

I. Dynasty 561

Chapter 561

“That’s right, since the Prince of Wei is determined to destroy our fief, we must quickly conquer Wei’s territory and retaliate.”

“I second the motion.”

After discussion, the monarch and his two ministers in the main hall reached a consensus.

With the matter settled, Zhan Xingchang and Pang Yukun departed. Zhan Xingchang needed to prepare for his diplomatic mission to Yan and Chang’an, after all, this mission was extremely perilous.

Although it was said that envoys were not to be executed during wartime, encountering an unreasonable person could lead to trouble.

However, for this mission, he was not at ease entrusting it to someone else. After all, Zhan Xingchang was nimble-minded and good at adapting, so he might be able to resolve the danger.

But for the mission, he was beyond his reach. The only thing he could do now, as Pang Yukun said, was to act quickly and decisively, completely taking control of Wei’s territory.

Thinking of this, he once again issued an order to Yue Yun, instructing him to lead the fleet to capture Tongzhou, then proceed up the Yangtze River to bombard Jinling City. At the same time, he was to search for suitable landing sites along the river.

As the saying goes, “to catch the bandit, first catch the king.” Since that was the case, once he was ready, he would directly attack Jinling City, thereby launching a pincer attack from north and south.

The next day, Zhan Xingchang, accompanied by his retinue, departed from Qingzhou for Yan’s territory.

On the same day, Yue Yun led the naval cadets to Dengzhou. After half a month of practical training in Dengzhou, Yue Yun departed with twenty-four warships and twelve thousand Dengzhou troops towards Tongzhou.

Four days later, Tongzhou City appeared before him.

Just a month ago, this port was still providing supplies for warships, but now it was heavily guarded by soldiers, and any Qingzhou merchant ships were refused permission to dock here.

Even some merchant ships were maliciously seized, and merchants were arrested as Qingzhou spies.

Yue Yun was quite angry when he received this news. The Prince of Wei’s ambition and unwillingness to ally with Qingzhou were well-known throughout the world. This was not only a disregard for the imperial bloodline but also a blatant betrayal.

Therefore, the soldiers had long been dissatisfied with the Prince of Wei. Now that Xiao Ming ordered the capture of Tongzhou, it seemed the soldiers had found a way to vent their anger.

At Tongzhou pier, seeing twenty warships appear on the sea, the soldiers guarding the pier showed expressions of fear. They had never seen so many warships appear at Tongzhou pier at once.

Now that Tongzhou pier had explicitly refused any Qingzhou ships from docking, the presence of so many warships here could only mean one thing: war.

“Quickly report to the General! A large number of Qingzhou warships have appeared at sea!” The Tongzhou army commander guarding the pier shouted.

A soldier nodded and immediately galloped into the city.

At this moment, the warships on the sea began to adjust their formation, lining up in a single file. After the formation was complete, a thunderous roar, like an earthquake, suddenly erupted. White smoke and flames billowed from the sea, and black solid shots rained down on Tongzhou pier.

The Tongzhou soldiers were shocked. They had never seen such a hellish scene. Soldiers who were hit fell directly into pools of blood, dying tragically. Everything on the pier hit by cannonballs shattered into pieces. In a very short time, Tongzhou pier became a wreck.

Under the dense volley of cannonballs, the Tongzhou soldiers frantically searched for cover, but soldiers were constantly hit, emitting a final, dying wail.

At this moment, the pier was a living hell.

Yue Yun observed the situation at Tongzhou pier through his telescope. He had a deep understanding of war. War was always brutal, but for the unification of Great Yu Empire, and for Great Yu Empire to unitedly face foreign enemies, the war had to continue.

Great benevolence is ruthless. He learned this principle from Xiao Ming. If he were merciful to the Prince of Wei, Great Yu Empire would never see a day of great unification. If he did not wage a thorough war, the powerful families of Great Yu Empire would never be eradicated.

Perhaps one day history would cast Xiao Ming as the cruelest tyrant of all time, but he would not regret his actions today, for without destruction, there is no rebirth.

“Commander Ye, now it’s your turn.” Yue Yun said to the general standing beside him. This person was none other than Ye Qingyun, the Governor of Dengzhou.

Putting away his telescope, Ye Qingyun nodded, “Finally, it’s our Dengzhou Army’s turn to fight! Soldiers, fight to the death and do not retreat! We must show the soldiers of the Qingzhou Army that our Dengzhou Army is not just for show!”

“Yes, General!” The soldiers roared in unison.

Yue Yun nodded with a smile. At this point, he ordered the soldiers to lower the small boats from the warships. The Dengzhou Army descended the rope ladders into the small boats and rowed towards Tongzhou pier.

At this time, the warships' cannon did not cease, continuing to cover the Dengzhou Army's landing. When over a hundred small boats reached the pier, the thousand soldiers on board immediately seized important roads on the pier.

Only when the soldiers had completely secured the pier did the warships at sea begin to approach the pier. This was to prevent the warships from being damaged by the enemy.

When the warships reached the pier, the remaining soldiers began to disembark, and at the same time, field cannons were hoisted down from the warships.

Ye Qingyun also arrived at the pier at this time. The pier was now littered with the bodies of Tongzhou army soldiers, and more Tongzhou army soldiers had fled to Tongzhou City under the fierce firepower of the warships.

Before the siege, Ye Qingyun had received intelligence that there were as many as forty thousand soldiers in Tongzhou City, all due to the coastal Japanese pirate problem.

However, he was not afraid of an enemy four times his size. He had also received news that Pengzhou City had been captured by Lu Fei. For him, he did not want to lose to that madman Lu.

Quickly assembling his soldiers, Ye Qingyun left a portion of his soldiers to guard the pier, while the rest all advanced towards Tongzhou City. He did this to prevent his retreat from being cut off.

Compared to Pengzhou City, Tongzhou City was a flat area, and Tongzhou pier was only a few li from Tongzhou City. After walking less than half an hour along the main road, Ye Qingyun arrived at the foot of Tongzhou City.

Outside Tongzhou City was a large open field. Ye Qingyun quickly had the soldiers line up in a linear formation. At this moment, he looked at the Tongzhou wall and, to his surprise, he actually saw cannons.

“This Prince of Wei doesn’t place cannons in Pengzhou City, but he places them in Tongzhou City. Isn’t he deliberately trying to make things difficult for me? That madman Lu really got lucky.”

However, despite his complaints, he still had to think about how to solve this problem. According to his observations, there were a total of ten cannons on the front of Tongzhou City, and his scouts reported that all four city walls were defended by ten cannons each.

This meant his idea of attacking a city wall without cannons had fallen through.

Just as he was worrying, the artillery commander of the Dengzhou Army said, “Governor, don’t forget, the cannons His Highness sold to the Prince of Wei were the worst kind. Some cannons didn’t even have a range of four hundred meters, while our field cannons can fire up to three li. Our artillerymen can just directly eliminate their cannons.”

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“Boom, boom, boom...”

The roar of the field cannons broke the battlefield’s silence.

After the artillery commander proposed using cannons to destroy the enemy's cannons, Ye Qingyun decisively adopted this method.

Because it was located on a flat plain, Tongzhou City had no natural defenses on all four sides. At this time, the area where Ye Qingyun was located was a freshly harvested rice field, and looking out, the view was very wide.

Deploying his soldiers at a distance of only five hundred meters from Tongzhou City, Ye Qingyun ordered the bombardment.

More than thirty cannons fired simultaneously, their shells slamming fiercely against the city wall of Tongzhou City.

On the front city wall, Tongzhou City had deployed ten cannons. These cannons were originally intended to guard against Japanese pirate troubles along the coast, but now they became the first line of defense for Tongzhou City against the Dengzhou Army.

However, what the Prince of Wei and other vassal kings would not have expected was that Xiao Ming had held back a trick from the very beginning.

The Tongzhou soldiers, who were originally preparing to use cannons to attack the Dengzhou Army, were greatly alarmed. The Dengzhou Army's cannons seemed to have eyes; each time they fired, their shells would land beside the artillerymen. In an instant, the Tongzhou artillery suffered heavy casualties, and the cannons on the city wall were also knocked off their positions by the shells.

Moreover, Tongzhou's city wall was far less sturdy than that of a military stronghold like Pengzhou. The front city wall was quickly shattered into pieces, and the soldiers defending Tongzhou City fell into chaos.

“Advance!” Having dealt with the cannons on the city wall, Ye Qingyun ordered his soldiers to approach Tongzhou City.

The soldiers stopped at a distance of two hundred meters from the city. The artillery reloaded at this point and fiercely bombarded the front city gate. The wooden city gate was completely unable to withstand the attack of the twelve-pounder cannons and quickly collapsed entirely under the bombardment.

At this point, Ye Qingyun led his soldiers to continue approaching the city wall. Upon reaching ninety meters, he ordered the soldiers to fire.

At the same time, the Tongzhou soldiers also began to return fire with bows and arrows, but compared to the more than ten thousand soldiers using firearms, the Tongzhou archers on the city wall were utterly insignificant.

Under the fierce firing, the Tongzhou soldiers on the city wall were unable to even lift their heads, and at this moment, a thousand-man unit charged into Tongzhou.

The battlefield was filled with the roar of cannons and firearms. The Tongzhou City soldiers had never seen a war of such magnitude. The city gate, which used to resist enemy forces, was now vulnerable before the cannons.

Outside the battlefield, the common people watched everything numbly. They had watched Tongzhou City in the same way when the Japanese pirates attacked, and now they were still watching Tongzhou City in the same way.

For them, it didn't matter who ruled Tongzhou City, because in their eyes, Tongzhou City was a place where powerful families and nobles lived, and it had nothing to do with them. In their hearts, they only cared about their own families.

Ye Qingyun noticed this situation. Just outside the battlefield, the common people watched the two sides fight as if watching a play, and not a single common person raised their arm in a cry for help to defend Tongzhou City.

He suddenly felt a wave of sadness. Hadn't Qingzhou been like this before? But now, the people of Qingzhou were gradually awakening to the national and ethnic consciousness deliberately promoted in the newspapers.

The phrase, "Everyone is responsible for the rise and fall of the nation," was no longer exclusive to the powerful families and gentry. The common people gradually understood the profound meaning of this statement.

And "What does the nation have to do with me?" Such words of national demise were also cast into the dung heap, becoming words of depravity scorned by all. All who uttered such words harbored ulterior motives.

"Charge!"

The common people observing outside the city suddenly made Ye Qingyun realize Tongzhou's current situation. If the Tongzhou officials and generals had won the hearts of the people, how could these common people be so indifferent?

Presumably, these common people must have lived hard lives and had long harbored deep hatred for the officials and powerful families in the city.

With such public sentiment, the combat effectiveness of Tongzhou City's army was imaginable. Coupled with instances of generals fleeing after Japanese pirates landed, Ye Qingyun's confidence greatly increased.

The charge bugle sounded throughout Tongzhou City at this moment.

After the thousand-man unit entered the city, Ye Qingyun led the other soldiers and immediately charged into the city.

From generals to soldiers, the Tongzhou army was terrified by the Dengzhou army's fearless demeanor. Enduring the arrows from the city wall, the Dengzhou army, dressed in dark green long robes, was like tigers entering a flock of sheep. Upon seeing the Tongzhou army soldiers coming to meet them, the Dengzhou army soldiers stood firm for a volley, then fixed bayonets, formed a tight formation, and charged at the enemy.

"For Qingzhou! For the bounty!" Ye Qingyun shouted the slogans.

These words further stimulated the soldiers' ferocity. "For Qingzhou" meant loyalty, and "for the bounty" was for a prosperous life. Before coming to Tongzhou, they had already heard about the Southern Expedition Army.

This time, the spoils of war collected by the Southern Expedition Army after taking Pengzhou City totaled three million taels of silver, of which three hundred thousand taels of silver were distributed as rewards to the soldiers. Excluding a slightly larger share for the generals, each soldier basically received twelve taels of silver.

Just this one battle was equivalent to two years of military salary.

At this moment, whether for honor and loyalty or for money, they were determined to take Tongzhou City.

“Kill!” At this moment, the Dengzhou Army fully demonstrated the advantage of combining hot and cold weapons.

Facing the enemy from a distance, the Dengzhou Army would stand and fire. At close range, a volley followed by a bayonet charge. The Tongzhou Army initially tried to prevent the Dengzhou Army from entering the city by relying on their numerical superiority.

However, facing the Dengzhou Army’s combined long-range and close-quarters tactics, the Tongzhou Army suffered heavy casualties and quickly disintegrated. To save their lives, the soldiers lost their will to fight and fled in disarray. In an instant, Tongzhou City fell into chaos.

In the chaotic situation, the Dengzhou Army advanced like a broken bamboo, fighting from the north city gate all the way to the south city gate. After a day and a night of fierce fighting, the Dengzhou Army completely occupied Tongzhou City.

Having formally taken military control of Tongzhou City, Ye Qingyun organized his soldiers overnight to repair the city walls and city gates. This time, their attack on Tongzhou took advantage of the element of surprise, and thanks to the advantage of cannons, they were able to quickly enter the city, leaving many Tongzhou soldiers unaware of what had happened.

However, Tongzhou was an important port in Wei's territory. At this time, over a thousand merchant ships of various sizes were docked in the port, and all of them were now under Yue Yun's control.

The Prince of Wei would surely be furious at the loss of Tongzhou, as this effectively cut off the very foundation of the Prince of Wei's maritime trade. The distance from Jinling City to Tongzhou was about four hundred li, and Ye Qingyun believed that the Prince of Wei would definitely send a large army to retake the city.

Therefore, he had to repair the city defenses in advance and have Yue Yun transport the naval cannons from the warships into the city. This way, Tongzhou City would become an impregnable fortress.

Moreover, Tongzhou City was built by the sea, and with Yue Yun's warships providing support from the sea, he was not worried about his supplies being cut off.

Tongzhou City could provide supplies, and of course, they could also transport supplies there. According to Xiao Ming's order, he had to build Tongzhou City into a bridgehead for attacking Jinling City.

After issuing numerous orders, Ye Qingyun immediately dispatched soldiers to relay the battle report from Tongzhou to Qingzhou and report the details of the Tongzhou campaign to Xiao Ming.

Chapter 563

It is said that July's fire recedes, marking the transition from scorching heat to cooler temperatures.

Three days after the Battle of Tongzhou, news of the Tongzhou campaign reached Qingzhou, and during this time, the Bessemer steelmaking production line was also steadily under construction.

“Your Highness, having taken Tongzhou by surprise this time, the Prince of Wei will inevitably launch a massive attack once he reacts. At this point, you should have Yue Yun lead a portion of the warships to patrol the river near Jinling City to make the Prince of Wei apprehensive. At the same time, you should also have Lu Fei dispatch cavalry to Huaizhou to feign an attack and tie down the Prince of Wei’s forces.”

According to the current military system, the Tongzhou battle report was first sent to Niu Ben. Upon receiving the report, Niu Ben immediately discussed the matter with Xiao Ming.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming nodded.

Tongzhou’s location was modern-day Nantong, a place bordered by the sea to the east and a river to the south. Westward along the Yangtze River from Tongzhou was Jinling City, where the Prince of Wei’s residence was located.

His capture of Tongzhou this time was partly to retaliate against the Prince of Wei for seizing his merchant ships, and partly to drive a nail into the heartland of Wei territory. This nail would constantly pain the Prince of Wei.

At the same time, completely controlling Tongzhou also meant he had a stable coastal supply point, and maritime trade now had a transit station.

“In terms of defending a city, who can compare to my soldiers? This time, I had Yue Yun bring five hundred siege cannons. These siege cannons are all standard firearms, not the export-grade cannons sold to the Prince of Wei. Even if he wants to use the Dengzhou Army’s method of breaching a city, he probably can’t.”

“That’s right, wouldn’t our artillerymen just eliminate his cannons first?” Niu Ben said with a smile. Now he finally understood why Xiao Ming had specifically produced a batch of export-grade cannons back then.

It turned out he had considered this kind of situation back then.

Handing the battle report sent by Ye Qingyun to Niu Ben, Xiao Ming said, “Since that is the case, as the Governor said, immediately order the Southern Expedition Army to feign an attack on Huaizhou.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Niu Ben acknowledged and turned to leave.

Watching Niu Ben depart, Xiao Ming looked at the map of Great Yu Empire hanging in the main hall. At this time, the Prince of Wei’s fief was heavily marked by him.

Wei territory had thirteen prefectures in total, with Pengzhou being a major northern prefecture. Now that he controlled Pengzhou, it meant he controlled one-tenth of Wei’s northern territory.

Now he had also occupied Tongzhou. Now, out of the thirteen prefectures, only eleven remained. As for Huaizhou, it was modern-day Huaian, right next to Pengzhou, and this was where he planned to attack next.

However, perhaps due to the failure of the Battle of Pengzhou, the Prince of Wei not only reinforced Huaizhou but also transported fifty cannons to be set up on the city wall of Huaizhou.

Xiao Ming remained calm in response to the Prince of Wei's reaction. After all, no matter how many cannons the Prince of Wei produced, they posed no threat to him.

It could even be said that Xiao Ming was not afraid of any army within Great Yu Empire. His army could contend with top armies like the barbarians, so why would he fear these armies that turned pale at the mention of barbarians?

His only concern was that these forces might unite to attack him. In a one-on-one fight, he could easily handle them, as his firearm units had been established for almost two years now.

Neither the soldiers' mindset nor the army's regularization could be compared to these armies that were still stuck in the cold weapon era with lax organization and discipline.

On the map, Pengzhou had been marked with an 'X' by him. Now he had drawn another 'X' on Tongzhou. These two 'X's, one in the south and one in the north, were like a giant maw preparing to devour the Prince of Wei's fief.

As he was contemplating the next strategy for Wei's territory, Pang Yukun arrived in the main hall after being announced.

"Your Highness, the supplies transported from Pengzhou by Grand Councillor Fei's men have arrived. There's grain, cloth, salt, tea, raw silk, and porcelain. Although the powerful families of Pengzhou took a lot of gold, silver, and valuables, most of their property was left behind. Besides these things, there are

tens of thousands of oxen. Grand Councillor Fei asked me to ask Your Highness whether this batch of oxen should be kept in Pengzhou City or sent within the fief's borders." Pang Yukun said in one breath.

"Naturally, they are for the common people of Pengzhou. Is Pengzhou not my fief now?" Xiao Ming retorted.

Pang Yukun did not react for a moment, then suddenly realized. He said with a bitter smile, "I was indeed muddle-headed. Your Highness intends to incorporate Pengzhou into the fief now, so how can we show favoritism?"

Xiao Ming nodded, "That's right. You write back to Grand Councillor Fei and tell him that all affairs in Pengzhou are to be handled according to the fief's prefectures and counties, and that the people of Pengzhou should be integrated into the fief as quickly as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness." Pang Yukun said.

After a pause, Pang Yukun continued, "Your Highness, the three-year period has now passed. According to custom, it is time to collect the agricultural tax."

"I once promised to exempt the people of the fief from three years of taxes, and indeed, the deadline has arrived. But how was this year's harvest?"

"Compared to last year's drought, this year's grain harvest can be considered bountiful. Furthermore, the large-scale trial planting of potatoes in the prefectures near Qingzhou this year also yielded a rich harvest, so the common people have no worries about food and drink." Pang Yukun smiled.

In his opinion, the fief was truly thriving now. The common people had enough food and clothing, lived in peace and contentment, and even had spare money to buy various goods.

Currently, goods such as soap, salt, and white sugar sold by the Chamber of Commerce were actually sold the most within the fief, which showed that the people of the fief still had some spare money.

“In that case, the agricultural tax shall begin to be collected.”

Xiao Ming said contemplatively. He could no longer afford to be overly generous. The army’s campaigns in the east and west were extremely costly. The bullets fired and the cannonballs expended were all money, not to mention the continuously built warships, cannons, and firearms.

The pace of military equipment innovation during this period had been fast, but this was all achieved on the premise of Xiao Ming increasing the proportion of military spending.

And most importantly, after the chaos in Chang’an, prices soared. The prices of various goods doubled, which also led to the huge military expenditure becoming a financial burden for the fief.

Moreover, with the refinement of administrative affairs, administrative expenses also increased. At the same time, there were public schools throughout the fief. To popularize education, he was currently operating at a loss to gain goodwill.

All of these factors compelled him to collect agricultural taxes. After all, in an agrarian-based social system like this, agricultural taxes were still the main source of revenue.

However, while agricultural taxes were to be collected, they couldn't be enforced too harshly.

The result of his discussion with Pang Yukun was to take only one-tenth of the harvest per mu of land, which would be enough to ensure that the lives of the common people were not significantly affected.

"Yes, Your Highness. In that case, I will post notices and also have the Qingzhou newspaper publish this matter." Pang Yukun said contemplatively.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Also, this tax must be clearly defined. No local government offices are allowed to arbitrarily impose taxes under various pretexts, otherwise, don't blame me for taking drastic measures."

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"Yes, Your Highness."

Pang Yukun's expression was solemn.

As Chief Grand Councillor, his primary task was to find money for the government coffers.

Now, if there was anywhere that needed money, Xiao Ming would immediately come to him. Precisely because of this, he constantly remembered the time for agricultural tax restoration, and Xiao Ming's mention of official affairs was not without purpose.

In fact, Great Yu Empire's taxation was quite chaotic, and three years ago, the collection of agricultural taxes by local government offices throughout the fief was also fraught with irregularities. Some bold officials even overcharged, stirring up public outrage.

This time, with the restoration of agricultural tax, he, like Xiao Ming, was worried about opportunistic corruption and malpractice. After all, this agricultural tax was submitted to the local government offices, and based on his years of experience in officialdom, there would certainly be officials who would manipulate the issue of "spoilage."

In Great Yu Empire, this "spoilage" had always been extremely prevalent. Simply put, when the common people delivered grain, a dou (a unit of measure) would be used for weighing. During weighing, it was inevitable that some grain would spill onto the ground. The government office would not allow the common people to pick this grain back up, and it was thus called "spoilage."

Even more so, some officials would intentionally kick the dou, causing grain to fall to the ground. This meant the common people had to make up the missing weight, effectively forcing them to pay more grain.

And these "spoilages" would become the officials' own personal gains.

Xiao Ming's mention of this now was also to remind him that the ills of Great Yu Empire's officialdom could not be replayed in the fief's officialdom, otherwise what would be the difference with Great Yu Empire's corrupt officialdom?

Having agreed to the matter, Pang Yukun prepared to leave. At this time, Li Kaiyuan arrived at the government office under the guidance of a servant.

Seeing Pang Yukun, Li Kaiyuan said, "Chief Grand Councillor Pang, I was just looking for you. Can the raw silk, porcelain, and tea sent from Pengzhou this time be handed over to the Chamber of Commerce? I am about to do business with the Dutch and am in urgent need of these goods."

"I can give them to you, but you must convert them into silver and deposit them into the treasury." Pang Yukun's facial muscles twitched, looking pained.

"Hahahaha, Chief Grand Councillor Pang, rest assured, that's for sure. No matter how much silver I earn, won't I ultimately hand it over to you, Your Excellency?" Li Kaiyuan said with a grin.

Pang Yukun shook his head. This Li Kaiyuan was always glib. He said, "I will arrange this matter as soon as I go back."

Li Kaiyuan cupped his hands upon hearing this.

Pang Yukun turned and left. At this point, Li Kaiyuan turned to Xiao Ming and said, "Your Highness, the Dutch merchant ships have arrived at Dengzhou port. The envoy sent by the Dutch told me that this transaction will only use silver. I am undecided and have come specifically to ask Your Highness."

"You tell the Dutch that we only need half in silver; for the remaining half, have them exchange it for goods."

For Xiao Ming, actual goods were now more practical than silver, but with the prosperity of commerce in his fief, hard currency like silver could not be lacking. Therefore, after weighing the options, he opted for half of each.

“Then what goods does Your Highness need?” Li Kaiyuan asked.

“Saltpeter, sulfur, iron ore. Exchange the rest of the silver for these,” Xiao Ming said. These were the strategic materials he needed most now.

Li Kaiyuan nodded and continued to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, besides that, I plan to dispatch merchant ships to Chu territory to sell Qingzhou’s goods there. This time, in addition to the usual goods, white sugar and pendulum clocks have been added.”

“Oh, are pendulum clocks also going to be sold?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Yes, Your Highness. The clock workshop has now produced one hundred pendulum clocks. Merchants in Chu territory greatly fancy these goods and have requested us to transport them to Chu territory. The silver will be paid.”

Xiao Ming asked, “How much silver did you sell each of these pendulum clocks for?”

Sighing, Li Kaiyuan said, “If it were before, I could certainly have sold them for fifty thousand taels each. But now, with the world in turmoil, these pendulum clocks, no matter how exquisitely crafted, cannot fetch that much silver. I have only sold them for thirty thousand taels each.”

“That’s already good. Since that’s the case, sell more in volume, that way you can also earn more silver,” Xiao Ming said.

Li Kaiyuan nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. This time, all one hundred units have buyers. Chu territory accounts for half the volume, and the rest have been bought by local Qingzhou residents."

"Since when did Qingzhou have so many wealthy people?" Xiao Ming asked in confusion.

"Your Highness, that's not surprising. Firstly, most of the nobles from Chang'an have fled to Qingzhou. Secondly, merchants from various parts of Great Yu Empire have settled in Qingzhou these days, so naturally, there are suddenly more people with spare silver." Li Kaiyuan said with a smile, "It's just that Wei Family Restaurant is now packed every day, and the number of merchants joining the Chamber of Commerce has increased several times compared to before."

The situation described by Li Kaiyuan greatly pleased Xiao Ming. Now that Great Yu Empire was in chaos, merchants all wanted to find a stable place to settle down. Without a doubt, Qingzhou was currently the place they most yearned for.

Precisely for this reason, merchants flocked there in large numbers, and due to Qingzhou's comfortable living environment and prosperous trade, some nobles were also eager to come.

The arrival of these people naturally also brought a large amount of wealth, but now this wealth was in their hands. He had to think of a way to make these people spend heavily in Qingzhou.

Thinking of this, countless modern money-making methods immediately appeared in Xiao Ming's mind. In fact, these people settling in Qingzhou was similar to wealthy people immigrating in the contemporary era.

In contemporary times, every country liked wealthy people to settle in their country because it meant the arrival of wealth. Now, he naturally could not waste this opportunity.

“Hmm, that’s excellent. Since that’s the case, the Chamber of Commerce should quickly absorb new members during this period. Additionally, we should produce more luxury goods to sell to them.” Xiao Ming said with a sly smile.

“Your Highness, this is my forte!” Li Kaiyuan said happily.

The two chatted for a while longer, then Li Kaiyuan departed.

This time, Li Kaiyuan’s main reason for seeking him out was still the trade with the Dutch. The subsequent matters were merely incidental, as the maritime trade with the Dutch was the priority.

And just as he thought, the main goods the Dutch now wanted were raw silk, porcelain, and tea. All three were in short supply in Qingzhou, but Wei territory had abundant production of these items.

Thinking of this, his determination to take Wei’s territory strengthened. Once Wei’s territory was taken, the fief’s financial resources would stabilize, which would provide a solid foundation for him to seize the northern lands.

The Prince of Zhao’s current single-mindedness in taking Shu’s territory was also for the same reason: both wanted a stable grain supply area.

These past few years, the North had become increasingly cold and bitter, and grain was becoming scarcer. Although they didn't understand what the Little Ice Age was, they were well aware of the actual grain output.

In Xiao Ming's opinion, the Prince of Zhao's decision to act at this time must have also been due to sensing this.

Chapter 565

A gust of wind blew in from outside the main hall.

The refreshing coolness brought Xiao Ming back from his contemplation. Now, with his soldiers fighting for him outside, he could only diligently manage internal affairs and develop industry in his fief to provide them with strong support.

At the same time, to face the current situation and future external wars, he decided to implement conscription.

This conscription was somewhat similar to modern compulsory military service, meaning that all common people within the fief must serve in the military for two years.

For him, this was not only for reserve soldiers but also to elevate military service to a new level, making the common people realize that serving in the military was a glorious thing.

Thinking of this, he began to draft the "Conscription Law," preparing to promote it alongside agricultural taxation, to instill this concept in the hearts of the common people.

That night, he and Pang Yukun met again. After discussion, the two went to the newspaper office and had both the agricultural tax and conscription matters published in the newspaper, to be promoted to the people of the fief the next day.

While the two were busy with internal affairs, Yue Yun, having received orders, led half of his warships from Tongzhou and headed towards Jinling City along the Yangtze River. This time, they were going to give the Prince of Wei a taste of his own medicine.

And to cooperate with Ye Qingyun, Lu Fei also dispatched five thousand cavalry from Pengzhou City towards Huaizhou. For a while, there was an atmosphere of impending storm.

After the fall of Tongzhou, the Prince of Wei was unusually furious, but as he was preparing to gather his army, news of Lu Fei's movements and the warships in the Yangtze River arrived one after another.

This immediately put him in a dilemma.

"Is heaven truly going to destroy me?"

In the main hall of the Prince of Wei's residence, the Prince of Wei sat at the head of the table, with his civil and military household retainers below him. The situation in Wei's territory was worsening by the day, and now people were panicking.

"Your Highness, King Qi's military might is unstoppable. We are simply no match for him. Both Pengzhou City and Tongzhou City fell in a single day. This is enough to demonstrate the formidable power of King Qi's army."

“That’s right, Your Highness, if this continues, our Wei state will be destroyed. We cannot continue to fight King Qi like this. Now is still not too late to mend relations with King Qi.”

“Your Highness, for the sake of Wei’s people, please think twice!”

“...”

The officials in the main hall one by one spoke of seeking peace, and the Prince of Wei’s face gradually became unsightly.

At this moment, the young man standing at the head of the officials stepped forward and said, “Father King, now all the officials see clearly that we are not King Qi’s opponent. We cannot continue to fight King Qi like this. Please, Father King, send an envoy to Wei’s territory to seek peace.”

The young man was precisely the Prince of Wei’s eldest son, Xiao Han. Seeing Wei’s territory being eroded day by day, the officials nominated Xiao Han to state the matter clearly to the Prince of Wei.

“Han’er, even you!” The Prince of Wei felt a surge of sadness in his heart, seeing his own son now standing with a group of officials seeking peace.

Gasping violently, the Prince of Wei said, “Xiao Qi has already embarked on a diplomatic mission to ally with the Prince of Yan, the Prince of Zhao, and the Prince of Liang. Are you all scared out of your wits already?”

“Father King, not to mention that Xiao Qi might not succeed in forming an alliance, even if he does, the time it takes for these four sides to prepare their armies will be enough for Xiao Ming to reach Jinling City. Tongzhou has already fallen, and Qingzhou’s fleet is heading towards Jinling City. What if the Qingzhou Army lands below Jinling City? Can we hold out?” Xiao Han said.

In his heart, he had always held a deep prejudice against Xiao Qi. He was the Prince of Wei’s heir, but Xiao Qi had overshadowed him for years, making him almost non-existent.

This time, from the very beginning, he opposed going to war with King Qi and strongly advocated allying with Xiao Ming, but his suggestions were all rejected.

Now, due to the continuous victories of King Qi’s army, a group of officials and generals gradually sided with him, and his influence grew unprecedentedly strong.

“No need to discuss this matter further. Until Xiao Qi returns, I will not surrender to Xiao Ming.” The Prince of Wei flicked his large sleeve and walked directly out of the main hall, no longer paying attention to the civil and military officials.

After the Prince of Wei departed, the officials gathered around Xiao Han. The Prefect of Huaizhou said, “Your Royal Highness, what should be done? King Qi’s cavalry is now hovering outside Huaizhou City, and could attack at any time. If we wait any longer, Huaizhou City will be gone.”

“That’s right, that’s right. Our Yangzhou is very close to Tongzhou, and we are also constantly facing the threat of King Qi’s army from Tongzhou,” another official said.

Xiao Han sneered, "Father King won't shed tears until he sees the coffin, won't turn back until he hits a brick wall. Hmph, what else can be done now? We can only wait for Xiao Qi to return."

Many officials were still uneasy. An official said to Xiao Han, "Your Royal Highness, as long as you can make King Qi cease hostilities, all of us will support you."

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of Xiao Han's mouth. He understood what these officials meant.

These people were sons of powerful families in the prefectures and counties. What they cared about most now was their own small plots of land. The example of Pengzhou City was right before their eyes. After losing Pengzhou City, powerful families like the Mi family and Lu family were like stray dogs, and Mi Wenji was even directly beheaded.

The tragic fate of the Mi family made them feel a sense of shared misfortune. Now, the only thing they wanted was to preserve their own territory. So, their subtle words were actually meant to tell him that as long as he could make peace with King Qi and cease hostilities, they would be willing to support him in ascending to the position of Prince of Wei.

The example of Chang'an was right before their eyes, and these officials could naturally think of following suit.

"Thank you all for your kindness. I know what to do. If the situation becomes critical, I will have to rely on all of you." Xiao Han's words were equally veiled.

Many officials had now departed, leaving only those who shared the same thoughts.

As everyone was speaking, a “rumbling” sound suddenly came.

This sound seemed like distant thunder, but gradually, they discerned the difference. Xiao Han said, “Speak of the devil, and he shall appear. King Qi’s fleet has arrived as promised.”

The officials had long since turned pale with fright. Now, King Qi’s army was like a nightmare, haunting them and making them restless in their chambers.

Jinling City, like Tongzhou, was also built by the river, but unlike Tongzhou City, Jinling City was further from the river.

Leading a group of officials, Xiao Han ascended the city wall. From the city wall, he gazed at the river. Twelve huge warships were bombarding the pier on the bank. From the city wall, he could clearly see white smoke and flames erupting.

The Prince of Wei also ascended the city wall at this moment. Looking at this scene, the Prince of Wei’s face was extremely grim. Now, he could only watch helplessly as these warships paraded their might, while he could not mount any counterattack.

“Father King, now you believe that King Qi’s army can directly attack Jinling City from here, don’t you?” Xiao Han persuaded, “Father King, it’s still not too late to ally with King Qi.”

The Prince of Wei's expression remained very firm. He said, "What's done is done. Even if I seek peace now, do you think Xiao Ming, with his character, would spare me?"

Chapter 566

Bozhou.

As Xiao Qi emerged from the Prince of Yan's residence, he ran into Zhan Xingchang.

He had seen Zhan Xingchang during his previous mission to Qingzhou and knew that Zhan Xingchang was resourceful. At this moment, Zhan Xingchang's presence here was undoubtedly for a specific purpose.

"I didn't expect King Qi's intelligence to be so keen, knowing King Wei's plan so quickly. I just wonder if Governor Zhan also brought assassins to kill me." Xiao Qi sneered.

Zhan Xingchang had also met Xiao Qi before. From the tone of his words, Xiao Qi deliberately used the title of Governor Zhan to provoke him, merely wanting to annoy him. He said, "If I wanted to kill you, why would I come to Bozhou personally? And you underestimate His Highness too much. What you can do, we can also do, and do it better." Zhan Xingchang said.

Xiao Qi's face changed slightly. Zhan Xingchang's simple words had already revealed the purpose of his trip; he, too, had come to seek an alliance.

As for why Xiao Ming wanted an alliance, anyone with discerning eyes could see that it was to unite with the Prince of Yan to attack the Prince of Wei.

Sneering twice, Zhan Xingchang didn't want to say more to Xiao Qi. He turned and headed towards the Prince of Yan's residence.

Xiao Qi's brow immediately furrowed. He had been in Bozhou for five days, and during this time, he had met both the Fourth Prince and the Prince of Yan.

However, despite his earnest persuasion, the Prince of Yan's words were always vague, seemingly agreeing but also seemingly hesitant. Overall, his meaning was that if either the Prince of Liang or the Prince of Zhao agreed, he would send troops.

So this time, he was preparing to go to the Prince of Liang to lobby, as he also knew that the Prince of Liang had always secretly resented King Qi, so reaching an alliance with him would not be a problem.

His departure this time was precisely to head to Liang's territory, but now Zhan Xingchang's arrival made him feel uneasy. This was the only way to save Wei's territory. If it could not be achieved, Wei's territory would fall into eternal damnation.

Looking back at the Prince of Yan's residence, Xiao Qi still decided to go to the Prince of Liang. At the Prince of Yan's place, he had already made the stakes clear, and he believed the Prince of Yan would not go back on his decision.

As Xiao Qi departed, Zhan Xingchang had already arrived in the main hall of the Prince of Yan's residence. At this moment, the Prince of Yan was waiting for him in the main hall.

"You are Zhan Xingchang? It is said that the Battle of Jizhou also had your contribution." The Prince of Yan said loudly.

Zhan Xingchang looked up at the Prince of Yan. In his eyes, the Prince of Yan was thin, with a long face and wide mouth, looking somewhat ugly, like a donkey's face.

"Reporting to Your Royal Highness the Prince of Yan, I am indeed he. However, the credit for the Battle of Jizhou belongs to His Highness, not to me." Zhan Xingchang said cautiously.

The Prince of Yan stared at Zhan Xingchang and said, "First the Prince of Wei, and now King Qi. What's going on now? What wind blew you all here?"

Zhan Xingchang thought to himself, 'The Prince of Yan is indeed an old fox. He's clearly feigning ignorance.' The Prince of Yan was pretending not to know anything, even though Xiao Qi had just left.

So Zhan Xingchang said, "Your Highness, I have been dispatched by King Qi not for anything else, but to present Your Highness with a grand gift."

"Oh? King Qi's grand gifts are rarely seen. Do tell." The Prince of Yan said with a smile.

Zhan Xingchang said lightly, "Shouzhou."

"Shouzhou?"

A glint flashed in the Prince of Yan's eyes, a detail noticed by Zhan Xingchang.

“That’s right, it’s Shouzhou in Wei’s territory. Your Highness has always longed for Shouzhou. Now, His Royal Highness King Qi is willing to take Shouzhou with Your Highness and give it to Your Highness.” Zhan Xingchang said.

The Prince of Yan remained outwardly calm. He said, “Shouzhou is where my Zheng family’s ancestral home is located. However, the matters of ancestors are, after all, the matters of ancestors. When it comes to me, some things should be let go, shouldn’t they? I don’t want to make a big fuss over this matter. Besides, even if I take Shouzhou, it’s not certain who it will ultimately belong to.”

With that, the Prince of Yan lightly sipped his tea, awaiting Zhan Xingchang’s words.

“So, the Prince of Yan has decided to deal with us alongside the Prince of Wei?” Zhan Xingchang asked, neither subservient nor arrogant.

The Prince of Yan let out a puff of hot air and said indifferently, “I am not foolish. I know very well whether Shouzhou is more important or the safety of Yan’s territory is more important. To abandon Shouzhou and sit by while King Qi annexes the entire Wei’s territory, then King Qi’s next target will be me, won’t it?”

Zhan Xingchang grew more cautious. This Prince of Yan was exceptionally calm and saw things very clearly; this was precisely their next step.

“But does the Prince of Yan truly believe that the four armies can break through Qi’s territory?”

“Perhaps not, but it will be enough to severely weaken Qi’s territory, preventing it from further encroaching on the lands of other vassal kings.” The Prince of Yan tapped the table. “And the strengths of the other vassal kings are comparable. Even if they fight each other, they cannot easily annex territory like King Qi annexing Wei’s territory. Therefore, I am more willing to trust the Prince of Wei than to dig my own grave for a temporary small gain.”

Zhan Xingchang inwardly thought, ‘This is bad.’ This Prince of Yan was exceptionally calm and saw things very clearly. He said, “What if His Highness and Wei’s territory improve their relationship? Don’t forget, the Prince of Wei and His Highness are both imperial kinsmen. This war is merely over some unpleasant matters, just like a couple’s squabble in bed that reconciles by the bedside.”

“Hahahaha...” The Prince of Yan suddenly burst into laughter. “If I didn’t know Xiao Qi’s identity, I might believe you, but knowing his identity, I understand that the Prince of Wei will absolutely not seek peace with Xiao Ming!”

“Xiao Qi’s identity?” Zhan Xingchang’s expression was puzzled.

The Prince of Yan seemed unwilling to conceal the matter. He directly said, “This Xiao Qi is none other than the son of the Prince of Ning. Back then, Xiao Wenxuan killed the Prince of Ning for his throne. The Prince of Wei concealed his son and raised him by his side. It can be said that the Prince of Wei had harbored rebellious intentions for a long time. King Qi is Xiao Wenxuan’s son, so how could the Prince of Wei submit to him? Although the Prince of Wei is extravagant and unrestrained, I know that the Prince of Wei still has some backbone.”

Zhan Xingchang looked shocked. He had also heard about the major case of the Prince of Ning. With the Prince of Yan saying this, he finally understood why the Prince of Wei refused to ally with Xiao Ming. It turned out that in his heart, he had always harbored hatred towards Xiao Wenxuan and his descendants.

“So that’s it.” Zhan Xingchang’s eyes narrowed. However, he still had a trump card. He believed the Prince of Yan would not refuse, because in the current situation, this was something everyone wanted.

After a moment of thought, Zhan Xingchang’s eyes darted around. He bluffed, “Actually, His Royal Highness King Qi has long known Xiao Qi’s identity, so the war with the Prince of Wei is merely a personal grudge. His Highness has no intention of contending for the world; he merely wishes to guard his fief and live a carefree life. To prove His Highness’s innocence, His Highness instructed me that the firearm manufacturing technology can be imparted to your Yan territory.”

The Prince of Yan’s eyes suddenly narrowed, and his heart, disobediently, pounded violently a few times. It had to be said that this condition was simply too tempting.

Chapter 567

“Firearm technology? Really?”

The Prince of Yan stood up from his seat and walked towards Zhan Xingchang. He couldn’t help but be excited.

“Precisely!” Zhan Xingchang said.

According to intelligence gathered by the secret service, the Prince of Zhao has already mastered the technology of forging matchlock guns with rolled iron. Therefore, for Great Yu Empire, the matchlock gun forging technology is no longer a secret.

It is worth exchanging a non-secret technology for some benefits.

Although the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Liang outwardly seemed inactive, both have always been very eager for firearm technology. Many of the spies captured in Qingzhou are also from Yan and Liang.

From this, he concluded that the Prince of Yan was very likely to want this matchlock gun forging technology.

With a smile, Zhan Xingchang said, "Now His Royal Highness the Prince of Yan should believe my sincerity, right? King Qi has even handed over his most prized skill."

"Then how do you plan to hand over the firearm technology to me?" The Prince of Yan asked.

"It's very simple. Your Highness can send craftsmen to Qingzhou. We will certainly teach these craftsmen how to produce matchlock guns. When these craftsmen return to Yan territory, Your Highness can then manufacture matchlock guns yourself." Zhan Xingchang said.

The Prince of Yan's heart was finally in disarray. His resolve began to waver. Should he suppress Xiao Ming, or should he acquire the matchlock gun technology? These two questions made his anxious heart ache.

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "Your envoy might as well stay in Bozhou for a few days. Allow me two days to consider before giving a reply."

"In that case, I shall depart. I hope Your Highness can make a wise decision." Zhan Xingchang said with a smile.

The Prince of Yan forced a smile and cupped his hands to Zhan Xingchang.

Zhan Xingchang understood and turned to leave.

Watching Zhan Xingchang depart, the Prince of Yan suddenly said, "You two, come out."

As his voice fell, the Fourth Prince and two young men emerged from the inner chamber of the main hall.

The elder of the two young men said, "Father, is there even a choice? Of course, it's the matchlock gun. As long as we have matchlock guns, we can contend for the world. Otherwise, even if we eliminate Xiao Ming, there are still the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Liang, the Prince of Wei, and in the south, the King of Chu. How would we then be their opponents?"

"That's right, Father. The Prince of Wei and Xiao Ming are enemies, but the Prince of Wei and us are also enemies. Helping him eliminate Xiao Ming, isn't that helping him? In my opinion, this time, it's better to let Xiao Ming torment the Prince of Wei half to death, but not let Xiao Ming completely annex Wei territory. This way, Xiao Ming's strength cannot expand rapidly, and the Prince of Wei will also be severely weakened." The other young man said.

The Fourth Prince's view differed from the two. He said, "Uncle, we absolutely must not fall into Xiao Ming's trap. This alliance with the Prince of Wei is an opportunity to eliminate Xiao Ming in one fell swoop. Otherwise, if Xiao Ming is given more time, no one in the world will be his opponent. Letting him go now is undoubtedly nurturing a tiger for future trouble."

The Prince of Yan paced back and forth. He said, "Your words all make sense, so I am also in a difficult position now. If I take a wrong step this time, Yan's territory will be doomed forever."

"Father King, do not hesitate any longer. A man who does not act for himself will be condemned by heaven and earth. If we do not have firearms, it will not be difficult for the Prince of Zhao and the Prince of Liang to destroy Yan. After all, behind them are the barbarians. But if we are equipped with firearms and cannons, it will be different. At that time, perhaps there will still be a glimmer of hope."

"That's right, Father King, you must consider the bigger picture."

The Prince of Yan's two sons strongly urged him.

The Fourth Prince wanted to interject, but seeing their cold eyes, he immediately fell silent.

Although he had escaped from Chang'an to Bozhou this time, the honor that once belonged to a prince was gone. Now living in the Prince of Yan's residence, although he was called the Fourth Prince, he no longer had the rights of a prince.

And the Prince of Yan's two sons had repeatedly been disrespectful to him, which made him gradually realize that he was merely an outsider.

Facing his sons' instigation, the Prince of Yan became increasingly tempted, but he retained a trace of composure. He said, "Tomorrow, gather the civil and military officials to discuss this matter."

With that, the Prince of Yan turned and left. He needed to calm down and think about this matter carefully.

Immediately, only the Prince of Yan's two sons and the Fourth Prince remained in the royal residence. At this, the Prince of Yan's eldest son said sarcastically, "Fourth Prince, you don't need to participate in the affairs of our Yan state. After all, you are a prince of Great Yu Empire. You should go to Chang'an and inquire about Chang'an's affairs."

"That's right, maybe the Thirteenth Prince will even be happy enough to grant you a fief." The Prince of Yan's second son said.

The Fourth Prince's face alternated between white and black. He now finally understood what it meant to be dependent on others.

The two mocked for a while, then turned to leave. As they left, they deliberately bumped into the Fourth Prince.

Looking at their arrogant demeanor, a hint of ruthlessness flashed in the Fourth Prince's eyes. He had never suffered such humiliation. Clenching his fists tightly, he secretly vowed to deal with the two of them.

The next day, the Prince of Yan gathered his civil and military officials to discuss the matter of the envoys from Qi and Wei. To the Prince of Yan's surprise, all the officials chose the matchlock gun. However, to limit Xiao Ming's growth, the ministers also offered him a very sinister idea.

That afternoon, the Prince of Yan again summoned Zhan Xingchang.

"I have decided to agree to King Qi's terms." The Prince of Yan said.

Zhan Xingchang was overjoyed. "Your Highness, this is truly a wise decision."

The Prince of Yan waved his hand and continued, "However, I have one more condition."

"Please speak, Your Highness."

"From now on, King Qi must cease the annexation of Wei territory and maintain the existing cities. Otherwise, even if we do not need the firearm technology, we will attack Qi along with the Prince of Wei." The Prince of Yan said.

Zhan Xingchang's brow furrowed. This Prince of Yan was simply too cunning and treacherous. He was trying to gain benefits while also preventing Xiao Ming from completely occupying Wei territory and strengthening his power.

This matter was too significant, and Zhan Xingchang could not give an immediate answer. He said, "This matter can only be discussed with Your Highness after I have gone to Zhao's territory and returned to Qingzhou."

"I am not in a hurry." The Prince of Yan looked as if he had Zhan Xingchang precisely where he wanted him.

Zhan Xingchang nodded upon hearing this and turned to leave.

Returning to his lodging, Zhan Xingchang immediately sent someone to convey the Prince of Yan's condition back. At the same time, he prepared to depart for Chang'an. This was the last stop of his journey. As long as he could persuade the Prince of Zhao not to participate in this matter, he would truly be at ease.

At that time, after further dividing the Prince of Yan, only Liang and Wei would remain. Liang, with the Prince of Yong resisting, was not to be feared. The only one left was the Prince of Wei.

So now, the most important thing was the Prince of Zhao's attitude. After all, the Prince of Zhao was currently the strongest vassal king besides Xiao Ming.

Having packed his valuables, Zhan Xingchang and his entourage set off for Chang'an. At the same time, Zhan Xingchang's achievements in Yan's territory were also conveyed to Qingzhou, and Xiao Ming's final attitude would determine whether a major melee would break out in the North.

Chapter 568

"The Prince of Yan is indeed cunning."

In the Qingzhou government office, Fiji was reading the letter sent by Zhan Xingchang.

He had just returned from Pengzhou yesterday. Now that the Pengzhou City government office was officially operational, and the Prefect of Pengzhou had taken over the various administrative affairs, there was no need for him to remain there.

Pang Yukun said, "The Prince of Yan wants both the matchlock gun technology and to restrain us. He truly harbors ulterior motives, and he has indeed presented us with a dilemma."

Xiao Ming's face was grim. The situation he least wanted to see had arisen. Judging by the Prince of Yan's reaction, the Prince of Zhao would probably also be very wary of his annexation of Wei's territory.

Indeed, ten days later, Zhan Xingchang returned from Chang'an, bringing the Prince of Zhao's reply.

"Your Highness, now only the Prince of Liang has agreed to Xiao Qi's alliance. The attitudes of the Prince of Zhao and the Prince of Yan are still wavering, awaiting our reply," Zhan Xingchang said.

"So, what are the Prince of Zhao's terms?" Xiao Ming asked.

Zhan Xingchang said, "After meeting the Prince of Zhao this time, the Prince of Zhao initially wanted to threaten Your Highness with the alliance matter. However, when I mentioned the alliance with the King of Chu, the Prince of Zhao changed his mind. Now, he only requests that Your Highness does not continue to annex Wei's territory."

Taking a breath, he continued, "This time, the Prince of Wei also paid a heavy price to get reinforcements. It is said that to secure troops, he had Xiao Qi send eighty thousand taels of silver to the Prince of Zhao. However, the Prince of Zhao is currently at war with the King of Shu and is unwilling to fight on two fronts."

"So, only the Prince of Liang is willing to send troops now?" Xiao Ming asked.

“Yes, Your Highness. Now the most important thing is the Prince of Yan’s attitude. If the Prince of Yan also ceases hostilities, this alliance will basically fail.”

Xiao Ming paced back and forth. Now that the vassal kings of Great Yu Empire had declared independence, each vassal king had their own interests, and no single vassal king wanted to see another become too powerful.

If he hadn’t displayed such overwhelming strength, it would probably be the Prince of Zhao who was being attacked right now.

After careful thought, he said to Zhan Xingchang, “Since that is the case, we will agree to the Prince of Yan’s condition and provide him with matchlock gun technology.”

“Your Highness, but in that case, are we to abandon our campaign against Wei’s territory?” Niu Ben was also in the government office. He was very displeased about this matter. Now that the Southern Expedition Army and Dengzhou Army were advancing like a broken bamboo, it was the perfect time to pursue victory.

Fiji and Pang Yukun were both old foxes. They exchanged glances, seemingly seeing through Xiao Ming’s strategy.

“To avoid being besieged by an alliance, we can only temporarily agree to this condition. Moreover, having now obtained Pengzhou City and Tongzhou City, we also need time to thoroughly transform these two places. Now that the Prince of Wei has involved the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Yan, and the

Prince of Liang, this alliance seems to require the signing of an agreement.” Xiao Ming looked at Zhan Xingchang.

“Your Highness’s brilliant foresight! Both the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao proposed sending envoys to Qingzhou, so that envoys from all five sides can jointly sign a truce agreement in Qingzhou, maintaining the status quo,” Zhan Xingchang said in surprise.

Fiji said, “This matter reminds me of the Six States allying to attack Qin. The current situation indeed bears resemblance to those times.”

“Hahahaha... So, we are now the mighty Qin, you mean?” Xiao Ming said.

Pang Yukun echoed, “That’s right. Precisely because of this, these vassal kings will fear our continued growth. Your Highness’s campaign against Wei this time truly made them wary. In this situation, even if the Prince of Wei hadn’t sent someone to form an alliance, it’s likely the other vassal kings wouldn’t have been able to sit still.”

“Chief Grand Councillor Pang is absolutely right. I also saw this point and decided to play along with their scheme. Since they want a written agreement, we will give it to them. After Pengzhou and Tongzhou are stabilized, we will continue to take other cities in Wei’s territory.” Xiao Ming said loudly.

Everyone nodded upon hearing this. The initiative, whether to attack or defend, was now in their hands.

Pengzhou now had a population of five hundred thousand, and Tongzhou had a population of two hundred thousand. Now they only needed time to recruit and train soldiers from these two places. Once

they had an additional fifty thousand troops, they would not fear even if the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Liang, the Prince of Wei, and the Prince of Yan attacked them together.

Niu Ben sighed. He said, "But I still feel at a disadvantage. If we sign this troublesome agreement, won't it mean that only the Prince of Wei can attack us, and we can't attack him?"

"Rest assured, Commander Niu. Since we are signing an agreement, I will naturally make them acknowledge our occupation of Pengzhou and Tongzhou. Moreover, I have another idea: perhaps we can take Huaizhou in the process!"

Xiao Ming already had a plan in mind, then he explained the plan to Pang Yukun and others.

After listening, Fiji looked astonished. He said, "I never thought text could be used this way. I have truly learned something new. If that's the case, the Prince of Wei and other vassal kings will truly have difficulty speaking."

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded.

This time, Xiao Ming didn't sign the truce agreement because he was a coward. In fact, even if the four kings attacked, he might not necessarily lose. However, he never forgot that the barbarians were constantly watching the changes in Great Yu Empire.

At that time, even if he won, it would be a Pyrrhic victory, and the four kings would also suffer heavy losses. This situation was precisely what the barbarians most hoped to see.

Once that happened, he would no longer have any spare capacity to deal with Great Yu Empire's true enemies.

Therefore, at this moment, he had to avoid the Prince of Wei's alliance scheme. After all, he had already gained advantages and only needed to consolidate his victory.

Once his strength was further enhanced, he would completely annex Wei's territory in a very short time, leaving the Prince of Yan and others no time to react.

As for now, he still needed time to digest the conquered land and population. Most importantly, he was preparing to seize an overseas food supply area: the Sanzan Kingdom, currently controlled by Japan.

In this era, the large island opposite Fuzhou was called Ryukyu, and a series of islands between Ryukyu and Japan were called the Sanzan Kingdom, which are later Okinawa and its surrounding islands.

According to the intelligence provided by Wang Xuan, the Sanzan Kingdom had a population of two hundred thousand and was now forced to pay tribute to Japan, providing a large amount of grain to Yamada Nobunaga every year. During Yamada Nobunaga's unification of Japan, the grain provided by the Sanzan Kingdom greatly helped Yamada Nobunaga.

In contemporary history, successive dynasties twice missed the opportunity to recover this kingdom. Xiao Ming did not want to miss it now, especially since it was a place that could provide free grain.

Therefore, the reason for signing the truce agreement was also partly due to this consideration. With a stable food supply, he would not have to worry about logistics in the future.

Having settled the matter, Xiao Ming said to Zhan Xingchang, "This time, you will be responsible for this to the very end. You will now notify them, saying that I have agreed to their conditions and that they should send envoys to Qingzhou for discussions."

"Yes, Your Highness." Zhan Xingchang bowed.

Chapter 569

Time swiftly entered August.

After being busy for over half a month, Zhan Xingchang conveyed Xiao Ming's ideas to the four vassal kings, and the Prince of Zhao, the Prince of Yan, the Prince of Liang, and the Prince of Wei all sent envoys to Qingzhou to discuss the matter.

At the same time, after three failures, the steel workshop produced its first alkaline converter. This news arrived, making Xiao Ming extremely excited.

Negotiations were imminent, and the success of the alkaline converter now gave him more confidence in the negotiations. Mass production of steel would enable him to quickly achieve the modernization of military equipment.

Just as his plan envisioned, all he needed was some time.

“Your Highness, this is the alkaline converter.”

In the scorching steel workshop, Meng Kuo led Xiao Ming to a converter two meters high and one and a half meters in diameter.

Xiao Ming inspected the converter with satisfaction. The converter Meng Kuo had built consisted of a truncated cone-shaped furnace hood, a cylindrical furnace body, and a spherical furnace bottom, looking overall like a spinning top.

On the steelmaking furnace, trunnions were cast to allow the converter to rotate, accommodating processes like charging, tapping, and slag pouring. Below the side of the converter, there was an upward-sloping opening, which was the tuyere.

Currently, the steelmaking method adopted by the steel workshop was the side-blown alkaline steelmaking method, which was the earliest method to appear during the Bessemer steelmaking era. Later, the bottom-blown and top-blown technologies were very demanding and he could not achieve them.

However, even so, it was enough to meet his current needs. The quality of the molten steel produced by this batch of converters would definitely be significantly better than that produced by crucibles.

It could be said that with the current intensity of gunpowder, he no longer feared barrel explosions.

In addition to the tuyere below the side, there was also a small pipe above the converter, which was the steel tap hole.

“Hmm, good, good.” Xiao Ming was very satisfied after inspecting the converter up and down.

In addition to the converter, the steel workshop also underwent a thorough renovation. At this time, the converter was not placed on the ground, but on a stand. The lower half of this stand was cast in concrete, and the upper part was metal.

The suspended converter could be rotated by craftsmen pulling connected chains, and on one side of the stand, there were two more facilities: one for pouring raw materials into the converter, and one for tapping steel.

Overall, the equipment in the steel workshop was still somewhat rudimentary; after all, it would be a long time until automated machinery.

Meng Kuo was quite satisfied with his results. The busy period had not been in vain. Now he was preparing to build the second converter production line. "Your Highness, we have already attempted steelmaking, and the quality of the steel produced is much stronger than before. The problem of phosphorus and sulfur in crucible steelmaking has finally been solved."

"Is that so? You're quite fast." Xiao Ming smiled.

Meng Kuo said, "Your Highness, the only troublesome part is the furnace lining; the other equipment is very simple, which is why it's faster."

"Although that's true, it wouldn't have been possible without your tireless efforts day and night. But this is just the beginning. You must continue to work hard. I expect you to bring down the cost of steel," Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness, if I cannot significantly increase production with the Bessemer steelmaking method, Your Highness can throw me into the furnace to be refined along with the steel.” Meng Kuo’s assurance was not without humor.

A faint smile appeared on Xiao Ming’s face. He said, “If that were the case, what would be the difference between me and a tyrant? However, if you don’t perform well, I will certainly replace you.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Meng Kuo chuckled.

After strolling around the steel workshop for a while, Zhan Xingchang sent someone to find him.

Originally, Xiao Ming was going to slowly negotiate and sign the agreement with the four envoys today, but because he was happy, he put that aside and made a special trip here.

When Zhan Xingchang looked for him and found that Xiao Ming was not in the royal residence, he sent someone to find Xiao Ming.

After giving Meng Kuo a few more instructions, Xiao Ming slowly headed towards the Qingzhou government office. When he arrived, he found Zhan Xingchang and the four envoys in a heated argument.

“What’s going on? When did the government office become a marketplace?” Xiao Ming said as he walked in.

Zhan Xingchang saw Xiao Ming approaching and said, “Your Highness, we were just discussing the agreement.”

Xiao Ming nodded. At this moment, he looked at the other four people. The Prince of Wei’s envoy was none other than Xiao Qi. He also recognized the envoy sent by the Prince of Zhao; it was Wang Xi, who served Empress Zhao.

As for the Prince of Yan’s envoy and the Prince of Liang’s envoy, he did not recognize either of them.

Noticing Xiao Ming’s expression, the Prince of Yan’s envoy stepped forward and said, “I, Cui Zhang, second son of the Prince of Yan, greet Your Highness.”

“So it’s the heir. Please sit, please sit,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Cui Zhang sat down. Originally, he didn’t have to come in person this time, but because the matchlock gun technology was too important, the Prince of Yan had to send his second son to Qingzhou.

The Prince of Liang’s envoy always wore a cold expression. After the Prince of Yan’s envoy introduced himself, he said indifferently, “I, Zheng Hao, greet His Royal Highness King Qi.”

After Zheng Hao, Xiao Qi and Wang Xi exchanged feigned pleasantries with Xiao Ming respectively.

With the formalities seemingly concluded, the discussion moved to the main topic. Xiao Qi was the most resentful among them. He had tirelessly campaigned, only to find upon his return that both the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao had proposed humiliating terms for Wei's territory.

At this point, he had to change his view of Xiao Ming.

The true terms had actually been reached under the negotiation table. Cui Zhang and Wang Xi did not want to waste time. After a moment of silence, Cui Zhang spoke first, "Your Highness, our purpose in coming today is to ask Your Highness to stop the annexation of Wei's territory. Since Your Highness has now agreed to this matter, it should be written down in black and white as proof by contract."

"That's right, everyone is a clear-headed person here. Let's not waste any more time," Wang Xi also said.

Xiao Qi naturally knew that the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao had reached some unspeakable agreement with Xiao Ming. He said, "Gentlemen envoys, what you agreed with His Highness has nothing to do with us. Since His Highness now wants a truce, why not hand over Pengzhou and Tongzhou first, and then we can talk about this matter?"

Zheng Hao also said, "Envoy Xiao is absolutely right. Your Highness has occupied two cities in Wei's territory. How can there be any reason for a truce without handing them over? Wouldn't that mean Your Highness gets all the advantages?"

Xiao Ming said lightly, "So, are you two here because you disagree with the ideas of the Prince of Yan, the Prince of Zhao, and me?"

“Precisely. Only if Your Highness hands over Pengzhou City and Tongzhou City will we agree to a truce,” Xiao Qi said firmly.

Xiao Ming looked at Xiao Qi in surprise, a playful smile suddenly appearing on his face. Then he looked at Cui Zhang and Wang Xi, “Gentlemen, as you can see, the Prince of Wei is being aggressive. It seems this truce agreement cannot be signed.”

Cui Zhang and Wang Xi immediately felt somewhat annoyed. Their goal was to weaken the Prince of Wei and simultaneously tie Xiao Ming’s hands and feet. They certainly didn’t want to ruin their good intentions over the Prince of Wei’s two cities.

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“Xiao Qi, what exactly do you mean?”

Cui Zhang, in his youthful vigor, was originally just going through the motions, intending to take firearm technology from Qingzhou. Now, Xiao Qi had suddenly disrupted his plan.

Xiao Qi looked at Cui Zhang and sneered, “It’s Wei’s cities that are being ceded. Of course, Prince Cui wouldn’t feel the pinch, but while you don’t, the Prince of Wei certainly does.”

Wang Xi, hearing this, immediately smiled sarcastically, “Xiao Qi, I don’t know if it’s your ignorance or the Prince of Wei’s ignorance. You mustn’t forget, if it weren’t for the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao persuading His Royal Highness King Qi, you wouldn’t even have the chance to talk now.”

“Secretary Wang is absolutely right.” Cui Zhang echoed.

Zheng Hao then said, "The two of you are truly exceptional at distorting the truth. The boundaries of the vassal states of all the princes were established during the reign of the late Emperor, clearly stated in the imperial edict. Now, King Qi is annexing the Prince of Wei's cities. How is this any different from rebellion and treason?"

Xiao Ming looked at Zheng Hao at this moment and said, "If I am committing treason, then what crime is the Prince of Liang's collusion with foreign tribes to seize Chang'an? What crime is the Prince of Liang's collusion with Jin merchants to sell large quantities of goods to the barbarians!"

"Your Highness, mind your words. The Prince of Liang has always been loyal to Great Yu Empire and has never engaged in such conduct," Zheng Hao bowed.

Xiao Ming's eyes narrowed. This so-called truce agreement was nothing but a piece of scrap paper to him. He was going through so much trouble merely to lull them into a false sense of security and secretly strengthen himself.

However, this negotiation clearly exceeded his expectations, with the situation developing in an unpredictable direction. He couldn't help but sigh, 'Man proposes, God disposes.'

Cui Zhang and Wang Xi looked at Zheng Hao simultaneously. The matter of the Prince of Liang colluding with the barbarians was known to all, and this Zheng Hao truly had the audacity to lie with his eyes wide open.

Since things had come to this, Xiao Ming no longer bothered to save face for Xiao Qi and Zheng Hao. After refuting Zheng Hao, he looked at Xiao Qi and said, "Don't think I don't know what the Prince of Wei is plotting. Xiao Qi, do you know who the Prince of Ning is?"

As soon as the words "Prince of Ning" left his mouth, the room immediately fell silent, and Xiao Qi's face changed drastically.

Xiao Ming continued, "When the late Emperor executed the Prince of Ning for treason, only one young son disappeared. That person must be you, mustn't it? What does it mean that the Prince of Wei has kept you by his side and raised you all these years?"

"Also, six years ago, the Prince of Wei and the powerful Wang family of Qingzhou colluded and attempted to assassinate me. In the Battle of Jizhou, the Prince of Wei sent such a weak army, probably hoping to see me defeated by the barbarians. With all this, I not to mention taking two cities, what if I were to take the entire Wei territory? Is the Prince of Wei still qualified to possess imperial land?"

Xiao Qi's face immediately flushed, then paled upon hearing this, while Wang Xi and Zheng Hao looked at Xiao Qi in surprise. Only Cui Zhang's eyes flickered, because this was precisely what the Prince of Yan had intentionally revealed.

The reason for this was that the Prince of Yan wanted to prevent Xiao Ming from ever reconciling with the Prince of Wei.

"What? Did I hit the mark?" Xiao Ming sneered repeatedly. He said, "Since all four envoys are in Qingzhou today, this must be made clear. This time, I wish to cease hostilities, but the Prince of Wei refuses. In that case, do not blame me for being merciless."

Cui Zhang and Wang Xi exchanged glances, which immediately put them in a difficult position. Wang Xi continued, "Xiao Qi, a wise man knows when to adapt. At this time, Qi is strong and Wei is weak. Relying solely on verbal skills will not win the war."

“That’s right. If I were you, I’d quickly sign the truce agreement to cede Tongzhou and Pengzhou City,” Cui Zhang echoed.

Zheng Hao also remained silent at this point. His presence here this time was merely to play the role of a troublemaker. He clearly understood that with only the Prince of Wei and the Prince of Liang left, they posed no threat to Xiao Ming at all.

Xiao Qi gritted his teeth. “This matter is significant. I need to explain it to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wei.”

Before he came to Qingzhou this time, the Prince of Wei’s idea was to reclaim Pengzhou City and Tongzhou. However, he hadn’t expected that the Prince of Zhao and the Prince of Yan were unwilling to see Xiao Ming grow stronger, and also unwilling to see him grow stronger.

Therefore, the clause in the truce agreement to cede Pengzhou City and Tongzhou City caught him somewhat off guard.

Xiao Ming said, “You may return, but don’t blame me for not reminding you: until the truce agreement is signed, Qi and Wei will remain in a state of war.”

“I understand.” Xiao Qi looked deeply at Xiao Ming and turned to leave.

At this point, Xiao Ming looked at the other three and said, “Gentlemen, since the Prince of Wei is being so unreasonable this time, if war breaks out again, you cannot blame me.”

Zheng Hao did not speak. Cui Zhang and Wang Xi nodded in agreement.

Instructing Zhan Xingchang to entertain the three, Xiao Ming turned and exited the government office. At this point, he immediately sent someone to call Niu Ben over.

Soon, Niu Ben appeared at the government office.

“Your Highness, are you preparing to attack Huaizhou?” Niu Ben asked.

“That’s right. This time, the Prince of Wei’s greed is perfectly in line with our plan. You immediately send someone to inform Lu Fei to attack Huaizhou City,” Xiao Ming said.

He had planned to trick the Prince of Wei in this negotiation, but he didn’t expect the Prince of Wei to walk right into his trap.

Now, even if he took Huaizhou, the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao wouldn’t be able to say anything; they would probably only pressure the Prince of Wei to cease hostilities sooner.

Niu Ben was overjoyed upon hearing this. He said, “Your Highness, I will send someone to inform Lu Fei right away.”

With that, Niu Ben immediately returned to the military camp and relayed the military order to Pengzhou City.

The first negotiation halted due to the Prince of Wei's obstruction, and it would take seven or eight days for Xiao Qi to return with news. For Xiao Ming, seven or eight days were enough to take Huaizhou City. During this time, he only needed to wait for the good news.

The next day, the Qingzhou military order arrived in Pengzhou City. Lu Fei, who was training new recruits, was overjoyed upon seeing the order.

"What's wrong? So happy?" Luo Xin stepped forward to join the excitement.

Lu Fei said, "The military order has come! It orders us to take Huaizhou!"

"Really!" Luo Xin exclaimed excitedly. I had thought the war would temporarily stop, but I didn't expect to be able to conquer cities and seize land again. Like many soldiers, the enthusiasm from the last bounty had not yet subsided. Now, the soldiers of the Southern Expeditionary Army all wanted to continue fighting.

Lu Fei handed the military order to Luo Xin. Soon, other generals were also attracted. Upon learning that they were about to attack Huaizhou, the generals whispered among themselves.

Having confirmed the military order, Luo Xin said to Lu Fei, "Should we bring the new recruits from Pengzhou this time? It's worrying to leave these new recruits in Pengzhou; after all, they are not loyal enough yet."

“You’re right. This time, let’s bring them along to boost morale and avoid leaving behind trouble. After all, to us, they are new recruits, but in reality, they are veterans.”

After occupying Pengzhou City, Lu Fei began to recruit soldiers. With the government’s land equalization policy, many of the former soldiers in Pengzhou City joined the Southern Expeditionary Army.

However, until these individuals were fully integrated into the Southern Expeditionary Army, Lu Fei did not dare to trust them completely.