense. In times of chaos, if something happens to me, whom should they continue to follow? If there are descendants, they will be reassured. At least the fief will not be in chaos, and this also stabilizes people's hearts." Xiao Ming said.

In this world, there was no such thing as an imperial aura that would make the whole world submit in a fit of rage. In fact, every general and every soldier under him had their own ideas.

Hadn't all these people faithfully followed him precisely so that in the future there could be a peaceful world where they could live comfortable lives?

So, on the way back, he had figured this out. And in fact, he was not young anymore, and it was time for him to have descendants and continue his bloodline.

"Your Highness has finally understood." Fei Yue'er moved from behind Xiao Ming to stand in front of him, a smile on her face.

"If I hadn't figured it out, I estimate those two would follow me around every day, nagging." Xiao Ming stood up. At this moment, he suddenly lifted Fei Yue'er into his arms, causing her to gasp.

"Your Highness, what are you doing?" A blush spread across Fei Yue'er's face.

"Of course, continuing the lineage." Xiao Ming laughed loudly.

Chapter 548

On the yellow earth-covered official road of Yizhou, a line of carriages pulling field cannons was slowly advancing.

On the city wall, Lu Fei was holding a telescope, observing the convoy. Beside him was Luo Xin. They had arrived in Yizhou two days ago. Seeing the last batch of cannons arrive, Lu Fei let out a heavy sigh of relief. He said, "Damn it, you artillerymen are truly like turtles. If you didn't arrive soon, the flowers would have withered."

Luo Xin rolled his eyes. "It's easy for you to say. Each of these cannons weighs four to five hundred catties. Try pulling one yourself."

“Alright, alright, I won’t argue with you. Now that the field cannons have all arrived, it’s time to take Pengzhou City.” Lu Fei said, “Heh heh, this time I must fight a beautiful battle, so that the soldiers of your Firearm Battalion don’t look down on me.”

Luo Xin shook his head. Since the Qingzhou Army was equipped with firearms, this was the first time the two of them independently led an army. They understood Xiao Ming’s intention. With the world in chaos now, Qingzhou might face multi-front operations, and at such a time, capable and experienced generals were needed.

This time, Xiao Ming’s dispatch of the two clearly indicated his intention to entrust the campaigns in the direction of Wei to them. For this, both of them were extremely excited.

The two bickered their way down from the city wall. At this time, the armies from the three prefectures were being integrated and trained in the Yizhou grand camp. Including the infantry of the Firearm Battalion, there were a total of twenty thousand men. Adding the five thousand cavalry allocated later, this army attacking Pengzhou would consist of twenty thousand infantry and five thousand cavalry. For Qingzhou, this was already a large-scale army, after all, when they fought the barbarians in Jizhou last year, it was only about this number of troops.

Going straight back to his tent, Lu Fei sent for the generals participating in the siege.

Soon, over thirty generals gathered in Lu Fei’s tent. At this moment, Lu Fei said, “Gentlemen, the field cannons have all arrived, and the flintlock guns and plate armor have also been issued to the soldiers. It can be said that everything is now ready. According to the original battle plan, we will rest today and then proceed down the Bian River tomorrow to attack Pengzhou City.”

Luo Hong nodded, “Speed is crucial in warfare. We should catch the Pengzhou City defenders off guard and quickly capture Pengzhou City.”

“Battalion Commander Luo is right. This time we will split our forces into two routes. One part will go downstream by boat along the Bian River to first deal with Pengzhou City’s navy. The other part, led by Luo Xin, will depart from the official road and head directly to the foot of Pengzhou City. At that time, we will converge and capture Pengzhou City in one fell swoop.” Lu Fei knocked on the table.

“Yes, General Lu.” The generals said.

This time, Lu Fei was leading the army on campaign. Xiao Ming bestowed upon him the title of Southern Campaign General and granted him a tiger tally. All of this was to enable him to smoothly command the army.

With the plan set, the generals each went back to prepare. The next day, Lu Fei personally led three thousand musketeers to board ships and went downstream, while Luo Xin led five thousand cavalry and seventeen thousand infantry towards Pengzhou City.

Yizhou is located southwest of Qidi, only a hundred li from Pengzhou City. Departing in the morning, Lu Fei arrived on the Bian River outside Pengzhou City in the afternoon.

Looking at Pengzhou City, built by the water, Lu Fei sneered. In his opinion, although the people of Pengzhou were fierce, no matter how fierce the soldiers, they would be afraid when facing firearms.

As the three warships slowly approached, the Pengzhou city wall immediately fell into chaos. The soldiers were well aware of the situation between Wei and Qi.

These past two days, even Mi Wenji, the eldest son of the Mi family, had returned to Pengzhou City to gather troops and prepare for war. It could be said that the soldiers of Pengzhou City had been on edge

all along. Now that these three warships full of soldiers appeared, they immediately understood that what was coming, had indeed come.

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack!”

The soldiers on the city wall shouted. At the same time, some soldiers quickly went to the bed crossbows and aimed them at the continuously advancing warships, while some soldiers descended the city wall to report the matter.

At this time, in the Mi mansion of Pengzhou City, Mi Wenyi was hosting a banquet for the powerful families of the day. This time, he was appointed by the Prince of Wei to personally guard the city of Pengzhou, so as soon as he arrived in Pengzhou City, he invited the local powerful families to discuss the matter together.

While everyone was enjoying the singing and dancing, eating and drinking, a general suddenly burst in and said to Mi Wenyi, “Chief Clerk Mi, three warships full of soldiers have appeared outside the city. It’s probably King Qi’s army.”

“King Qi’s army.”

“How did they get here so fast?”

“Are we really going to fight now?”

“...” Everyone discussed animatedly.

Mi Wenyi's eyes narrowed. He said to the general, “How many people are there in total?”

“There are less than a thousand soldiers on the warships, but I believe there must be more soldiers hidden in the holds. It should be between two to three thousand.” The general said.

“Only three thousand men? Our Pengzhou City garrison has fifty thousand elite troops, and the various family militias number more than thirty thousand. These enemy soldiers are nothing to fear.” An old man at the banquet said. He was the head of the Lu family, the second largest family in Pengzhou City.

The others echoed, “Exactly. These three thousand aren't even enough to fill our teeth. This King Qi underestimates our Pengzhou too much.”

At this time, a young man said loudly, “Chief Clerk Mi, our Pengzhou Navy has over thirty warships. Why don't we send out the navy to sink these three warships in the river? That way, wouldn't all the invading enemies be fed to the fish?”

Unlike the optimism of these local powerful families, Mi Wenyi said, “Everyone, remember not to underestimate King Qi's army. King Qi's ability to defeat the barbarians in the Battle of Cangzhou and the Battle of Jizhou is enough to prove the strength of his army. This time, their dispatch of only these soldiers is probably not arrogance, but rather confidence that these soldiers alone can take Pengzhou City.”

There were still some calm people at the banquet who nodded in agreement.

Mi Wenyi seized the opportunity and said, "However, now that the Prince of Wei and King Qi are at odds, and Pengzhou City is a strategically important location, King Qi's army appearing here must be to capture Pengzhou City. If the city falls, given King Qi's past actions, will we, the powerful families, still have a way to survive?"

"We all clearly remember King Qi's slaughter of local powerful families three years ago. If he captures Pengzhou City this time, he certainly won't give us a way out!"

"That's right, we must fight to the death this time!"

"Indeed, falling with the city means death anyway, so it's better to defend Pengzhou City to the last. I'll gather the Zhang family's private army now." One person said.

"I'm going too."

"..."

Mi Wenyi's expression was calm, but he breathed a sigh of relief inwardly. With just one sentence, he had made the local powerful families and himself share a common hatred for the enemy.

He coughed and said, "Gentlemen, since that is the case, I hope you all will provide strong support this time. Our Mi family will send out all our private armies and household retainers, swearing to fight to the death and not let King Qi succeed."

“Chief Clerk Mi’s righteousness! We will also go back and gather our private armies. Let’s see if King Qi’s soldiers are formidable, or if our soldiers are formidable.”

Chapter 549

On the deck of the Qingzhou battleship, Lu Fei was holding a telescope, observing the troop deployment on the city wall of Pengzhou.

When he saw the soldiers holding swords and sabers, he felt somewhat relieved, because there wasn’t a single cannon on the city wall of Pengzhou. Such a deployment allowed him to boldly let the warships patrol along the Bian River in front of Pengzhou City. For him, as long as there were no cannons, there was no threat to the three warships in the river.

“Are you afraid?”

Lu Fei said jokingly to the soldiers beside him. Among the Southern Expedition Army, only the Cangzhou Army had been on the battlefield before. Most of the soldiers from Laizhou and Yizhou had not seen blood. As for the Firearm Battalion, they had only attacked the imperial city in Chang’an and had not experienced a truly brutal encounter.

“No, sir!”

The young soldier beside Lu Fei said. Beneath his tender face, the soldier was no older than sixteen.

“Good, courageous lad. When I fought back then, I was a year younger than you. Once you’re on the battlefield, as long as you focus on killing the enemy, you won’t be afraid.” Lu Fei chuckled.

The soldiers on the warship looked at Lu Fei with admiration. In the fief, although Lu Fei's official position was not as high as Niu Ben's, his reputation in the army was renowned. Therefore, upon learning that Lu Fei was commanding this army, the soldiers were all a bit excited. The story of Lu Fei's three thousand iron cavalry routing the barbarian soldiers was still a celebrated tale in the army.

Upon hearing this, the soldier's knuckles, gripping the flintlock gun, turned white from the force, and then he nodded heavily.

"General, should we give the Pengzhou army a show of force, and let them know how formidable we are?" At this moment, a cavalry commander behind Lu Fei suggested.

Lu Fei nodded. "To attack a city, first attack the heart. These Pengzhou soldiers have never seen cannons and firearms. We will let them understand what kind of army they are about to face. Immediately order the warships to head towards the city gate."

"Yes, General!"

The cavalry commander received the order, turned and left. Soon, the warships began to move along the river towards the city gate of Pengzhou City.

Inside Pengzhou City.

Mi Wenyi, who had learned of King Qi's army's attack, quickly reached a consensus with the powerful families of Pengzhou City. At this time, the Mi family's banquet had dispersed, and the heads of each family had returned home to gather their private armies to assist the Pengzhou army in defending the city.

Mi Wenyi also changed into a suit of armor and headed towards the city wall. When he ascended the city wall under the protection of soldiers, he saw three warships approaching the city gate.

At this moment, he couldn't help but frown. In his eyes, these three warships were no different in appearance from ordinary merchant ships, and there were only about two thousand soldiers on board. Was King Qi's army planning to land these two thousand men on the ground in front of the city gate to attack the city?

"Chief Clerk Mi, all the cable bridges on the Bian River have been dismantled."

Mi Kuang, the governor of Pengzhou, said to Mi Wenyi. This Mi Kuang was also from the Mi family. Because the Mi family was powerful, the Prince of Wei greatly valued them. The local government and military largely relied on members of the Mi family. Precisely because of this, the military and political power of Pengzhou City was, in fact, controlled by the Mi family.

Mi Wenyi glanced at the empty surface of the Bian River. Previously, there was a cable bridge extending to the opposite bank directly in front of Pengzhou City. Normally, common people and merchants would enter Pengzhou City via the cable bridge. Once the cable bridge was dismantled, the over hundred-meter-wide Bian River became Pengzhou City's natural moat.

"Hmm, immediately have the soldiers prepare rolling stones, fire oil, and other items to prevent a sudden enemy attack," Mi Wenyi said. These three warships were quite an eyesore in his mind now.

Without these three warships, it would be very difficult for King Qi's army to cross the one-hundred-meter-wide Bian River and reach the city. But now, these three warships provided convenience for King Qi's soldiers.

Mi Kuang nodded. Like Mi Wenyi, he also had some thoughts about these three ships. He said, "Chief Clerk Mi, why not send out the Lu family's navy to directly sink these three ships? As long as we control the Bian River, unless King Qi's army grows wings, they will not be able to attack the city at all."

Mi Wenyi said, "The Lu family has already gone to gather their warships to prepare for battle. We just need to watch the show from the city wall now."

"Chief Clerk Mi is right. As long as the Lu family is willing to put in the effort, sinking these three ships will be an easy task." Mi Kuang looked at the three warships in the river with disdain.

Mi Wenyi frowned upon hearing this; he was somewhat worried. Having served under the Prince of Wei, he knew that King Qi possessed a type of warship equipped with cannons. When he learned that three warships had appeared, he was initially shocked, but now, seeing these three warships, he didn't see any cannons on them.

Thinking of cannons in connection with warships, Mi Wenyi's face darkened somewhat. The Prince of Wei had obtained very few cannons and matchlock guns from Qingzhou. Now, these cannons and firearms were all kept by the Prince of Wei for the army in Jinling City, leaving them with no advantage at all.

Just as he was thinking, the Pengzhou Navy appeared in the direction of the three warships. Thirty Pengzhou warships were now facing the three Qingzhou warships.

Seeing this scene, Mi Wenyi felt a little relieved. Although the Pengzhou warships were not very large, they made up for it in sheer numbers. These crescent-shaped, two-decked warships were packed with soldiers holding swords, sabers, and bows and arrows.

As soon as the Pengzhou Navy appeared, the soldiers on the city wall immediately cheered.

“Beat them! Beat them hard!”

“Sink them into the river to feed the fish!”

“Slaughter them all!”

“ ... ”

These shouting soldiers were either surnamed Mi or Lu, and some belonged to other major surnames, members of the powerful clans in Pengzhou City. These past few years, they had also been influenced by the powerful clans and were highly vigilant against King Qi from the north.

As the Pengzhou Navy appeared, the three Qingzhou warships suddenly adjusted their direction, turning their broadsides towards the approaching Pengzhou Navy.

On the warship, Lu Fei paid no attention to the approaching navy. Naval combat was naturally for naval commanders to direct. He was responsible for land warfare. When a burst of cheers erupted on the city wall, he said, "Where is the rifled gun squad?"

"Here, General!" Sixty soldiers with rifled guns on their backs shouted in unison behind Lu Fei.

Lu Fei nodded. In front of Pengzhou City gate was a hundred-meter-long sandbank, and beyond that was the Bian River. From his current position to the city wall was only about one hundred fifty meters.

"Shoot a few of them down for me. Let's see who among them still dares to act so arrogantly." Lu Fei's fiery temper had somewhat mellowed, but it was still fiery.

The soldiers equipped with rifled guns immediately began to load, then they aimed their gun barrels at the soldiers on the city wall.

Lu Fei scanned the city wall with his telescope. When he saw two generals standing together, he suddenly said, "You two, shoot in this direction."

This time, before Lu Fei's departure, Xiao Ming specifically had Lu Fei bring this group of soldiers carrying rifled guns and loaded with conical bullets. According to Xiao Ming, even if they didn't hit, they could still scare a few into wetting themselves.

Chapter 550

"Bang, bang, bang..."

A series of gunshots and white smoke erupted from the warships, and after a burst of gunfire, several screams suddenly came from the Pengzhou city wall.

Lu Fei had been observing the city wall and at this moment regretted, "Just a little bit off, what a shame. Only a few small soldiers died. Reload quickly."

Upon receiving the order, the soldiers immediately took out Minié balls and gunpowder to reload.

After Xiao Ming delivered this batch of firearms to the Qingzhou Barracks, they had been training continuously. Compared to previous firearms, the range and accuracy of this batch of firearms had improved significantly.

However, even so, the hit rate at targets over a hundred meters away remained very low, which was why Lu Fei demanded that all sixty fire at the target simultaneously.

As the soldiers reloaded, wails of agony filled the city wall. This volley immediately felled eight soldiers on the city wall. Three of them were shot in the head and died on the spot, blood continuously flowing from the bullet holes.

Two others were hit in the ribs, now lying on the ground, groaning incessantly. The remaining three were hit in the arms. The bullets penetrated their flesh, and the intense pain made them cry out relentlessly.

The other soldiers were as if they had seen ghosts. They were initially confused, then became terrified. It seemed too bizarre to them. Even with the fierce people of Pengzhou, these soldiers couldn't help but tremble. This method of death was simply too frightening.

Compared to these soldiers, Mi Wenyi and Mi Kuang were even more terrified. The soldiers' tragic deaths turned their faces pale, and Mi Wenyi clearly understood that this volley of firearms was aimed at him and Mi Kuang.

"Chief Clerk Mi, what is going on?" Mi Kuang's whole body trembled uncontrollably. Unlike Mi Wenyi who had seen firearms, Mi Kuang had been in Pengzhou City for many years. Although he had heard of them, he had never seen firearms or cannons.

Mi Wenyi had no time to explain to Mi Kuang now. He immediately hid behind the parapet, not daring to show himself. He roared, "Get down! Do you want to die? These are the Qingzhou Army's firearms! Damn it, why are these firearms' ranges so far? King Qi must have deceived us!"

Mi Kuang's face grew even paler. Pengzhou City had been at ease for too long. In normal times, these soldiers had only suppressed some peasant rebellions; they had never faced a real war.

The tragic deaths of the soldiers impacted both other soldiers and himself.

"What should we do? Are we just going to hide here?" Mi Kuang said.

Just as the two were speaking, another volley of gunshots rang out. Immediately, nine more soldiers were hit. In an instant, the soldiers on the city wall were utterly terrified. They all mimicked Mi Wenyi and Mi Kuang, crouching down.

But the truly terrifying events were just beginning.

“Boom, boom, boom...” After the second volley, the Qingzhou warships shed their harmless disguise. At this point, square covers on one side of the warships flipped open. These covers were used to conceal the muzzles of the cannons.

When these wooden covers were raised, black muzzles extended out, aimed at the continuously approaching Pengzhou Navy.

As the Pengzhou Navy entered within fifty meters of the warships, intense flashes of fire and white smoke obscured the warships. Cannonballs shot straight towards the Pengzhou naval ships in the river.

“Thump, thump, thump...”

Cannonballs pierced through the hulls of the warships, carrying splinters of wood flying towards the boatmen in the cabins. Immediately, continuous screams echoed in the cabins.

The boatmen, who were still rowing, had never seen such a sight. Terrified, they immediately dropped their oars and screamed, fleeing towards the deck.

But the scene on the deck was even worse than below. At this moment, incomplete corpses lay everywhere on the warship’s deck. Soldiers clutched severed legs and arms, screaming incessantly, and blood flowed freely across the deck.

Soldiers who hadn’t even reacted to the booming sounds were enveloped by death. Most of them were paralyzed with fear, with only one thought in their minds: ‘What in the world is this?’

But before they could think, another explosion sounded. This time, in their eyes, a black cloud, like lightning, rushed towards them. Only when it was close did they clearly see that these were small round beads.

And these black round beads became the last sight in the eyes of many soldiers, after which their bodies were pierced through.

Screams echoed on the river, and the river water quickly turned red with blood. Terrified soldiers jumped into the river to escape. At this moment, they had no will to fight.

The Lu family general leading the Pengzhou Navy was even more pathetic. When the warships in front were hit by cannon fire and splintered wood, they panicked and retreated.

The soldiers on the city wall were even more frightened by the scene before them. This time, they finally understood what firearms were and what cannons were.

“How can this battle even be fought?”

A general’s eyes were filled with despair. Even if his soldiers were brave, being killed before they could even engage the enemy was enough to make them lose their will to fight.

“Soldiers of Pengzhou City, listen! His Royal Highness King Qi has given an order: all who surrender shall not be killed! Moreover, once the army enters the city, the common people in the city can, like the

people of Qingzhou, receive good land! Soldiers, do you still want to be bullied and oppressed by these powerful families of Pengzhou City?"

Suddenly, a resonant voice carried from the river to the city wall.

Mi Wenyi and Mi Kuang's eyes immediately flashed with a hint of hatred upon hearing this. Now, they understood even more what would happen if Pengzhou City fell.

"As for the sons of powerful families in the city, as long as you are willing to surrender, His Highness will also spare your lives. As long as you disband your private armies and return the common people's land, His Highness is merciful and will allow you to continue living in the city. Otherwise, after the city is breached, all sons of powerful families will be executed without mercy."

Lu Fei's voice rang out again.

After these two sentences, some soldiers from impoverished families looked at each other. The news about Qingzhou had long reached here. Although the local powerful families tried their best to slander King Qi, they understood that King Qi was very benevolent towards the common people.

Unlike these poor soldiers, the sons of powerful families had mixed feelings. They were now in a dilemma.

"Don't believe their nonsense! King Qi is a despicable scoundrel! They are deceiving you! If Pengzhou City falls, you will lose your land and wives! Soldiers, today we must hold back the enemy's attack!"

Mi Wenyi shouted loudly.

Mi Kuang also shouted, "Today, all soldiers must fight to the death with me! Anyone who dares to retreat half a step, I will kill them!"

The soldiers fell silent upon hearing their voices. They exchanged glances, wondering what they were thinking.

On the river, after Lu Fei loudly announced Xiao Ming's policy for Pengzhou City, he ordered the warships to dock on the north bank of the Bian River. His objective was to defeat the Pengzhou Navy, which he had now easily accomplished.

The rest was to wait for Luo Xin and Luo Hong to lead the main force to formally attack the city.