

I. Dynasty 571

Chapter 571

Wei Family Restaurant.

Xiao Qi looked at the bustling streets of Qingzhou with a sense of bewilderment. He had sent someone to convey the truce conditions back to Jinling City, but he felt very pessimistic about the outcome.

In fact, after the alliance failed, Xiao Han had widely slandered him in Jinling City, implying that he was merely superficial and that the alliance was a foolish idea.

However, despite this, the Prince of Wei had not lost his trust in him, but the Prince of Wei's attitude was also very clear: he wanted Xiao Ming to withdraw his troops and return the cities. But today, after seeing the truce agreement, he suddenly understood that Wei's territory had completely become an item of trade between Xiao Ming and the other vassal kings.

Precisely because of this, he suddenly felt a pang of sadness. Once upon a time, Wei's territory was the foremost fief in Great Yu Empire, and even Xiao Wenxuan had to be wary of it. But now, Wei's territory could only tremble in Xiao Ming's shadow.

Yes, the Prince of Wei had some backbone, but in his opinion, no matter how tough that backbone was, it couldn't stand against Xiao Ming's guns and cannons now.

It was just that the Prince of Wei had not yet emerged from this disparity, still looked down on Xiao Ming, and was even more unwilling to submit to him.

Sighing, Xiao Qi closed his eyes. After Xiao Ming left this time, he suddenly had an ominous premonition. This feeling was strange, but he couldn't quite explain it.

However, the ominous premonition soon became reality. On the third day, he received news of the Southern Expedition Army's attack on Huaizhou.

Upon learning this news, he finally understood Xiao Ming's words: as long as the truce agreement was not signed for one day, he would have time to continue conquering cities and seizing land. At this point, the Prince of Yan's envoy and the Prince of Zhao's envoy were also helpless, as all of this was his doing.

And by the time the Prince of Wei agreed to this matter, Huaizhou would probably also be a city listed in the truce agreement. Thinking of this, he immediately wrote a letter to the Prince of Wei, urging him to agree to the truce.

Otherwise, Wei's territory would only lose more and more cities, and the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao would not stop Xiao Ming.

In King Qi's residence, three streets away from Wei Family Restaurant, Xiao Ming also received news of the Southern Expedition Army's attack on Huaizhou.

"Your Highness, the Prince of Wei is suffering the consequences of his own actions this time. We don't need to be polite. After taking Huaizhou, the land at the northern gate of Wei's territory will all be ours, and our fief will increase by a million people," Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Pengzhou City had a population of five hundred thousand, Tongzhou City two hundred thousand, and Huaizhou City about three hundred thousand, totaling one million people. This

was equivalent to increasing the fief's population by a third. The South was indeed a densely populated area.

If he were to completely annex Wei's territory, he estimated that the fief's population would reach seven million, a number basically comparable to England's population at this time.

With this population base, he would no longer fear the human wave tactics of other allied vassal kings. However, Huaizhou was now heavily fortified by the Prince of Wei, and it would probably not be easy for the Southern Expedition Army to crack this tough nut.

"I just hope Lu Fei can take Huaizhou quickly. By the way, what about the agricultural tax you mentioned last time? Were there any complications?"

Conquering territory was important, but internal governance was the foundation of conquering territory, so Xiao Ming dared not slack off at all.

Pang Yukun said, "Your Highness, I came precisely to discuss this matter. The people of the six prefectures did not object to the resumption of agricultural tax. After all, they had paid agricultural tax before, and this time our agricultural tax is very low, so the people are quite happy. Therefore, the collection of agricultural tax has been very smooth."

After a pause, he continued, "However, some common people are unwilling to pay grain to offset the agricultural tax, but instead directly pay silver, cloth, raw silk, and other things. I wonder what Your Highness's intentions are?"

“It’s normal for the common people to want to keep more grain now that they know the outside world is in chaos. Moreover, Great Yu Empire’s agricultural tax collection originally allowed for various goods to offset it. Since some are doing this, accept it,” Xiao Ming said contemplatively.

Pang Yukun nodded, then asked a very important question, “Your Highness, should the collected agricultural tax be kept in the government office, or handed over to the national treasury?”

Xiao Ming was stunned for a moment, then asked, “Why do you ask this question?”

Pang Yukun said, “Great Yu Empire’s agricultural taxes are partly retained by each prefecture’s government office, with the remainder submitted to the national treasury. However, the tax methods learned at Bowen Academy dictate that all taxes from each prefecture’s government office be submitted to the national treasury, and then the national treasury allocates funds back to each prefecture’s government office according to the circumstances. This tax is a major affair of the state, and I only report to Your Highness.”

Xiao Ming understood. He said, “Local retention of taxes inevitably leads to abuses like adulteration, corruption, and embezzlement. To prevent these taxes from being intercepted at the local level, have them submit their accounts and taxes to Qingzhou. After the accounts are tallied, return a portion to them.”

“However, this would incur significant transportation costs for the various prefectures and counties to transport these goods to Qingzhou,” Pang Yukun reminded.

Xiao Ming immediately realized. He sighed. This era was still too backward. But even so, he still adhered to this method. He hadn’t forgotten how tens of millions of taels of silver in taxes during the Ming Dynasty were intercepted at various levels, with only a small portion reaching the capital.

In any era, corrupt officials were audacious. Xiao Ming did not believe that all officials in his fief were incorruptible.

In fact, in any dynasty, whether during its founding or its decline, the proportion of corrupt officials in officialdom was higher than that of honest officials.

“A portion is sent, and all is sent.” Xiao Ming said, “Moreover, every village and every county must have its own account book backup for verification and inspection.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming continued, “Chief Grand Councillor Pang, taxation is the easiest area for officials to embezzle. You must grasp this firmly. You tolerate no sand in your eye, and I tolerate no sand in my eye either.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Pang Yukun’s expression was somewhat unusual. He looked at Xiao Ming as if wanting to say something, but ultimately said nothing.

...

Huaizhou.

As Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun were discussing the agricultural tax, the Southern Expedition Army was launching a full-scale assault on Huaizhou City.

Just as the intelligence reported, the Prince of Wei had added fifty cannons to Huaizhou City, but these cannons were scattered by the Qingzhou Army's artillery before they could even be used.

Unlike Pengzhou City, Huaizhou's terrain was very flat, a wide-open plain.

Facing such a city without even a moat, Lu Fei boldly deployed his soldiers in front of the city wall, while Bai Mu's cavalry were positioned on both sides of the infantry to protect the flanks, as there were three thousand cavalry in Huaizhou City.

This time, to defend Huaizhou City, the Prince of Wei had indeed invested heavily.

However, when it came to cavalry, how could these Huaizhou cavalry be a match for the Qingzhou cavalry, who had personally engaged the barbarians? When the Southern Expedition Army first arrived at Huaizhou City, Huaizhou Army's cavalry had attempted to attack the infantry lined up in formation, but after leaving a trail of corpses, these cavalry retreated into the city and never came out again.

Chapter 572

Amidst the booming cannons, Lu Fei observed the situation in Huaizhou City through his telescope.

At this moment, Luo Hong returned on horseback. Dismounting, he said to Lu Fei, "General, all four city walls of Huaizhou City have now been breached by us. Not a single powerful family member in the city can escape. Should we now order the soldiers to attack the city?"

Lu Fei nodded. Huaizhou City was located in the heartland, and like cities such as Cangzhou and Laizhou, the local garrison was small. This victory over the Pengzhou army had already dealt a heavy blow to the Prince of Wei's army.

According to intelligence from the secret service, the garrison of Huaizhou City was originally only five thousand men, but after Pengzhou City was captured, the Prince of Wei urgently recruited soldiers locally and dispatched another thirty thousand men to reinforce Huaizhou, all very hastily.

In his opinion, these hastily assembled soldiers were no match for the Pengzhou army.

"Withdraw the soldiers from the South Gate." Lu Fei said contemplatively.

Luo Hong was surprised. "General, this is an opportunity to annihilate the Huaizhou army completely. Why withdraw?"

Lu Fei had read many military treatises and war examples at Bowen Academy these days. He said to Luo Hong, "Pengzhou City has fallen, and the Huaizhou generals must be terrified. After all, we could easily capture Pengzhou City, and Huaizhou City is no exception. Moreover, the troops reinforcing Huaizhou this time were dispatched from other prefectures and counties; they lack conviction in defending Huaizhou. If we besiege them from all sides, they might fight to the death out of desperation, but if we leave them a way out, they will surely rout."

Luo Hong suddenly understood. He felt ashamed. He had been very confident after arriving in Qingzhou, but after interacting with these Qingzhou generals, he felt increasingly inferior.

Not only were these generals proficient in the use of firearms, but they were also well-versed in military strategy, which was very different from the generals in other armies of Great Yu Empire.

"I understand. His Highness wants us to take Huaizhou City as quickly as possible, so there's no need to entangle with the city's defenders," Luo Hong said.

"Exactly. However, I have no intention of letting them go. After the southern army withdraws, immediately set up an ambush along the southern official road. Furthermore, have Bai Mu coordinate with you to ensure this relief army is annihilated. We must make the Prince of Wei unable to recover."

"Yes, General."

Luo Hong was initially somewhat unconvinced by Lu Fei. After all, he came from the imperial guards, while Lu Fei was purely a self-taught talent. Now, he truly realized that Lu Fei did have some ability.

Watching Luo Hong depart, Lu Fei again observed the defenders on the city wall. Under the Southern Expedition Army's bombardment, all four city gates had now been blasted open. In front of cannons, city gates were no different from paper cutouts.

And after the city gates were breached, the Huaizhou army was already in complete disarray. There was no decent resistance on the city wall now. Facing this scene, Lu Fei fell into contemplation.

Whether it was Pengzhou City or Huaizhou City, these two campaigns made him realize that other vassal kings, who currently seemed aggressive, were actually just superficially powerful.

Moreover, against armies with firearms, these armies still stuck in the cold weapon era had no adequate countermeasures.

After this Battle of Huaizhou, he must send a letter to Xiao Ming explaining the current situation, so that Xiao Ming can correctly judge the current situation.

As Lu Fei expected, when Luo Hong withdrew the soldiers from the South Gate, the resistance on the city wall weakened again.

At this point, he issued the order to charge.

The sound of the charge bugle rang out, and the Southern Expedition Army soldiers, like hungry wolves, attacked the city from the north, east, and west gates. For a while, gunshots erupted throughout the city.

Huaizhou City was already in chaos, with corpses of Huaizhou army soldiers scattered everywhere near the city walls due to the Southern Expeditionary Army's bombardment.

Upon entering the city, the Southern Expeditionary Army immediately occupied the city walls near the city tower. Then, the soldiers turned the cannons on the city walls and furiously bombarded the troops within the city.

At the same time, mortars were also brought onto the city wall. This time, the Southern Expeditionary Army no longer fired lime bombs, but switched to another type of shell. These shells were not filled with lime, but with individual lead balls.

When the shell exploded, the lead balls inside would scatter, causing area damage. However, despite their different effects, their principles were the same; this was the most primitive shrapnel shell.

The only drawback was that timing control was difficult, making precise explosions impossible, but even so, it was enough to intimidate the enemy.

Moreover, this batch of shells had just arrived and had not yet been used. Luo Xin specifically had the artillery use them in this battle.

“Boom...”

The mortar on the city wall emitted a dull thud. The shell, with a wooden plug at its front, landed among the resisting Huaizhou army.

Like lime bombs, this type of shell also required cutting a fuse to time its explosion. When the shell landed among the Huaizhou army, it merely struck one person and rolled to the ground.

The surrounding Huaizhou army was startled by this shell, but seeing it lying motionless on the ground, they paid it no mind. But just then, the shell on the ground exploded with a “boom.”

“Ah...”

A burst of white smoke and flames erupted within the crowd, accompanied by screams of agony. A large number of Huaizhou army soldiers around the shell fell, many clutching their wounds where they had been hit by the lead balls, screaming.

This scene made the other Huaizhou army soldiers turn pale with fear, but then more shells fell into the dense crowd.

Facing heavy casualties, the Huaizhou army, organized by the powerful families, completely lost its will to fight and began to rout.

“There are no enemy troops at the South Gate!”

At this moment, someone shouted, and the Huaizhou army, upon learning this news, immediately routed towards the South Gate.

At this time, the Southern Expeditionary Army had completely controlled the city towers on the north, east, and west city walls. The soldiers who entered the city also drove the Prince of Wei’s army within the city southward like herding ducks.

On the official road at the South Gate of Huaizhou City, Luo Hong and Bai Mu were ambushed twenty li outside the city. There was a forest here, convenient for hidden troops.

At this time, they had been waiting here for two hours. They had launched their attack in the morning, and it was now afternoon.

Just as Luo Hong was getting a bit impatient from waiting, a scout reported, “Commander, the routed enemy troops are heading this way!”

Luo Hong and Bai Mu exchanged glances and nodded.

This time, they not only wanted to take Huaizhou City but also to maximize the annihilation of the Prince of Wei’s forces.

Like a hawk waiting for its prey, soon, a scattered formation of routed soldiers and families of powerful clans appeared in Luo Hong’s and Bai Mu’s sight.

In war, a rout meant that the army had lost its command and organization. Such a headless force was simply unable to organize a counterattack. Precisely because of this, throughout history, closely pursuing routed troops always resulted in small losses and great gains.

“Attack!”

Seeing the routed troops getting closer, Luo Hong suddenly shouted loudly. At this time, he only had five thousand musketeers, but for him, no matter how many routed troops there were, they were nothing but a disorganized rabble, not worth mentioning.

Compared to his musketeers, Bai Mu’s cavalry was more agile. Leading three thousand cavalry, Bai Mu charged out first.

Chapter 573

Jinling City.

Xiao Qi's message had arrived in Jinling City just two days ago, and immediately after, news of Huaizhou City's fall arrived.

Upon hearing this news, the Prince of Wei collapsed into his seat.

"Father King, things are very clear now. If we don't sign the truce agreement, Xiao Ming will continue to conquer cities and seize land, and the Prince of Yan and the Prince of Zhao will only stand by. After all, it's Father King's refusal to agree to the truce conditions that led to the fall of Huaizhou."

Xiao Han's face was anxious. In this situation, his father was still stubborn and unyielding like a stone in an outhouse. If this continued, all the cities in Wei's territory would belong to Xiao Ming, so what land would he, the heir, have left to inherit in the future?

Therefore, after Huaizhou fell, he immediately allied with loyal officials to go to the royal residence and advise.

The Prince of Wei on the throne stared blankly. In the last battle of Pengzhou, some of the defending troops managed to escape, but this time, the Huaizhou defenders were either killed or captured, with only a very few managing to escape.

The Battle of Pengzhou was a fluke, Tongzhou might also have been a fluke, but now that Huaizhou was also conquered, he finally realized the gap between the Wei army and the Qi army.

Without cannons and firearms, he simply could not defeat Xiao Ming.

“Your Highness, the most important thing now is a truce. Only by giving us time can we reorganize our army, otherwise Wei’s territory will be lost.”

Xiao Han looked heartbroken: “Father King, Xiao Qi’s painstaking efforts to form an alliance this time resulted in this truce agreement. If we don’t seize the opportunity, the other vassal kings will certainly ignore our Wei territory!”

The Prince of Wei’s face was extremely grim. He was once ambitious, ready to ascend the supreme throne of Chang’an, but now he could only live humbly in Xiao Ming’s shadow.

“Send someone to tell Xiao Qi that I have agreed to the terms of the truce agreement,” the Prince of Wei finally said, word by word.

Xiao Han and the officials immediately breathed a sigh of relief. Wei’s territory had thirteen prefectures. What did it matter if they lost three? As long as they could preserve their wealth and status, they could negotiate anything.

Soon, a lone rider carried the Prince of Wei’s message to Qingzhou.

Five days later, the five envoys met again.

Compared to ten-odd days ago, Zhan Xingchang was even more energetic now. The capture of Huaizhou had put all officials in the fief in a state of fervor.

Expanding territory was the duty of a minister, and now that they saw the fief's territory growing day by day, they were naturally happy.

"Xiao Qi, that day I told you to sign it. Didn't you bring this upon yourselves? Now Huaizhou is lost too." Cui Zhang said sarcastically.

When Xiao Wenxuan was in power, the Prince of Wei's fief was the largest in area, with the most cities and population.

Precisely for this reason, other vassal kings of different surnames were somewhat wary of him. However, even losing three cities now had not reached the point of crippling Wei's territory.

Wang Xi's expression was somewhat complex. King Qi's army had taken another city in such a short time, which shocked him greatly. Thinking that the Prince of Zhao and the King of Shu had been fighting for over a month with no significant results, he grew even more wary of Xiao Ming.

However, his purpose in coming to Qingzhou this time was merely to mediate the alliance. Now, the Prince of Zhao was powerless to attack Xiao Ming with others, so even though he knew Xiao Ming had taken another city, he was helpless. If he said too much, he feared provoking Xiao Ming into providing large quantities of firearms to the King of Shu.

As the five of them were casually chatting, Xiao Ming walked in.

Lu Fei had already sent the battle report to Qingzhou. This time, Lu Fei's easy capture of Huaizhou gave Xiao Ming a new understanding of the combat effectiveness of current feudal armies.

Previously, he had seemingly overestimated the armies of these vassal kings. Now, Lu Fei had proven the combat power of the vassal armies with facts, and he suddenly had a clear understanding.

As Pang Yukun said, Great Yu Empire was now in a state of widespread decay. This decay was not just limited to the imperial family; land annexation had also reached its peak in the fiefs of the various vassal kings.

The powerful families and gentry were already a cancerous growth, and now they had also plundered the wealth of the world. The battle report sent back by Ye Qingyun further illustrated this problem.

The indifference of the common people when they attacked Tongzhou City was astonishing.

So, after analyzing this issue, Xiao Ming realized that perhaps he could be bolder. After all, despite the numerous vassal kings, he was the only one undergoing fundamental reform.

"Your Highness."

Xiao Ming arrived, and everyone stood to greet him.

At this point, Xiao Qi proactively said, “Your Highness, the Prince of Wei is willing to agree to the truce agreement and hopes it can be signed soon.”

“That’s right, Your Highness. We have been in Qingzhou for some time now. Calculating the days, it’s time for us to return. We hope Your Highness will make a decision soon.”

Xiao Ming did not speak, but instead suddenly spread a map on the table.

Everyone looked, and saw that it was a map of Wei’s territory, with the current cities of Wei’s territory and the cities that had already been captured marked on it.

When Xiao Qi saw this map, his face changed drastically, because besides the already captured cities being marked, a circle was drawn around Yangzhou.

“Your Highness, what is the meaning of this?” Xiao Qi was both surprised and angry. He had already guessed a few things.

“It’s simple. Besides Pengzhou, Tongzhou, and Huaizhou cities belonging to me, also cede Yangzhou and pay five million taels of silver in compensation. Fulfill these conditions, and I will affix my seal to the truce agreement,” Xiao Ming said loudly.

Xiao Qi’s face suddenly flushed red. “Your Highness, you are going too far!”

“It’s the Prince of Wei who is going too far, isn’t it? This truce agreement was already giving him face, but he refused to accept it. In that case, he cannot blame me,” Xiao Ming’s tone was somewhat firm.

Zheng Hao looked at Xiao Qi, then at Xiao Ming, “Your Royal Highness King Qi, this is truly a bit excessive. Since Your Highness has taken Huaizhou, it’s fine to give Huaizhou to Your Highness, but how can Yangzhou be ceded?”

“The grudges between me and the Prince of Wei are many, and cannot be explained in a few words. Now, these are the conditions for a truce. Otherwise, I will have no choice but to take it personally.”

Xiao Qi and Zheng Hao exchanged glances. At this point, Zheng Hao said, “Since Your Highness is so aggressive, it seems we, Wei, Zhao, Yan, and Liang, will have to contend with Your Highness.”

Negotiations were inherently a form of argument, relying on words on the surface and strength beneath.

Mutual intimidation was also a form of negotiation. Now, Xiao Qi and Zheng Hao clearly wanted to use this tactic.

“You two, don’t drag Yan’s territory into this. The Prince of Wei has thirteen prefectures under his command. Ceding four prefectures as compensation is reasonable and logical. Besides, Wei’s territory is prosperous, and five million taels is a small sum, isn’t it?” Cui Zhang waved his hands repeatedly.

Wang Xi also smiled under Xiao Ming’s gaze, “Your Highness, I said nothing.”

Xiao Qi's and Zheng Hao's faces immediately looked awkward. This alliance had completely failed.

"So, the Prince of Wei and the Prince of Liang are preparing to go to war with me?" Xiao Ming said with a smile, "Then I can only accept the challenge!"

Chapter 574

"Your Highness, are you truly prepared for a full-scale conflict? You must not forget, though a state may be great, if it is fond of war, it will perish. Even if Your Highness can defeat us, your strength will surely be greatly diminished."

Xiao Qi said loudly.

"It's not I who wants to wage a great war, but you who are forcing me to fight. If that's the case, then we shall perish together." Xiao Ming had the air of a rogue who dared anyone to be afraid.

Seeing this, Xiao Qi and Zheng Hao fell silent. Xiao Qi was clearly determined now.

Cui Zhang and Wang Xi, meanwhile, secretly rejoiced. They wished these three families would fight among themselves so they could profit from it.

After exchanging glances with Xiao Ming for a while, Xiao Qi finally backed down. Xiao Ming, as the victor, was arrogant, while he, as the defeated party, was trembling.

Hesitating, he said, "This matter is too significant. I cannot make the decision. This matter must be decided by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wei. I just hope Your Highness can give me time, and not take the opportunity to seize more land."

Xiao Ming smiled. His strong demeanor had finally made Xiao Qi back down. He said, "Alright, but my patience is limited."

Xiao Qi nodded, turned, and left.

Cui Zhang sighed, "Alas, this will take another ten days or so."

"Why is Your Royal Highness the Heir Apparent so impatient? In Qingzhou, there's food and drink, and opera. These days are not boring at all," Wang Xi said with a smile.

Cui Zhang sneered inwardly, thinking to himself, 'How would this Wang Xi know that they and King Qi had already reached a private agreement?' But on the surface, he remained amiable, saying, "Secretary Wang is absolutely right. In that case, let us go for a stroll in the Qingzhou opera house today."

With that, the two also left.

Zheng Hao left as the others did, not lingering. He cupped his hands to Xiao Ming and also departed.

At this point, Zhan Xingchang said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, will the Prince of Wei agree? Yangzhou is a famously prosperous land."

"I'm not afraid he won't agree, I'm afraid he will agree. We've taken three cities in over a month. Even if the Prince of Wei is stupid, he should understand he's no match for us. At this point, his delaying our attack works in their favor." Xiao Ming said.

Zhan Xingchang nodded, "But delaying time is even more beneficial for us. Bringing these four prefectures' populations under our control will greatly increase our strength."

"That's right, but the reason for the truce this time, besides the four-sided alliance, the issue of ammunition also made me a bit helpless. The military factory reported that the ammunition stored in the warehouse is not much left." Xiao Ming sighed.

Zhan Xingchang's expression immediately turned somewhat interesting. He hadn't expected Xiao Ming to be purely bluffing Xiao Qi earlier, when he was in fact already unable to continue the attack.

"So that's it. It seems we really should keep a batch of ammunition for self-defense and not use it all for conquest," Zhan Xingchang said.

Xiao Ming nodded. This time, the Battle of Pengzhou, the Battle of Tongzhou, and the Battle of Huaizhou consumed 1.2 million firearm rounds and 16,000 solid cannonballs.

Although some were recovered after the battle, some cannonballs went missing, and lead balls were lost even more due to their small size.

Moreover, the lead balls that hit enemy soldiers could not be retrieved.

“Exactly.” Xiao Ming said. Continuous battles had almost depleted his reserves.

However, now that the Bessemer steelmaking production line was in place, this problem was no longer an issue, but he needed time to build up reserves.

After chatting casually with Zhan Xingchang for a while, Xiao Ming went to the steel workshop. These days, he frequently visited this place. Whenever he saw a whole furnace of molten steel flowing out, he would feel very satisfied.

Because this brought him one step closer to the Industrial Revolution. After all, to fully realize the Industrial Revolution, a large amount of steel was needed to manufacture various types of machinery.

After observing steel production for a while and checking on the production of the second converter, Xiao Ming then headed to the royal residence.

As soon as he returned to the royal residence, Xiao Ming was about to rest when Li Kaiyuan walked in with a red-haired, blue-eyed man.

“Your esteemed Highness, long time no see.”

The person accompanying Li Kaiyuan was none other than the Dutchman, Rhodes.

A few days ago, Li Kaiyuan was still talking about trading with the Dutch and mentioned that Rhodes had arrived in Dengzhou. He didn't expect Rhodes to actually follow him to Qingzhou.

"Your Highness, Rhodes said that Earl Clare sent him to Qingzhou, so I brought him," Li Kaiyuan said with a smile.

Xiao Ming then looked at Rhodes. "Convey my regards to Earl Clare. Earl Clare must have something important for you to come this time."

"Yes, Your Highness. The British have been very active at sea lately, and our fleet is under great pressure. So Earl Clare hopes to sign a military alliance with Your Highness, hoping Your Highness can help us hold back the British attack in the Asian waters. These damned British guys are really driving us crazy," Rhodes complained.

"Aren't the British always in the Indian Ocean? As far as I know, the southern seas are mainly your Dutch and Spanish colonies," Xiao Ming mused.

"No, there are also the French and Portuguese." Rhodes corrected him, "Your Highness is right, the British were originally in India, but our merchant ships brought unfortunate news: the British have improved the damned steam engine. It is said that this has greatly increased their cloth production. Now these British fellows are looking for dumping grounds for their goods everywhere, and they will certainly have ideas about this place. Earl Clare is just taking precautions."

Xiao Ming's expression remained impassive, but his heart stirred slightly. According to his understanding, the Western world in this era had ended the Middle Ages half a century earlier due to the earlier barbarian invasions from the grasslands.

And now, Rhodes's words further confirmed his conjecture: Western technology was about half a century ahead of the same period in his own time.

He couldn't help but ask, "When did this happen?"

"It takes our merchant ships over three months to reach the Netherlands from Zeelandia. Plus a year's time, that's a total of one year and three months. But by the time everyone knew, the first batch of steam engines had already entered textile factories." Rhodes spread his hands.

Xiao Ming's eyes narrowed. He hadn't expected to inadvertently receive such major news.

"Now all the countries in Europe want to get steam engine technology from the British. It seems they are all very interested in this thing," Rhodes said to himself.

He had been away from the Dutch mainland for too long and was now slow to react to the changes happening in Europe.

Rhodes's purpose in coming here this time was still to sound out a military alliance. After some thought, Xiao Ming said, "A military alliance might be a good idea."

"Of course! With Your Highness's more than thirty warships, the British won't gain any advantage in these waters." Rhodes's eyes were eager.

Xiao Ming was stunned for a moment. It seemed Rhodes and Clare already knew about his fleet's increase of twenty-four warships. These Dutchmen were indeed well-informed.

Chapter 575

"Earl Clare's intelligence is quite sharp."

"Uh..." Rhodes immediately understood, showing a surprised expression, then chuckled awkwardly.

As the saying goes, "it's bliss to be ignorant." Xiao Ming did not expose the Dutch monitoring his fleet. After all, even contemporary NATO allies eavesdropped on each other, so when it came to alliances, it was merely about acting together when there were common interests, and being ready to fall out when interests diverged.

Therefore, he didn't care about the alliance itself, but was very interested in the intelligence Rhodes had provided.

When Yue Yun went south, he had captured a British officer whose intelligence had mentioned a steam engine, but at that time, it was still an unrefined, first-generation steam engine. Now, it was clear that the steam engine had entered its second generation.

However, he wasn't nervous now. After all, he had also successfully manufactured steam engines and had already begun to apply them in various industries. In this regard, he was not lagging behind.

The only dilemma was that Britain now possessed a large number of colonies providing raw materials and a large number of dumping grounds for goods. This was where he couldn't compete, and it was the most fatal point.

Because without a large number of overseas colonies, he would at least need to unify Great Yu Empire to obtain sufficient resources to achieve industrial transformation, and he was precisely stuck at this juncture.

Thinking of this, he clenched his fists. After digesting the four captured prefectures and stockpiling sufficient ammunition, he would quickly take Wei's territory, followed by Yan's territory, Liang's territory, and Chang'an, thereby ending the northern vassal states' partition.

"Your esteemed Highness, if you agree, I will bring the alliance treaty back this time. What do you think?" Rhodes asked.

Xiao Ming nodded, "You go back and tell Earl Clare to rest assured. As long as you Dutch can honestly do business with me, I will provide you with protection."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Rhodes said with a smile.

With Xiao Ming's assurance, Rhodes was overjoyed and chatted with Xiao Ming for a while before returning to the Chamber of Commerce with Li Kaiyuan to discuss business.

Watching Rhodes depart, Xiao Ming's expression turned thoughtful. It seemed he could not relax at all. After all, he was developing, and Europe was also developing. Who knew what Europe would become in another fifty or sixty years? Therefore, he had to quickly contend for colonies and catch this last train.

Rhodes stayed in Qingzhou for three days before returning to Dengzhou. His time in Qingzhou naturally attracted much attention, especially from the nobles who had come from Chang'an, who discussed him as if they had seen a ghost.

After Rhodes' departure, after a delay of eight days, the Prince of Wei finally sent back a message, expressing his willingness to cede Yangzhou and pay five million taels of silver in compensation.

Upon learning this news, Xiao Ming finally breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He immediately summoned the four envoys to sign the truce agreement with Xiao Qi in person, temporarily ending the war in Wei's territory. At the same time, this was also a complete destruction of the alliance.

"I hope Your Highness will strictly abide by the agreement, otherwise our four sides will surely attack jointly," Xiao Qi said.

At this, Cui Zhang, Wang Xi, and Zheng Hao also nodded. They had achieved their respective goals, and at this moment, their common interest was to restrain Xiao Ming's further growth.

"Everyone, rest assured, I will naturally not unilaterally tear up the truce agreement." Xiao Ming said with a smile.

The four envoys nodded. They had lingered in Qingzhou for over a month now and were eager to return. Only Cui Zhang remained after the other three left.

Xiao Ming naturally understood his intention. He sent a craftsman from the machinery department to impart the rolled iron method to the craftsmen in Yan's territory. Only after a complete matchlock gun was forged did Cui Zhang feel completely relieved.

At the same time, Xiao Ming ordered Ye Qingyun to dispatch a portion of his soldiers to garrison Yangzhou City, to arrive before the Prince of Wei could empty Yangzhou City, lest they receive an empty city.

Upon receiving Xiao Ming's order, Ye Qingyun immediately led six thousand musketeers to Yangzhou. When he arrived at the foot of Yangzhou City, the scene before him stunned him.

He saw beacon fires raging within Yangzhou City, flames erupting from houses everywhere, wails filling the streets, and soldiers within the city wantonly slaughtering the common people. Blood flowed like rivers in the streets, and corpses of common people lay everywhere.

Ye Qingyun's eyes instantly turned red, as did the eyes of the Dengzhou Army soldiers. They were enraged by the inhuman cruelty of the Prince of Wei's army.

"Brothers, open your eyes and look! This is the true nature of powerful families! This is the true face of the Prince of Wei! They never consider us ordinary common people!" Ye Qingyun roared loudly.

Drawing his long saber from his waist, Ye Qingyun angrily shouted, "Brothers, follow me into the city and slaughter these damned bastards!"

"Kill!"

The soldiers roared in unison, following Ye Qingyun as they bravely charged into Yangzhou City.

“King Qi’s army has arrived!”

The soldiers within the city shouted in terror, but his voice was abruptly cut short after a burst of gunfire. The Dengzhou Army soldiers, like hungry wolves, charged at the soldiers who were slaughtering the common people.

Seeing the Dengzhou Army, the soldiers in the city took to their heels, carrying large and small bundles in their arms, all plundered from the common people’s homes.

On the day of the handover, an order suddenly reached the Yangzhou army: this order was to pillage, burn, and slaughter Yangzhou City. They wanted to leave an empty city for King Qi.

Upon receiving this order, the powerful family members within the army carried it out without hesitation. For a time, the city was like hell.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

Gunshots were chaotic. After six thousand soldiers entered the city, they immediately dispersed to encircle and annihilate the rebellious troops within the city. The burning, killing, and looting within the city were quickly quelled with the intervention of the Dengzhou Army, leaving behind a ground littered with soldiers’ corpses.

This time, the Dengzhou soldiers were truly enraged. Under the guidance of their military Chief Administration, they had come to understand what a nation was and what an ethnicity was. Now, for them, Great Yu Empire was their country, and the common people within it were all of the same ethnicity.

And now, the Prince of Wei was actually slaughtering his own common people like barbarians, which made them extremely angry. Now they finally understood why the Chief said these vassal kings were the cancerous tumors of Great Yu Empire. With such vassal kings, Great Yu Empire would never know peace.

At this moment, the bravery of the Dengzhou soldiers in combat surpassed their attack on Tongzhou City. The dignity of the nation was more important than money.

Entering from the west gate, the Dengzhou Army swept through, continuously shooting down the rebellious troops within the city. Upon reaching the east gate, they eliminated the last of the rebellious troops, but a group of soldiers still managed to escape.

As everyone was filled with rage, a group of soldiers dressed as Wei troops suddenly approached them. These soldiers suddenly knelt before Ye Qingyun and said, "Sir, please take us in! We want to kill the Prince of Wei to avenge our relatives!"

Chapter 576

Ye Qingyun vigilantly watched the hundreds of soldiers before him.

These soldiers wore red long robes with black scale armor over them. Their bodies were covered in fresh blood, as if they had just been through a brutal battle.

"Who are you?" Ye Qingyun asked.

The person who looked like a leading general said, "Sir, we are the defenders of Yangzhou City. The Prince of Wei gave us an order to slaughter the people in the city, burn all the grain and houses, and leave nothing for King Qi's army. But these people in the city are our parents and brothers. How could we bring ourselves to do it? So I led my brothers and fought against those powerful family members. But they outnumbered us, and we were powerless to stop them. Many of our brothers died, but they still killed a lot of people."

Ye Qingyun's brow furrowed. At least some of the Yangzhou defenders still had a conscience. However, he wouldn't easily believe these people's words. He said, "I cannot yet believe what you say. I will consider your request after confirming your identities."

The reason these soldiers were able to walk alive before Ye Qingyun was because they had no weapons and had approached with their hands raised. Now that Ye Qingyun said so, the Dengzhou soldiers immediately took these five hundred men into custody.

Having occupied Yangzhou City, Ye Qingyun immediately organized the common people in the city to put out the fires. Now, the city was engulfed in flames, and if the burning continued, nothing would be left.

"Governor, fortunately His Highness is so brilliant. Otherwise, if we had been one step later, Yangzhou City would truly have become an empty city," a cavalry commander said.

"His Highness is well aware of the Prince of Wei's viciousness. He has tried countless times to harm His Highness by any means necessary, so how could he willingly hand over a prosperous Yangzhou City to us in vain? But even so, Yangzhou City has suffered heavy losses."

After a pause, he said, "You are to immediately lead men to search the entire Yangzhou City. Collect everything usable, otherwise, this time's supplies will be difficult."

“Yes, Governor.” The cavalry commander acknowledged and left.

After the cavalry commander departed, Ye Qingyun’s face suddenly turned grim. In marching and fighting, the most important thing was supplies. This time, when they rushed from Tongzhou to Yangzhou, they only brought three days’ worth of dried rations. If there were not enough supplies in the city, the soldiers would go hungry.

Thinking of this, he immediately sent someone to convey the news to Qingzhou.

Three days later, news from Yangzhou reached Qingzhou, immediately causing an uproar in official circles.

Fiji and Pang Yukun immediately arrived at the royal residence to discuss the matter with Xiao Ming. Niu Ben also quickly followed.

“Your Highness, the Prince of Wei is truly insane! I request to personally lead troops to campaign against the Prince of Wei and capture him alive to appease the world!” Niu Ben said angrily.

Pang Yukun, on the other hand, said, “Your Highness, this matter may not necessarily be a bad thing for us. This massacre in Yangzhou will certainly cause the Prince of Wei to lose the hearts of the people in Wei’s territory. Now, we should use this incident to disrupt the morale of the people in Wei’s territory and gain their allegiance.”

“Chief Grand Councillor Pang makes sense, Your Highness. Now we should publish this matter in the newspaper, proclaiming the Prince of Wei’s evil deeds to the world, so that everyone understands the Prince of Wei’s atrocities,” Fiji echoed.

Niu Ben, upon hearing this, said discontentedly, “You scholars are just too wishy-washy! Why be polite to the Prince of Wei? Wouldn’t it be more satisfying to directly attack Jinling City and destroy him!”

Xiao Ming frowned tightly. What the Prince of Wei had done was merely what later generations would call “scorched-earth policy” or “burning away anything useful.” His sole purpose was to prevent Xiao Ming from getting any supplies from Yangzhou City, thereby restraining Xiao Ming’s actions in Yangzhou.

After the agreement was signed, Xiao Ming had some worries, but they hadn’t expected the Prince of Wei to resort to such cruel and inhuman tactics. However, the Prince of Wei’s actions also completely made Xiao Ming break away from his long-held view of the world from a modern perspective.

Unlike modern civilization, human civilization in this period was very low. In other words, they had basically just emerged from the jungle not long ago, and their savage nature was undeniably evident.

Precisely because of this, the Age of Exploration was so bloody, and indeed, there were so many massacres during wars.

Having experienced this, Xiao Ming realized that he was still too merciful. If he wanted to defeat savage enemies, he had to be even more savage than them.

This world was a jungle. The high-and-mighty powerful families and gentry would not believe the tears of the common people. For them, the number of deaths did not matter, as long as they could maintain their rule.

After a moment of thought, Xiao Ming said, "Propagandizing the Prince of Wei's atrocities is certainly necessary, but the most important issue now is the supply problem in Yangzhou City. What do you all suggest we do?"

"An eye for an eye, massacre the city!" Niu Ben suddenly said at this moment.

Pang Yukun, upon hearing this, said, "Commander Niu, what do you mean? Why should we massacre the city? Haven't the common people in the city suffered enough?"

"Chief Grand Councillor Pang, I am not talking about the common people, but about completely slaughtering the powerful families of Yangzhou and its surrounding prefectures and counties. This way, not only can we prevent these powerful families from taking the opportunity to cause trouble, but we can also gather grain and supplies."

Xiao Ming nodded slightly. What Niu Ben said was exactly what he was thinking.

Now that the Dengzhou Army had no supplies in Yangzhou City and faced unstable factors like powerful family militias, only by adopting this method could Yangzhou City be stabilized as quickly as possible.

In fact, many historical massacres also targeted local powerful families, as in times when powerful families held sway, grain was controlled by them.

“Commander Niu’s method is not bad,” Fiji said. “Your Highness, great benevolence is ruthless. At this time, there must be no womanly compassion. In chaotic times, extraordinary measures must be used.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.” Xiao Ming said to the scout sent by Ye Qingyun, “You are to immediately return and tell Ye Qingyun to annihilate all the powerful families in Yangzhou!”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The scout responded and turned to leave.

Having settled this matter, Xiao Ming continued, “This truce is merely a temporary measure, and also to avoid an alliance of the four vassal kings. Now that our objective has been achieved, you must take advantage of this time to sort out internal affairs, stockpile grain and fodder, and recruit and train new soldiers. Six months from now, I will launch an attack on Wei’s territory from both Huaizhou and Yangzhou simultaneously, annihilating the Prince of Wei in one fell swoop!”

With that, Xiao Ming slammed the table. The Prince of Wei’s despicable actions had completely enraged him. He would no longer give him the chance to continue.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Pang Yukun and Fiji responded in unison.

Niu Ben also clasped his hands and nodded in agreement.

After instructing the three on some more detailed administrative matters, Xiao Ming dismissed them.

However, as Pang Yukun said, during this period, he had to seize the opportunity to disrupt the morale of the people in Wei's territory, so that he could gain widespread support when campaigning in Wei's territory.

Therefore, he immediately sent for Fan Zeng to draft the document.

Chapter 577

"The Unspeakable Massacre in Yangzhou, the Prince of Wei's Atrocities Are Shameful!"

The next day, the headline on the front page of "Qingzhou Daily" roared. Scholars, merchants, and nobles who received the newspaper were all filled with righteous indignation after reading the article, cursing the Prince of Wei.

At the same time, reporters took newspapers to various prefectures and counties, spreading the news to the common people in every village.

"Alas, Prince of Wei, Prince of Wei, what can I say about you? Aren't you just handing others a handle?"

In a civilian block in the south of Qingzhou City, there was a large courtyard with "Princess Mansion" written on the plaque above the gate. This was Princess Pingyang's residence in Qingzhou.

At this moment, in the princess's pavilion, Princess Pingyang was reading the Qingzhou newspaper. Since she arrived in Qingzhou, reading the newspaper had become a habit for her. Without having to go out, she could learn everything happening in Qingzhou from the newspaper.

“That’s right. Since Yangzhou City was ceded anyway, why bother with another massacre? Originally, people in the world sympathized with him, but now he’s become a tyrant.”

Ouyang Mu said.

When Xiao Wenxuan was alive, Princess Pingyang and the Prince of Wei had close ties, and he had also received many benefits from the Prince of Wei. Now, he felt a bit regretful.

“I’m afraid my Third Brother is desperate. He must also realize that Xiao Ming is surely going to destroy him. Now it’s just a matter of when Xiao Ming will make his move.”

Princess Pingyang gently put down the newspaper, revealing an arm as white as snow from her purple silk sleeve.

Ouyang Mu’s eyes gleamed at the sight. He said, “The Prince of Wei, despite his formidable strength, was defeated by Xiao Ming so easily. This humble general thinks that the future of this world might belong to King Qi.”

“The Imperial Brother’s last will already named him heir, which is very clear,” Princess Pingyang said languidly. She continued, “By the way, go and get the cloud brocade from the storehouse. This afternoon, I’ll go to the royal residence and give the cloud brocade to the Princess Consort. Now that we are living under someone else’s roof, we should be more diligent.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Ouyang Mu said.

This cloud brocade was a tribute from Shu territory and was extremely precious. Even the princess's mansion's storehouse only had a few rolls.

As the two were speaking, a commotion suddenly erupted outside the princess's residence, and then a group of people dressed in luxurious clothes walked in.

"Your Royal Highness Princess, have you seen the newspaper? How could this Prince of Wei be so foolish? Now we have no way to talk to His Highness about this matter." The leading elder sighed deeply.

"Duke of Tang, we should not get involved in this matter. Now it's time for someone else to revitalize the imperial family. I think only this child Xiao Ming can revitalize our imperial family now." Princess Pingyang said.

The Duke of Tang, hunched over, said, "Alas, Your Royal Highness Princess is right. Neither the Prince of Wei nor the Prince of Yong are now as good as Xiao Ming. However, Your Royal Highness Princess, we have come this time to discuss another matter with Your Royal Highness Princess."

Princess Pingyang looked at the Duke of Rong, the Duke of Xia, and the Duke of Song behind the Duke of Tang, and she already had a pretty good idea. These four dukes were all imperial clan members, extremely close to Xiao Wenxuan's lineage.

These four dukes could be said to share the same grandfather. After Chang'an fell, they later came to Qingzhou.

"You want to talk about the stipend, don't you?" Princess Pingyang said lightly.

This time, accompanying the Duke of Tang were all imperial clan members, including many county marquises and county princes. These royals had no real power, but in Chang'an, they had always been supported by the imperial family, meaning they received a monthly stipend.

Now that Chang'an was gone, their stipends naturally disappeared. Although these people seemed outwardly splendid, their lives were actually quite difficult. After all, not everyone had a business in Qingzhou like she did.

"Your Royal Highness Princess is a sensible person." The Duke of Tang said, "If this continues, we will truly starve. What face will the imperial family have then?"

"Duke of Tang, don't worry. I haven't said anything final yet, have I? How about this, I will go to the royal residence this afternoon. I will take this opportunity to discuss this matter with the Princess Consort and Concubine Zhen. You all know King Qi's temper. Even I wouldn't dare to speak too much. Only Concubine Zhen and the Princess Consort can persuade him."

"Thank you, Your Royal Highness Princess, thank you, Your Royal Highness Princess!" The Duke of Tang was overjoyed.

The tall Duke of Rong then said, "Your Royal Highness Princess, tell the consorts and concubines that His Highness is currently in need of capable people. Although most of the imperial clan members are useless individuals who only know how to eat, drink, and have fun, there are also a few shrewd and capable ones. When it comes to using people, is there anyone more trustworthy than one's own kin?"

Princess Pingyang nodded, "Duke Rong's words make some sense. I will tell Her Highness. As for you all, please return for now."

The Duke of Tang nodded, and after thanking them, led the group away.

"Your Highness, why do you take on such a thankless task?" Ouyang Mu was somewhat puzzled.

Princess Pingyang's face was smiling. She said, "Why is it thankless? I went and spoke. Whether it succeeds or not is up to His Highness, but I have gained favor. Moreover, in my opinion, His Highness might even choose some excellent royal children to enter the army and officialdom?"

"Why?"

"Neither the Fei family nor Pang Yukun and the others are, after all, outsiders. Governing the fief is one thing, but governing the world is another. Xiao Ming doesn't understand this yet, but he will soon realize that he needs a force that can protect his imperial throne to support him."

Ouyang Mu seemed to understand, yet not quite. In his opinion, Princess Pingyang's words were simply too complex. However, Xiao Ming always acted unpredictably, and no one could foresee what he would do next.

For instance, regarding the article about the Prince of Wei in the newspaper this time, who could have imagined that Xiao Ming would use this fact to implement a psychological warfare tactic?

At the same time, the Qingzhou newspaper began to spread from Qingzhou City to the surrounding villages. When reporters told the common people in each village about the Prince of Wei's atrocities, the common people in the villages immediately became enraged. This reminded them of their past lives, where powerful families and gentry wantonly slaughtered the common people, not treating them as human beings at all.

Under the influence of this news, a large number of young people flocked to the military camps, demanding to enlist and fight the Prince of Wei. The Qingzhou military camp was besieged by a dense crowd.

News of this reached Xiao Ming, who was also somewhat surprised. He hadn't expected that the article denouncing the Prince of Wei would actually boost the common people's enthusiasm for enlisting.

Chapter 578

The Qingzhou Grand Barracks were bustling with people.

At this moment, Xiao Ming, Fiji, and others stood in the military camp, all smiling as they watched the scene.

Pang Yukun said, "Congratulations, Your Highness. I didn't expect the Prince of Wei's atrocities to help Your Highness win the hearts of the people. Now, the fief, from top to bottom, is united as one."

"This is indeed somewhat unexpected, though it's not hard to explain. The common people now don't want to go back to being oppressed by the powerful families," Xiao Ming said contemplatively.

Fiji and Pang Yukun nodded. Fiji said, "However, although the common people are filled with righteous indignation, we have no way to conscript so many soldiers. The fief's finances cannot bear it. Quantity is not as important as quality in warfare."

Although Xiao Ming had ordered a military expansion this time, the number of people who came to enlist was indeed quite large. However, this showed that the national and ethnic education of the common people during this period was beginning to bear fruit.

Apathetic phrases like "What does the nation have to do with me?" could no longer sway the thoughts of the common people.

"That's right. This time, Yangzhou was massacred, and our idea of acquiring a large amount of supplies from Yangzhou City fell through. Even with the army we're recruiting now, our treasury will probably be stretched thin, won't it?" Xiao Ming asked.

Pang Yukun and Fiji exchanged glances, then sighed and responded with a "yes."

Xiao Ming felt a surge of anger. The Prince of Wei's scorched-earth policy this time turned the original war dividends into negative assets. Now, he had to find a way to reverse this situation.

Thinking of this, he said to the two, "I have an idea. The government coffers are short of money and grain, but the merchants and common people of Qingzhou have some. I plan to issue war bonds. Anyone who purchases war bonds will receive a share of the spoils of war dividends in the future. What do you two think?"

"War bonds?" Fiji and Pang Yukun were both stunned.

Xiao Ming came to his senses. He remembered that the two didn't know what war bonds were, so he explained.

In fact, his war bonds were equivalent to national debt, but because it was wartime and the wars were continuously victorious, public confidence was high, which was why he decided to issue war bonds.

Similar to national debt, the purpose of war bonds was to raise resources in advance. The strategic goal set was six months later, so he needed to raise war materials during these six months.

Actually, he had done this before, during the Northern Expedition, but at that time, only a few big merchants benefited. Now, these merchants almost monopolized the grasslands of the sixteen prefectures of Yan and Yun.

Out of caution against monopoly capital, Xiao Ming did not recruit merchants this time, but decided to issue them throughout the entire fief. The common people could receive war bonds even with grain.

This way, he could prevent his fief from being swayed by war capital. After all, learning from history, he did not want to be controlled by fanatical war capital.

After his explanation, Fiji and Pang Yukun understood. These war bonds were essentially borrowing money from merchants and common people to fight a war, and then returning the profits to the common people, plus interest, once the war dividends were obtained.

Pang Yukun was immediately amazed. Fiji also shook his head repeatedly. He had no idea how Xiao Ming came up with such a brilliant method.

If following Great Yu Empire's normal system, the solution for an empty treasury was simple: levy heavy taxes.

Now, Xiao Ming didn't even consider that option, and instead directly adopted this gentle method.

"Do you two understand now?" Xiao Ming asked.

"I understand. Upon returning, I will have the Chamber of Commerce put the war bonds up for sale." Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming nodded. "However, you must control it, limiting the purchase quantity to prevent a very few merchants from buying excessively and making exorbitant profits."

Now, Xiao Ming's concern was no longer about unifying Great Yu Empire, but rather that with the reforms in his fief, societal changes might move into an uncontrollable phase.

As popular wisdom blossomed, various advanced ideas would be grasped by the common people. What he worried about most was that public opinion would be manipulated by interested parties, leading to the country being torn apart by ideology.

And the people most likely to exploit public opinion were the big capitalists. Qingzhou was currently only in the nascent stage of capitalism. Once he unified Great Yu Empire and ventured into the oceans, capital would surely grow rapidly like an unbridled horse. How would he tame this beast then?

After all, in this era of isolated and backward savagery, it was not as easy to maintain stability as in modern times.

After finishing this matter, Xiao Ming remembered the matter of the imperial clan that Princess Pingyang had brought up yesterday. At that time, he was with Concubine Zhen. Princess Pingyang had mentioned this after giving gifts to Fei Yue'er and Concubine Zhen.

So he asked, "What do you think of the imperial clan in Qingzhou this time? Now they seem to be openly asking for money."

Fiji, upon hearing this, immediately looked down, feigning ignorance. He was an old fox and did not want to offend these people.

Pang Yukun, on the other hand, said earnestly, "Your Highness, you absolutely must not continue to support these imperial clan members for free. From Emperor Gaozu until now, the number of royal clan members in Great Yu Empire has reached over one hundred thousand. The offerings for these over one hundred thousand people have become a heavy burden on the national treasury. If Your Highness intends to support this group of people, the fief will be dragged down in no time."

Xiao Ming was deeply convinced by this, which reminded him of the Ming Dynasty. At that time, these imperial clan members were also a heavy burden on the court, but the Ming Dynasty at that time would rather support them than let them support themselves.

"Councillor Fei, what do you think?" Xiao Ming looked at Fiji. He didn't believe that Dukes Tang and Rong had not approached Fiji.

Compared to Xiao Ming, these people had closer relationships with Fiji, Luo Quan, and others.

“Your Highness, the number of imperial clan members in Qingzhou City is not large, actually only over a thousand. The others are distributed throughout various parts of Great Yu Empire. However, these thousand people all hold relatively high noble titles,” Fiji said.

Xiao Ming’s intention was actually to force Fiji to reveal his thoughts, but it now seemed that Fiji agreed with supporting this group of people.

“Chief Grand Councillor Pang, you know exactly how much silver is in the treasury now. Aren’t you just adding to the chaos?” Pang Yukun naturally heard the implied meaning in Fiji’s words.

Fiji remained calm as usual. He sighed and said, “Chief Grand Councillor Pang, don’t rush. This is why I’m saying this. We can’t let these people starve on the streets, can we? After all, they traveled thousands of miles to this unfamiliar Qingzhou. To put it simply, these people are Your Highness’s relatives. Even if Your Highness doesn’t provide for them, we should at least find a way for them to make a living. And I am doing this for Your Highness’s future smooth enthronement. After all, these people will still be needed to preside over the ancestral temple ceremonies. At that time, they will become quite important. Moreover, with the support of these people, Your Highness’s throne can be more stable.”

Xiao Ming glanced at Fiji. After all was said and done, Fiji’s thinking was still stuck on the family-based management of the country.

Chapter 579

The scorching midday sun pierced through the gaps between the tree trunks, casting dappled shadows on the three of them.

After their debate, Fiji and Pang Yukun finally looked at Xiao Ming, awaiting his decision.

Dealing with these imperial clan members was indeed troublesome. If he ignored them, Xiao Ming would inevitably be branded as inhumane and unjust. After all, in thousands of years of history, even tyrannical emperors had to care for their clans.

It was then that Xiao Ming gradually realized that the imperial family itself was a huge powerful clan, and the emperor was the head of this family.

But even so, Xiao Ming felt somewhat reluctant. He was well aware of the state of the government coffers; the fief was already not prosperous, so how could he support these clan members as well?

Moreover, he had no emotional attachment to these clan members. Firstly, Xiao Ming's original body had left the capital since childhood, and secondly, he came from modern times and understood that this kind of situation could not continue.

The imperial clan would only proliferate, and in the long run, it would become a heavy burden on the nation.

After careful consideration, Xiao Ming said, "Neither supporting them nor abandoning them is good. Since that's the case, I have a compromise."

Pang Yukun asked, "How to compromise?"

"It's simple: allow the imperial family to engage in commerce," Xiao Ming said lightly.

In feudal society, emperors kept a tight leash on the imperial family, preferring to raise them like pigs rather than allowing them to support themselves, fearing that the power and wealth in their hands might lead them to covet the throne.

After all, they were all descendants of Emperor Gaozu, and if the legitimate eldest son failed to inherit the throne, it would fall to a collateral branch.

“Your Highness, absolutely not!” Fiji was greatly alarmed. “This is a rule established by Emperor Gaozu for the stability of Great Yu Empire. We cannot condone these imperial relatives engaging in commerce!”

Xiao Ming always got a headache whenever he heard about ancestral laws. Perhaps in these people’s eyes, Xiao Yuanzhi was great, but in Xiao Ming’s eyes, he was ultimately a monarch of a feudal dynasty, and their own thinking was very backward.

So he said, “Since this is a rule established by Emperor Gaozu, then I ask you, is Great Yu Empire stable now?”

“This...” Fiji immediately fell silent.

“As the saying goes, ‘only those who adapt to the times are true heroes.’ Now that Great Yu Empire is in chaos, how can we still abide by some stubborn rules?” Xiao Ming said lightly.

Fiji's heart was shocked. Even Xiao Wenxuan would not dare to utter such rebellious words. Ancestral laws were the foundation of the nation. If this were in Chang'an, it would certainly be opposed by many officials.

But this was Qingzhou, and when he saw Pang Yukun's smile, he knew that this matter was irreversible.

Xiao Ming looked at Fiji, who at this moment seemed to be on the verge of speaking but held back. He understood that he had just uttered something very radical for this era, because the rules established by the founding emperor of Great Yu Empire were tantamount to a constitution.

Now, Xiao Ming was violating the constitution, openly breaking the rules, basically equivalent to an American president not recognizing the Declaration of Independence. If Qingzhou hadn't been largely controlled by the officials he had cultivated, he estimated that a large number of officials would soon kneel before the royal residence, begging him to retract his order.

"Your Highness speaks reasonably. After all, Great Yu Empire is about to change its ruler." Fiji's expression suddenly became somewhat strange.

Pang Yukun's eyes flickered, revealing a hint of a smile. Fiji had compromised.

In fact, compared to Fiji, he understood Xiao Ming's thoughts better. A fief was a fief, and Great Yu Empire was Great Yu Empire. The rules naturally had to change.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Since that is the case, you inform these imperial clan members that I will meet with them another day to make things clear. The world now is no longer the world of the past. Only those who adapt to local circumstances can long preserve their wealth and status."

“Yes, Your Highness.” The two said in unison.

Having decided on this strategy, Xiao Ming basically had no intention of continuing to manage these imperial clan members. After giving them the last batch of silver, they could do whatever they pleased. At most, he would give them a little preferential treatment in business.

He was absolutely not going to spend millions of taels of silver every year to support these people.

After this matter was settled, the two entered the Qingzhou Grand Barracks. At this time, some of the new recruits who had passed the assessments were watching the Qingzhou Army’s daily training.

Unlike before, many training facilities had been built in the Qingzhou Grand Barracks. These facilities were developed by the generals after reading his “Soldier Training Manual.”

In the training ground of the grand camp, there were running tracks, horizontal bars, climbing rocks, balance beams, mud pits, and the new recruits’ training regimen was also very modernized, including 5-kilometer runs, 100-meter sprints, single and parallel bar exercises, push-ups, sit-ups, long jump, and grappling techniques.

Besides these physical training, there were also technical training sessions like formation drills, bullet loading, three-stage firing, rolling, climbing, and also packing backpacks and carrying equipment.

Looking at the soldiers training on the field, these new recruits who had passed the inspection were all filled with curiosity.

As the saying goes, 'you haven't eaten pork, but you've seen the pigs run.' The training of veteran soldiers in the past was completely different from current training methods. Now, these soldiers performed all sorts of strange movements, which truly amazed them.

Fiji was also seeing the Qingzhou soldiers' training for the first time. Their peculiar appearance made him shake his head repeatedly, but he understood that it was this kind of training that made the Qingzhou soldiers strong.

However, his surprise was yet to come. When it was noon, Xiao Ming led them to the Qingzhou Grand Barracks' mess hall. When the food was served, he couldn't help but exclaim, "Your Highness, is this what ordinary soldiers eat?"

At this moment, before Fiji was three white steamed buns, a dish of chives and eggs, a dish of braised pork, another dish of celery and small shrimp, and a bowl of millet porridge.

Three of these dishes were stir-fries.

Pang Yukun said with a smile, "Grand Councillor Fei, now you understand why military expenditure is so high, don't you?"

"I understand. These soldiers eat almost as well as nobles." Fiji said, picking up his chopsticks and eating. The taste of the dishes made him even more amazed.

Xiao Ming, meanwhile, said, "Today we're lucky. It's the once-a-week meat day. This isn't how it is every day. If the Qingzhou Army didn't raise their own pigs, the soldiers wouldn't have meat to eat."

Speaking of which, Xiao Ming had only been here for over three years, and true political reform had only been going on for a little over a year. Rebuilding from scratch also took time. Currently, the fief's resources were still not abundant enough. After all, even raising a pig took a year to be slaughtered; there were no growth hormones here.

"Since that's the case, this is still much better than what the imperial guards eat. No wonder the Qingzhou Army is strong and well-fed. Coupled with high-intensity training, how can these soldiers not be formidable?" Fiji grew increasingly confident about the future. The matter of the imperial relatives was now far from his mind.

While the three of them were inspecting the new recruit recruitment, Xiao Ming's order arrived in Yangzhou.

Ye Qingyun, having received the order, immediately commanded his soldiers to retaliate against the powerful families in Yangzhou City and its surrounding prefectures and counties. Due to food shortages during the two days they occupied Yangzhou City, he had already received news that the powerful families in the nearby prefectures and counties seemed to be somewhat restless.

Chapter 580

In the main hall, Xiao Qi stood by the window, looking at the bustling streets of Qingling City.

It had been five days since Xiao Qi returned. Upon his return, he had handed the truce agreement to the Prince of Wei. He still remembered the Prince of Wei's fury when he tore the truce agreement to shreds.

At that moment, he only felt a pang of sadness. The weak would be bullied; this was an ironclad rule throughout history.

However, more disheartening than this was the Prince of Wei's order to massacre the common people of Yangzhou City. Upon learning this news, he knew that Wei's territory was finished.

Now, the Prince of Wei had not only lost land but also the hearts of the people.

In his anger, he stormed into the Prince of Wei's residence to question the Prince of Wei, but all he received was the Prince of Wei's cold remark, "You are merely an outsider; you need not question the orders concerning Wei's territory."

At this moment, he realized that he was nothing more than a pawn in the Prince of Wei's heart. The reason he had treated him like his own son was merely to gain sympathy in the name of the Prince of Ning, thereby contending for dominance over the world.

But when his ambition was crushed by Xiao Ming, he gradually realized that he no longer needed this pawn.

Standing by the Qinhuai River, gazing at the pleasure boats shuttling by, and listening to the lighthearted songs sung by the actors, Xiao Qi felt a wave of sadness. All he wanted was a peaceful and prosperous era, to assist a wise monarch.

And this was precisely his father's wish. It was just that the Prince of Wei was clearly not someone worth assisting now.

“Third Royal Uncle, I have been offering you strategies all these years, even risking my life to form alliances to preserve Wei’s territory. I think what I owe you should be repaid. Now, I will go to assist a truly virtuous king.” Xiao Qi said.

As he was thinking, he suddenly heard the sound of horse hooves. Turning his head, he saw Xiao Han approaching him with guards.

Upon reaching Xiao Qi, Xiao Han sneered, “Xiao Qi, you should understand your position in Wei’s territory now. From now on, behave yourself, and Father King will still give you a bite to eat. But it’s also hard on Father King; he’s been hiding his true intentions for so long. Otherwise, I would have always thought he treated you like a treasure, Hahahaha...”

Xiao Qi’s face held a hint of mockery. Like father, like son. Previously, this Xiao Han, like the Prince of Wei, was always amiable towards him, but now he had finally shed his hypocritical facade.

“No need. I plan to leave Wei’s territory. Since I am an outsider, there is no need for me to stay here.” Xiao Qi said.

Xiao Han said mockingly, “That won’t do. Father King said you still have some ability, so you should honestly stay in Jinling City. Perhaps one day we can even send you to Xiao Ming. After all, his father is the killer of your father. I imagine he would definitely want to cut the weeds and remove the roots.”

With that, Xiao Han laughed loudly and left with his guards. The resentment he had harbored over the years seemed to be released all at once today.

The Prince of Wei's public humiliation of Xiao Qi in front of all the officials clearly showed the Prince of Wei's attitude towards Xiao Qi.

Looking at Xiao Han's receding figure, Xiao Qi's face showed a trace of weariness. At this moment, his heart was filled only with hatred—hatred for the Prince of Wei's ruthlessness, cunning, and treachery.

He had been deceived all these years, and every time he thought of his gratitude towards the Prince of Wei, his hatred grew stronger.

"Prince of Wei, oh Prince of Wei, you are seeking your own destruction!"

Xiao Qi's eyes suddenly became cold. He was well aware of the situation the Prince of Wei was now facing. There was no one left to use in Wei's territory. The people surrounding Xiao Han were merely sycophantic villains.

This bad idea must have been suggested by these people to Xiao Han, and then Xiao Han suggested it to the Prince of Wei. But they only thought of momentarily delaying Xiao Ming's advance, and overlooked the devastating impact this matter would have on public sentiment.

Moreover, this incident would inevitably invite Xiao Ming's retaliation.

Just as he thought, two days later, news of the Dengzhou Army's massacre of local powerful families arrived. The powerful families of Yangzhou City and its vicinity were all slaughtered, and from these powerful families, the Dengzhou Army obtained a large amount of grain and supplies.

And most importantly, wherever the Dengzhou Army went, the local common people would help the Dengzhou Army transport grain and fodder, and bring water and food. In just a few days, the common people of Yangzhou City gave their allegiance, and food and fodder were no longer an issue.

Prince of Wei's Residence.

Upon receiving this news, the Prince of Wei was not only not angry but rather thought his scheme had succeeded.

"Father King, this time Xiao Ming only won the hearts of these commoners, but he offended the powerful families! The powerful families of Yangzhou were massacred completely. All the powerful families in the world will know what kind of person Xiao Ming is! Hmph, Great Yu Empire was founded on the basis of powerful families. Now that he has offended all the powerful families in the world, who will support him and uphold him?"

"Well said! The powerful families of Wei's territory will surely resist King Qi's army to the death. I will make sure he cannot advance an inch." The Prince of Wei's face twisted with madness.

Xiao Han echoed with a laugh, then he said, "But Father Emperor, what about the five million taels in compensation?"

"Give it to him. It's only five million taels. The Ding family alone has assets worth tens of millions. Kill a few merchants, and the silver will come," the Prince of Wei said indifferently.

“Good idea! It is said that Ding Wan Quan sent his illegitimate son to Qingzhou. He has disloyal intentions. This time, we’ll make an example of him.” Xiao Han said.

The Prince of Wei nodded, “Xiao Qi has gone too far. Now we can only expand our army and prepare for war. If there’s no silver, we’ll find a way from these merchants. If that fails, we’ll increase taxes on the common people.”

“Yes, Father King. I have already had the craftsmen of Jinling City work day and night to forge weapons. By then, Jinling City will be built into an impregnable fortress,” Xiao Han said.

The father and son exchanged glances, seemingly reaching a tacit understanding.

However, what the two did not know was that after the Yangzhou massacre, the Wei army’s atrocities began to spread in Pengzhou City, Huaizhou City, Tongzhou City, and Yangzhou City.

The people spreading this news included merchants, ordinary common people, and also officials. While publicizing the Prince of Wei’s atrocities, they also promoted the prosperous life of the Qingzhou common people.

Under the deliberate propaganda and incitement, the local common people were all outraged. In the following few days, they became even more furious, because the common people who had personally witnessed the Yangzhou City massacre were sent to the four prefectures.

Under their vivid and emotional speeches, the common people could no longer be ostriches burying their heads in the sand. As the firsthand accounts were told, they began to hate the Prince of Wei, and at the same time, under the propagation of the Qingzhou common people, they yearned for Qingzhou.

And when the government offices were established and began to completely distribute the powerful families' land to them, the common people completely erupted. Everywhere in the four prefectures, King Qi's virtues were praised, and for a while, public sentiment gravitated towards him.

Yangzhou City.

Li San returned to the city after finishing his emotional account of grievances in a village.

In the government office, Ye Qingyun was waiting for him. Seeing him return, Ye Qingyun smiled bitterly, "You secret guards are truly formidable! In such a short time, you have made the common people so supportive of His Highness. I truly admire you."

Li San traveled from Pengzhou City all the way to Yangzhou, which was his last stop.

The work of the secret service was not only to gather intelligence but also to win the hearts of the people for Xiao Ming.