

I. Dynasty 581

Chapter 581

“It’s not that the Secret Guard is powerful, but that Prince Wei is too foolish. He only knows how to protect the interests of the powerful families but forgets that common people outnumber them in this world.”

Sitting in the government office, Li San took a sip of tea.

He had been truly exhausted these days. As per Xiao Ming’s request, they organized ‘suffering conventions’ in the villages, allowing common people oppressed by powerful families to speak of their grievances on stage, ending with strong condemnations of Prince Wei and the powerful families.

Besides the suffering conventions, there were also propaganda slogans in every village, naturally advocating for Prince Qi and the elimination of Prince Wei.

At the same time, they were cooperating with the government office to establish local militia organizations and rally public support.

Of course, no amount of talk was as effective as actual action. Distributing land to the common people was the real key to making them lower their guard.

With all these methods combined, the four prefectures finally gained the people’s support, and young adults eagerly joining the army were everywhere.

Ye Qingyun smiled. The Secret Guard had always been mysterious, and he felt a sense of awe towards Li San, because he felt that he and his people were definitely being watched by Li San.

After a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Where are you going next?"

"Jinling City!" Li San did not shy away. He said, "To catch a thief, first catch the king. If we can assassinate Prince Wei, wouldn't it be easier to conquer cities and territories?"

"Assassination!" Ye Qingyun was startled. "Aren't you afraid of this leaking out by telling me?"

"If the governor leaks it, I will know immediately," Li San said with a half-smile.

Ye Qingyun shivered, which further confirmed his suspicion. At this moment, his reverence for Xiao Ming grew, because in his view, Prince Qi is truly unfathomable.

'How did he establish an organization like the Secret Guard?'

But this was not a problem for him to ponder. After a brief chat with Li San, he left the government office to busy himself with recruiting new soldiers.

Yangzhou City was a large city with a population of 600,000. Because they arrived in time, after the massacre, there were still over 400,000 people remaining in the city. Coupled with the population from nearby prefectures and counties, the population of Yangzhou City was quite substantial, basically around 700,000.

Such a surplus population naturally made conscription easy. Moreover, orders had now come from Qingzhou, instructing him to recruit 30,000 new soldiers from Yangzhou and Tongzhou. In half a year, he would need to lead the army to cooperate with the southern expeditionary force to completely take down Wei territory.

...

Qingzhou.

Amidst the fervent propaganda in the four prefectures, war bonds began to be issued at the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce. In conjunction with the issuance of war bonds, the Qingzhou Daily thoroughly explained what war bonds were.

When the common people and merchants learned that these war bonds were issued by Xiao Ming, the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce was immediately packed with people.

Holding grains and silver, the common people exchanged them for war bonds at the Chamber of Commerce to support the war effort.

Compared to the common people, merchants were even more interested in war bonds. They eagerly took out their silver to purchase them. At the same time, the powerful families who came to Qingzhou from Chang'an also did not miss this opportunity.

Taking their assets, they exchanged their gold and silver for a few thin sheets of paper, which were the bonds issued by the Chamber of Commerce.

Xiao Ming had not anticipated such a bustling scene, but the enthusiasm of the common people and merchants was enough to show his current standing in the hearts of the common people. As for the merchants, having tasted the benefits during the Northern Expedition, they naturally did not want to miss this opportunity.

The only regret they had was that Xiao Ming had set a limit this time: they could not purchase more than 10,000 taels of war bonds.

While the Chamber of Commerce was packed, Xiao Ming's princely estate was bustling with activity. After the war bonds were issued, Cao Zhengyang and a group of prominent merchants all arrived at the princely estate to discuss the matter of the war bonds.

"Your Highness, during the last Northern Expedition, I did not set a limit. Why set a limit this time? And 10,000 taels is really too little," Cao Zhengyang said.

Ding Wu also echoed, "Your Highness, please believe in our loyalty to the state. We hope Your Highness can win battle after battle and expand the territory."

"Yes, Your Highness, we are all Qingzhou people now, with no ulterior motives."

"..."

The merchants spoke one after another, and the main hall was noisy.

Xiao Ming sat calmly in the main seat, drinking tea and listening to the merchants' complaints. After everyone had spoken, he said, "Gentlemen, setting limits is by no means because I do not trust you, but because the amount of war bonds issued this time is limited, and we cannot let all of them go to you."

Pausing, Xiao Ming said, "Moreover, for these war bonds, I don't want too much silver or banknotes. They are not very useful to me right now. Do you understand now?"

Cao Zhengyang and Ding Wu exchanged glances, and they immediately understood. This time, the common people were exchanging their grains, cloth, and other goods for bonds, as the common people did not like silver and preferred to exchange it for goods.

However, these merchants had a lot of silver in their hands, and the 50,000 taels of bonds were purchased in the form of silver and banknotes.

"Your Highness means that if we exchange goods, we don't have to worry about the limit?" Cao Zhengyang tentatively asked.

"Of course not, I can consider raising the limit to 300,000 taels," Xiao Ming said with a smile. This restriction was actually a trap, intended to make merchants find ways to acquire various materials from outside the state.

His individual strength was limited, but the combined energy of so many merchants in Qingzhou was immense. After all, they had connections in other places, and if they took action, it would save him a lot of trouble.

“300,000 taels.” Ding Wu repeated. This limit was acceptable. He asked, “What materials does Your Highness need?”

“Iron ore, saltpeter, sulfur, cloth, horses,” Xiao Ming said. These were all things he was short of. After expanding the army, he would need more steel, gunpowder, military uniforms, and warhorses.

Cao Zhengyang frowned upon hearing this. “Your Highness, these materials are currently very scarce and difficult to find.”

“If it were easy, why would I talk to you about it? However, regarding iron ore, I can give you a hint: there is a lot of iron ore in Prince Yong’s territory. You can go there to purchase mines and extract it,” Xiao Ming said. He now had to mobilize the power of capital to prepare materials for the war.

The merchants looked at each other, but thinking of the generous returns, they ultimately could not resist the temptation and all agreed to the matter.

“Your Highness, in that case, we will prepare these materials for Your Highness. My horse farm has 20,000 warhorses, at fifteen taels per warhorse, which totals exactly 300,000 taels,” Cao Zhengyang proudly glanced at the others.

“20,000 warhorses!” Xiao Ming was also shocked. Cao Zhengyang had only taken over this pasture a year ago.

However, after a brief thought, he understood that Cao Zhengyang must have been involved in smuggling from the grasslands, otherwise, he wouldn't have so many horses.

But at this moment, he was too lazy to manage this matter. Sometimes capital and politics are contradictory; while being mutually wary, they also need each other.

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The atmosphere in the main hall was somewhat subdued.

Cao Zhengyang made the other merchants feel the gap between them and the Cao family.

Xiao Ming smiled, "Shopkeeper Cao is truly a model merchant. I will accept these 20,000 warhorses."

"Your Highness is too kind," Cao Zhengyang said.

Seeing this, Ding Wu said, "Your Highness, I will send some iron ore for Your Highness."

"Your Highness, I will provide cloth."

"I will provide provisions."

“ ...”

The merchants eagerly expressed their intentions, fearing to fall behind others. They had tasted the sweetness of the last Northern Expedition and now all wanted Xiao Ming to continue waging war.

“In that case, I thank you all.” Xiao Ming felt the merchants’ enthusiasm but was also very wary. Capital seeks profit, and while these merchants came here for war bonds, essentially, they were still seeking to profit from the war.

Therefore, they were very diligent, their purpose being not to let Xiao Ming’s pace stop.

However, Xiao Ming’s pace could indeed not stop. This time, he did not get the abundant supplies he wanted in Yangzhou, so he could only conquer the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa), an island nation colonized by Japan.

This was for provisions and for the safety of the sea routes, because Yue Yun sent news that Japanese pirates were getting supplies from the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) to harass merchant ships on the routes.

Now, the sea routes were Qingzhou’s lifeline, and he did not want any mishaps. Therefore, a day ago, he ordered Yue Yun to lead 3,000 marines to conquer the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) and incorporate it into the state’s territory.

At this time, the massive Qingzhou fleet was sailing on the sea. After receiving Xiao Ming’s order, it set off from Tongzhou towards the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa).

On the third day, Yue Yun walked onto the deck, and through his telescope, the island known as the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) appeared.

A smile appeared at the corner of his mouth, and a weight was lifted from Yue Yun's heart. It was very difficult to find an island in the vast sea, and without a sea chart, he did not know how long he would have to search.

"Xia Chengmo, is there a dock in the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) where we can berth?" Yue Yun turned and asked a dark-skinned, thin young man. Because it was their first time in this sea area, the fleet was not familiar with it. So, in Tongzhou, Yue Yun paid someone who had been to the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) to be a guide.

The young man called Xia Chengmo said, "There is a dock where we can berth, but..."

"But what? Just say it," Yue Yun said.

"Since the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) became a vassal of the Japanese pirates, few common people have come here, because the Sanmyo Kingdom's (Modern day Okinawa) navy became the Japanese pirates' pawns, and they attacked Great Yu Empire's merchant ships together with the Japanese pirates. To call them a navy, it's better to say they are pirates. The leader of this Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) navy is named Hu Hai."

"Hu Hai? How audacious! He dares to attack our Great Yu Empire's merchant ships." Yue Yun said angrily upon hearing this.

Xia Chengmo continued, "He is more than audacious. All merchant ships that passed through this sea area before had to pay protection money, otherwise, within a few days, the merchant ships would be plundered, and no one on board would be left alive. Now that Great Yu Empire's fleet patrols the seas, they are a little more well-behaved."

As the two were talking, the first mate came up from the cabin. He heard their conversation and said, "General, Your Highness ordered us to recover the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa). We might as well take the opportunity to eliminate this Hu Hai. This subordinate also encountered Hu Hai's pirate ship while training in this sea area."

After the number of warships increased, Xiao Ming promoted Yue Yun to general and also promoted some naval officers. This Liu Chen was one of these excellent naval officers.

Xia Chengmo smiled bitterly upon hearing this, "Captain Liu, you must not underestimate these pirates. In the past, Prince Chu did send warships to suppress these pirates, but these pirates would flee upon seeing warships, and then return once the warships left. It was completely useless. The sea is so vast, where would you find them? Until later, even Prince Chu bothered no more."

The distant coastline was getting closer and closer to the fleet. Yue Yun said, "You don't need to worry about these things. We have our own methods. You just need to lead us to a dock in the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) where we can berth."

After saying all this, Liu Chen and Yue Yun both had determined expressions, without any trace of fear. A hint of pride flashed in Xia Chengmo's eyes. In the past, they feared pirates and Japanese pirates, but now with the Qingzhou fleet as their backing, he feared nothing. If it were before, even if he were given a hundred taels of silver, he would not lead them to find this demon, Hu Hai.

Ever since the Qingzhou warships began patrolling the seas, Hu Hai had been keeping an eye on their movements. Their approach towards the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) naturally did not escape him. On the dock, looking at the gradually approaching fleet, Hu Hai's face was incomparably grim, and his eagle eyes narrowed slightly.

"What should we do, General?" Beside Hu Hai was a burly man with a tiger-like back, whose clothes were clearly different from those of the Great Yu Empire; he was a Japanese person.

Having plundered at sea for so long, Hu Hai had experienced many storms. After a slight pause, he said, "You now lead 200 ships to ambush at sea ten li outside the dock. If the Qingzhou fleet just simply berths, then so be it. But if they intend to deal with us, then we might have to fight them. Heh heh, perhaps we can get hold of these warships then."

The dock was getting closer and closer. Yue Yun on the warship picked up his telescope and looked towards the dock. In his sight, many ships were berthed at the dock, including many unique Japanese Atakebune ships.

Yue Yun looked closer and saw that people coming and going on the dock were carrying matchlock guns, and some were being forced to move cargo.

"Besides this dock, are there any other berthing docks?" Yue Yun asked again. This time, he was prepared to capture them all in one go, leaving no chance for Hu Hai to escape.

Xia Chengmo had told him that the current king of the Sanmyo Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa) had become a puppet, and the real power was in Hu Hai's hands.

"I don't know that. We're not allowed to wander around when we come here."

Nodding, Yue Yun said to the flag signaler, "Have the warships form a line formation 500 meters from the dock, surrounding the transport ships in the middle. On the outer side, all gunners to their positions."

"Yes, General!" The flag signaler went to the bow of the ship and began to signal. After the signals ended, the twenty-four warships began to change their course. As they were about to reach the dock, the fleet's formation had essentially formed a single line.

During the maneuver, Liu Chen and Yue Yun continuously observed the movements on the dock with their telescopes. "It seems they're not up to anything good either," Liu Chen said, putting down his telescope. Many people on the dock had already hidden in the ships, and some musketeers were hiding in the bushes, but none of this escaped their eyes. "If you ask me, let's just shell the dock a few times."

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"We are not here to cause destruction. The purpose of occupying the Sanmyo Kingdom this time is to turn it into our maritime supply base and to provide food for the state. We didn't gain much in Yangzhou this time."

Yue Yun said thoughtfully.

Liu Chen nodded, "So, we're landing with small boats?"

Yue Yun nodded in response.

“Lower the small boats, prepare to attack.” After confirming the order, Liu Chen gave the command.

Upon hearing this, the marines rushed out from the ship cabins. Liu Chen then ordered the flag signaler to relay the command to the other warships. Soon, over 3,000 musketeers gathered on the deck and took the small boats that were being lowered towards the dock.

At this moment, sweat poured down Hu Hai’s face on the dock. The numerous transport ships on the sea told him that Great Yu was serious this time. He glanced around the dock; he only had 2,000 men on the dock, and this was the entire military force of the Sanmyo Kingdom. Moreover, most of these soldiers did not even have matchlock guns, using only swords and sabers.

However, every Great Yu soldier arriving by boat carried a musket with a bayonet.

Yue Yun constantly monitored the movements on the dock. His words with Liu Chen were merely a jest. If a truly dangerous situation arose, he would not hesitate to destroy the dock to ensure the safety of the marine soldiers.

It was not easy for him to train these soldiers. To compete with Niu Ben for equipment, the two almost came to blows in Qingzhou.

Currently, the army’s equipment was very scarce, and neither wanted to yield to the other.

At this time, Liu Chen also prepared to land with the marines. After landing this time, they would completely occupy the main island of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

“Always await my command,” Liu Chen instructed the soldiers on the same boat.

In Qingzhou, every general charged at the forefront during battles, and Liu Chen naturally inherited this tradition this time.

With rippling waves, the fleet quickly reached the dock. Liu Chen was the first to jump onto the wooden dock.

At this moment, the soldiers on the dock, holding their guns, rushed over. Some soldiers directly pointed their guns at them. One soldier asked, "Who are you? What is your purpose here?"

Liu Chen scanned his surroundings. Among these soldiers, only about a hundred had matchlock guns. He calmly said, "We are Prince Qi's fleet, dispatched by Prince Qi to drive out the Japanese pirates for the King of Sanmyo ."

"Prince Qi? What is Prince Qi? Only our General Hu calls the shots here! The General said that if you are just temporarily docking, leave after you rest. If you have malicious intentions, don't blame us for being impolite!" the soldier shouted.

These soldiers had also followed Hu Hai in plundering at sea, so they were very bold.

Liu Chen had a straightforward personality. Their purpose was to take down the Sanmyo Kingdom anyway, and war was inevitable regardless of whether the Sanmyo Kingdom's soldiers were friendly. He sneered, "That's not for you to decide."

“Not for us to decide? Then for you to decide?” the soldier said disdainfully.

Liu Chen looked behind him. At this moment, only he had landed, with merely fifty men on one boat.

However, he showed no fear. The characteristic of the marines was their bravery. He directly drew the long saber from his waist and stabbed it into the soldier’s chest. “Murder! Brothers, charge! Kill them!”

Liu Chen snorted coldly, then shouted, “Fire!”

“Bang, bang, bang...”

The musketeers behind Liu Chen pulled their triggers, white smoke billowed from the muzzles, and a dozen or so charging soldiers immediately fell. However, at the same time, more and more soldiers swarmed from the dock.

Liu Chen was unhurried. He needed to open up the dock battlefield, so he shouted, “Hold the line, await reinforcements.”

“Yes, Captain.” Receiving the order, the soldiers quickly formed ranks on the dock and continued firing. Simultaneously, the second and third boats docked, and soldiers rushed onto the dock.

With more men, the marines’ firepower intensified, and the charging soldiers fell one after another.

“When did Great Yu Empire’s army become so formidable!” Hidden in a warehouse outside the dock, Hu Hai’s heart felt as cold as winter as he watched his soldiers continuously fall.

Under the gunfire of Great Yu Empire soldiers, the Sanmyo Kingdom’s soldiers were utterly vulnerable. At this moment, he couldn’t help but turn pale with fright, having never fought such a war.

“Retreat!”

A trembling word escaped Hu Hai’s mouth. Now, he finally realized that he simply could not defeat this group of soldiers.

However, he still had his naval warships. While fleeing, he ordered his subordinates to light bonfires on the dock. He could abandon this island, but he wanted Great Yu Empire’s warships.

As long as he could get one, Hu Hai would be able to run rampant on the seas.

The signal fires on the island caught Yue Yun’s attention. This unusual action made him wary. He believed this was definitely not an accidental event.

Sure enough, shortly after, Yue Yun saw through his telescope that 300 ships were gathered in the western sea area, with many armed soldiers on board.

"This is getting interesting now." Yue Yun looked at these 300 warships. The enemy's warship numbers had an advantage, but he was not worried. Naval warfare was not just about having more people.

"General, should we open fire? These warships are about to enter firing range," the second mate said at this time.

Putting down his telescope, Yue Yun shook his head, "Don't rush. Let them get a little closer before firing. These ships are very small and can't withstand the bombardment of grapeshot. Have all gunners switch to grapeshot. I will teach them what naval warfare is."

"Yes, General." The second mate turned and went down into the ship's cabin.

With the wind, Hu Hai's ships approached very quickly. In just half an hour, over 300 pirate ships were within 500 meters of the fleet.

On the warship, the flag signaler continuously sent signals. The gunners on all ten warships were in position. On the outer side, the gunports of the galleons were opened one by one, and all cannons were pushed out, aiming their muzzles at the Sanmyo Kingdom's naval warships.

When black smoke rose from the dock, Murayama Akimitsu ordered his fleet to advance. He was the Japanese man who was with Hu Hai. As the fleet approached the Qingzhou fleet, Murayama Akimitsu became increasingly uneasy. His battlefield intuition made him feel something unusual. Any fleet facing hundreds of pirate ships would either flee, or defensive soldiers would pour out onto the ships. However, these dozen or so warships showed no movement at all. Instead, many square openings suddenly appeared on their sides, with black tubular objects extending out, while the ship's deck remained calm, as if they didn't care at all.

But despite this, the smoke rising from the dock was already conveying Hu Hai's order: seize these warships.

"Kill..." The massive warships were right in front of them, and the soldiers raised their weapons and shouted. And at that moment, deafening sounds echoed through the sky. Murayama Akimitsu only saw countless flashes of fire light up opposite them, followed by black spherical objects flying over like lightning.

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"Boom, boom, boom..."

The black iron balls struck the pirate ships, making dull thuds. A pirate ship, hit by dozens of cannonballs, instantly shattered into pieces. Some soldiers were directly hit by cannonballs, their bodies reduced to pulp.

Fear, deep fear, the shouts of the Sanmyo Kingdom soldiers instantly turned into wails. Ships were torn apart, and the entire fleet was in chaos.

Murayama Akimitsu stood on his ship, with no one left on either side of him. Countless cannonballs whistled past his ears, taking away all his crew. He was speechless, his legs trembling and unable to move. In his eyes were countless flying wood splinters and blood. Amidst the roaring sounds, ships sank one after another.

Yue Yun looked at the scattered soldiers and their desperate expressions, once again fully realizing the terrifying power of this weapon. At a distance of 100 meters, the pirate warships were directly pierced

by cannonballs. A dozen cannonballs were enough to destroy a ship, and most of the pirates were directly hit by the dense cannonballs, flying off in a string, clearly beyond saving.

The battle was fierce. These Sanmyo Kingdom warships had nowhere to escape. The ships attempting to flee were also sunk one by one. Half an hour later, only floating debris and corpses remained on the sea.

“Cease fire, capture some alive.” Yue Yun gave the order. The Sanmyo Kingdom’s navy had completely collapsed and posed no threat.

After his order was given, the fleet began to move, sailing towards the destroyed warships. Ropes were thrown down, and the surviving soldiers, as if grasping at straws, climbed up the ropes.

“General, we’ve caught a Japanese man.” As Yue Yun was focused on the sea, a soldier dragged a trembling person and threw him in front of Yue Yun. “According to those soldiers, he is the Japanese person sent to monitor Hu Hai. And besides this dock, there is another dock where some Japanese pirate ships are berthed.”

Glancing at the Japanese man, he said, “What’s your name?”

“My humble name is Murayama Akimitsu.” At this moment, Murayama Akimitsu was terrified and dared not conceal anything.

Yue Yun sneered, “You should know where that dock is. Lead the way now, or I’ll throw you into the sea to feed the fish.”

“Yes, yes...” Murayama Akimitsu nodded repeatedly.

At this time, Liu Chen on the shore had been pursuing for nearly forty minutes. After crossing a hillside, his view suddenly opened up. Outside the forest was a semicircular sea area surrounded by mountains, very vast and extremely concealed. When the fleet arrived earlier, they were blocked by the forest and did not see this bay.

The fleeing soldiers were still running down the hillside one by one, and on the beach side, over a hundred ships of various sizes were berthed. Some of these ships had already started to flee, and the people on board were dressed as Japanese pirates.

“Follow me!” Liu Chen shouted, charging down first. The marines, upon seeing this, cheered and followed him down.

He had heard the cannon fire just now and assumed the fleet had already engaged in battle. By taking this dock, they would truly control this sea area.

At this time, the Sanmyo Kingdom soldiers had no will to fight. Liu Chen easily occupied another dock, a dozen li away, and also captured more than a dozen warships, but he was powerless against those ships that had already fled.

However, after a while, he saw Yue Yun’s fleet sailing into the bay, and the thunderous roar of cannons resounded again.

After a period of shelling, Yue Yun ordered the fleet to sail into the bay. On the way, Murayama Akimitsu had already explained the characteristics of this excellent bay. According to him, the seawater in this bay was very deep, exceeding a dozen meters, making it very suitable for ships to berth. They had only recently built a dock here to be used as a new Japanese pirate dock.

The warships came ashore one after another, and Yue Yun disembarked.

“Who are these people?”

There were over a thousand people squatting on the dock, Yue Yun couldn’t help but ask.

“General, these are common people from Great Yu Empire, they were captured by Hu Hai and made into slaves,” Liu Chen said.

“Find a few people to lead the way. We need to talk with the King of the Sanmyo Kingdom,” Yue Yun said thoughtfully.

The two nodded. Although they had driven away Hu Hai and the Japanese pirates on the island, they still needed to occupy the island, and to completely occupy it, they had to talk with the King of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

Moreover, according to Xiao Ming’s plan, they also had to temporarily station troops on the island to prevent Japanese pirate counterattacks, as this place was simply too close to Japan.

Yue Yun’s suggestion was approved by both. In addition to stationing troops, they also needed to build a star fort to defend against enemies. These slaves were still useful for now. And besides these slaves, they also captured many surrendered soldiers. Building a star fort requires quarrying stone, and

assigning this to the prisoners of war was most suitable now. “Your Highness is probably overly worried. Why would we need a star fort to deal with the soldiers on this island?” Liu Chen said.

“You’re wrong. These star forts are not for dealing with the common people here, but for dealing with Japanese pirates. And these are not our concerns. Your Highness naturally has his considerations. Our duty is to carry out the mission. Now, let’s follow the road to the residential area,” Yue Yun said.

“Yes!” Liu Chen said.

With that, the two led the soldiers deeper into the island. After passing through the forest in front of the dock, their view suddenly opened up.

At this time, in front of them were many rice paddies, and at the end of the rice paddies were densely packed houses. These houses were no different from the architecture of the Great Yu Empire.

“The King’s palace is in the center of the city,” the guiding common person said. He had been captured and brought to the island five years ago and was very familiar with everything here.

Yue Yun and Liu Chen nodded and led the army further into the island. After walking twenty li, they reached the residential area.

On the way there, the guiding common person had already told them that the Sanmyo Kingdom’s writing was the same as Great Yu Empire’s, and their clothing was identical. However, ever since they were occupied by the Japanese pirates, some powerful families on the island wore kimonos and also learned the Japanese language.

Some children of the common people were also required to learn the Japanese language.

The arrival of the army caused the island's residents to be wary. They all hid in their homes, watching them from the cracks in their windows.

Yue Yun was unconcerned. He understood the situation on the island. This island nation of 200,000 people had very few troops. Because of this, they were like a weathervane, surviving in the cracks between the Japanese pirates and the Great Yu Empire.

However, from now on, there would be no more Sanmyo Kingdom. From now on, this place would be part of the state's territory.

Chapter 585

The warm sea breeze howled, and the ground was still damp, as if it had just rained.

Under the guidance of Xia Chengmo, Yue Yun and Liu Chen quickly reached the royal city of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

After passing through the residential area, a stone-built city wall appeared before everyone. The city wall's stones were cyan, and some green moss grew in the crevices.

The city wall was about five meters high, extending from north to south, protecting the royal city of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the middle.

“General, this is the main pass, Igusuku, that leads into the royal city,” Xia Chengmo said to Yue Yun.

At this time, before everyone was a very narrow pass. The city gate of the pass was only three meters high and two meters wide, and above the city gate was a small tower.

This kind of tower was common in the Great Yu Empire, similar to the structure of a pavilion.

The fully armed army arrived in front of the pass, and the hundreds of soldiers on the city wall immediately became nervous. A dozen archers aimed their bows at them.

“Who are you?” a trembling soldier on the city tower asked.

They had just heard the sounds of cannons and gunfire from the direction of the dock, so they were now extremely wary of these strangers.

Yue Yun glanced at these soldiers. According to the information provided by Xia Chengmo, the Sanmyo Kingdom’s military strength was limited, and most of it was in Hu Hai’s hands.

Now that Hu Hai had been driven away, there was basically no resistance left in the royal city, probably only the thousand or so people on the wall.

“We are soldiers of the Great Yu Empire. The Japanese pirates and Hu Hai have been driven away by us. Now quickly open the city gate, we want to see your king,” Yue Yun said coldly.

The soldiers on the wall were greatly alarmed by this news. With Japanese support, Hu Hai had become the Sanmyo Kingdom's top powerful official. Both the common people and soldiers of the Sanmyo Kingdom feared him.

Now, suddenly, a group of people had come and driven Hu Hai away, making them feel uneasy and anxious.

"We have already notified the inner palace. Please wait outside the pass." The soldiers on the city wall dared not offend them and said cautiously. These people, who could drive away Hu Hai, could easily take the castle.

Now they had no capital to be arrogant.

Yue Yun was not a warmonger. Upon hearing this, he nodded and waited for a reply.

While he was waiting, Liu Chen had already led soldiers to circle the castle and returned to Yue Yun's side. He said, "General, this castle is not large, probably about six li in circumference. There are very few defenders on the city wall outside the pass. Taking this castle will be very simple."

Yue Yun looked at some of the buildings inside from the top of the city wall. The exposed buildings had curved eaves like the roofs of Great Yu buildings, and they also had yellow tiles.

"Wait for now. If this King is unreasonable, then we might have to take action. Go and get the gunpowder barrels ready now, and we'll blow up the city gate when the time comes," Yue Yun said.

“Yes, General,” Liu Chen responded and went to prepare.

After giving the order, Yue Yun found a high ground and looked to the east. Through his telescope, he saw an ocean on the opposite side.

Then he looked south, and the territory of the Sanmyo Kingdom was clearly visible. As marked on the sea chart, the Sanmyo Kingdom’s territory was long and narrow. The narrowest part from east to west was only four or five li, and the widest part was no more than thirty li. Compared to its width, this island was very long and narrow, stretching for 200 li from south to north.

Their current location was the widest part, which was like a lump on a worm’s neck protruding westward.

The two docks just now were on the upper and lower sides of the semi-circular lump, and it was precisely for this reason that he could not discover the other dock.

After all, he had come from the southwest, directly facing the southern dock.

After waiting for a while, beads of sweat appeared on Yue Yun’s forehead. Qingzhou had already turned cool, but it was still very hot here.

Having learned geography at Bowen Academy, he knew that the Sanmyo Kingdom was subtropical, with a warm and rainy climate. It was precisely for this reason that the Sanmyo Kingdom was favored by Japan.

While he was observing the terrain, there was a sudden commotion on the city tower. Then, a figure who looked like a general appeared above. After surveying the two thousand soldiers below the city, the general's face turned somewhat pale.

"Quickly open the city gate!" the general ordered.

Upon receiving the order, the gate of Igusuku slowly opened. Then the general came out from inside the pass and bowed respectfully, "Chaku, Imperial General of the Sanmyo Kingdom, greets the Celestial Envoy."

"Dispense with the formalities," Yue Yun said with a slight smile.

The Sanmyo Kingdom always referred to Great Yu Empire's envoys as Celestial Envoys to show respect.

Chaku rose, cautiously scrutinizing Yue Yun and his group. Then he stood to one side, extending his hand and saying, "Celestial Envoy, please!"

Yue Yun nodded, preparing to enter the pass. At this moment, Liu Chen ran over from behind and stopped him, saying, "General, beware of trickery. Let me lead the soldiers to investigate first."

Upon hearing this, Yue Yun immediately understood and nodded slightly.

Liu Chen glanced at Chaku, then led a thousand soldiers into the pass. After searching the entire castle and finding no ambush, he returned to inform Yue Yun that it was safe to enter.

Chaku had remained silent until now, and only then did he say, "The Celestial Envoy is overly cautious. Our King has always awaited Great Yu Empire's assistance. Now that the Celestial Envoy has arrived with a great army, how dare we, your humble subjects, oppose the Celestial Envoy?"

"The Sanmyo Kingdom and the Great Yu Empire have been disconnected for some years. We have to be cautious," Yue Yun said as he walked into the castle.

Upon entering the castle, a cluster of red buildings immediately appeared before everyone. These buildings were elaborately carved and painted, resembling a small imperial palace. The only difference was that these buildings were wooden, and they also had many small windows, giving them a delicate appearance.

Following Chaku, Yue Yun and his group walked towards the royal palace, the route already being monitored by the marines.

In front of the largest palace in the complex, Yue Yun saw a middle-aged man dressed in a red official robe with gold cloud patterns, surrounded by attendants, awaiting his arrival.

"Celestial Envoy's esteemed presence honors this humble king," the middle-aged man clasped his hands and bowed to Yue Yun.

Yue Yun scrutinized the middle-aged man. When the Sanmyo Kingdom was a vassal state of the Great Yu Empire, a prince of the Great Yu Empire had sent an envoy to bestow upon the Sanmyo Kingdom the title of Sanmyo King. Thus, it was not improper for the king to refer to himself as “humble king.”

However, seeing their hurried appearance, Yue Yun realized that they must have just changed into these clothes. He paid it no mind and spoke directly, “I have been sent by Prince Qi of the Great Yu Empire to expel the Japanese pirates and reincorporate the Sanmyo Kingdom as a vassal state of the Great Yu Empire. What does the King of Sanmyo think of this?”

Yue Yun’s words were somewhat forceful. The current world situation was one of the strong preying on the weak, and he disliked pretense, preferring to state his purpose directly.

The King of Sanmyo was startled upon hearing this and said, “Prince Qi? Is it not the Emperor of Great Yu Empire?”

Chapter 586

“What? You’re unwilling?”

Yue Yun’s voice was cold. He didn’t want to waste any more words with the King of Sanmyo. If the king was disobedient, he could easily replace him.

He could easily control an island with a population of only 200,000.

A cold sweat broke out on the King of Sanmyo's back. In fact, he had no ability to contend with this army. Moreover, before this army arrived, the kingdom's power was controlled by Hu Hai. Now he only wanted to seize this opportunity to regain power.

"Willing, willing," the King of Sanmyo said with a smile, "It's just that, as the Celestial Envoy has seen, my kingdom has always suffered from Japanese pirate incursions. This time, the Celestial Envoy driving away the Japanese pirates is a good deed, but once you leave, these Japanese pirates will soon return, and then the kingdom will again suffer from their poisoning. Therefore, I hope that the Celestial Envoy can station troops in the kingdom to guard against the Japanese pirates and preserve the kingdom's eternal peace."

Yue Yun said indifferently, "As long as you obey Prince Qi's orders, the position of King of Sanmyo will always be yours. I guarantee that figures like Hu Hai will not appear again. Of course, stationing troops is also within our consideration, but ultimately it depends on your performance."

This time, when conquering the Sanmyo Kingdom, it was already planned to station troops according to Xiao Ming's intention. It was precisely because of Great Yu Empire's previous inaction that the Sanmyo Kingdom was eventually annexed by Japan.

Yue Yun held his trump card and knew that the current King of Sanmyo had no real power. His purpose in saying this was merely to completely control the King of Sanmyo.

Although they were going to incorporate the Sanmyo Kingdom into the state's territory this time, Xiao Ming currently had no spare officials to send to the island, so the King of Sanmyo would still act as the island's ruler. With the stationed troops supervising him, the Sanmyo Kingdom would truly become Great Yu Empire's first overseas colony.

"I respectfully obey the Celestial Envoy's command." The King of Sanmyo was overjoyed.

When Hu Hai was on the island, he was merely a puppet. Now that he truly held royal power, he didn't care who he paid tribute to.

Yue Yun nodded in satisfaction. The King of Sanmyo's attitude pleased him, otherwise, he would have to go to some trouble to replace the king.

Next, Yue Yun and the King of Sanmyo clarified the tribute materials.

After Japan occupied the Sanmyo Kingdom, the Sanmyo Kingdom would provide large quantities of grain to Japan every harvest season.

Although there were only 200,000 people on the island, because of the pleasant climate, grain harvests were abundant year after year, and the amount of harvested grain was quite considerable.

"The Celestial Envoy has come at just the right time. The rice in the fields is about to be harvested. This time, the grain can be sent to Qingzhou, and I hope the Celestial Envoy can speak a few kind words for me before Prince Qi," the King of Sanmyo said.

Yue Yun had briefly explained the situation in Qingzhou during their conversation, and now he had some understanding of Qingzhou.

"That is natural. As long as the grain arrives in Qingzhou, His Highness will certainly be very pleased. At that time, your position will also become more secure." When landing, Yue Yun had noticed the rice in the fields. At this time, the rice ears were already yellow, and they could be harvested soon.

The King of Sanmyo thanked him again upon hearing this.

Besides rice, another source of income for the Sanmyo Kingdom was fishing. Regarding this, Yue Yun planned to teach the trawling technique to the artisans of the Sanmyo Kingdom upon his return.

In this way, the Sanmyo Kingdom would be able to continuously provide seafood to Qingzhou.

After discussing the grain supply, Yue Yun finally mentioned the construction of the star fort. Since it was decided to station troops, the star fort definitely had to be built.

The reason was simple: this time, he only planned to station a thousand men on the island. With these thousand men combined with the star fort for defense, even if Japanese pirates attacked here, reinforcements would have time to arrive.

After all, with grain in the star fort and cannons on the city walls, a thousand men would be enough to resist the Japanese pirates for a period.

After clarifying the island's plan, Yue Yun then joined the King of Sanmyo for dinner at his invitation. Having arrived in the morning, it was now night, so he could only rest on the island.

The next day, he ordered one warship to return and relay the news of the Sanmyo Kingdom's occupation.

Five days later, the news of the Sanmyo Kingdom's capture reached the Qingzhou government office.

"The Sanmyo Kingdom can provide Qingzhou with 600,000 shi of grain this time?" Pang Yukun said, shocked.

Fiji, however, was confused, "Your Highness, Chang'an also has records of tribute from the Sanmyo Kingdom. The Sanmyo Kingdom only offered some coral and gold and silver statues as tribute. Why is it providing Your Highness with so much grain this time?"

"This time is different from that time. Then, the Sanmyo Kingdom was a vassal state of the Great Yu Empire, but now it is our colony," Xiao Ming said indifferently. The Sanmyo Kingdom's status in his mind was now only at this level.

After all, this was a country independent of the Great Yu Empire, and its common people did not yet identify with the Great Yu Empire. However, once he implemented education on the island, this place would eventually become Great Yu Empire's Hawaii, not Japan's Hawaii.

Fiji had only just encountered the concept of a colony. He said, "Your Highness, is this appropriate? To pacify the world, one should use the Kingly Way, not the Hegemonic Way. Without benevolence, all hearts will be lost, and in the future, which foreign land will still revere the Great Yu Empire as the Celestial Empire?"

Hearing this, Xiao Ming frowned. He said, "Elder Fiji, governing the world should be done with the Kingly Way, not the Hegemonic Way. But contending for the world should be done with the Hegemonic Way, not the Kingly Way. Now that the world is unsettled, isn't the Kingly Way too early? Moreover, the surrounding barbarians fear power but do not embrace virtue. Our Great Yu Empire has been

benevolent to the surrounding barbarians, yet whenever we are weak and poor, we suffer their bullying. At those times, did they ever consider the Great Yu Empire's benevolence towards them?"

"Your Highness, this..." Fiji was suddenly speechless.

After a pause, Xiao Ming said, "You constantly speak of the Kingly Way, yet why have the emperors of the Great Yu Empire throughout history treated their own common people like dirt, but treated barbarians as honored guests?"

Fiji's face turned pale then red, then red then pale. This time, Xiao Ming seemed very angry. He sighed inwardly, finally understanding why Qingzhou was so unique, because Xiao Ming's ideas were themselves very unique.

Pang Yukun saw Fiji being reprimanded and swallowed the words that had reached his throat. In fact, his views were very similar to Fiji's. Now that Fiji had taken the blow, he kept silent.

Originally, Xiao Ming was very happy about the news of the Sanmyo Kingdom's capture, but now it was all ruined by Fiji. Waving his hand, he told Fiji and Pang Yukun to leave.

Fiji's words this time were full of the so-called benevolence and morality of Confucianism, but the prevailing rules of the Age of Exploration were about who was more barbaric. And what he resented most was that throughout history, from ancient times to the present, there had always been this kind of "rather give to outsiders than to domestic servants" mentality, like Fiji's.

In fact, many people misunderstood the tribute system, thinking that the Great Yu Empire gained an advantage from it. This was not true, because after each tribute, the Great Yu Empire would give back goods worth several times more to the envoy of the vassal state for them to take back.

Even during the Ming Dynasty, Japan greatly profited from tribute, even paying tribute twice a year, because it was a profitable business for Japan. This was like giving someone 100 kuai and calling them “boss,” and then the person called “boss” happily giving that person 10,000 kuai – utterly foolish.

Because of this, now that he had come to this era, he wanted to break this cycle of thought. From now on, the Great Yu Empire would not be a false gentleman, but rather a true scoundrel. He wanted to conquer and plunder externally, and be benevolent internally, because in his view, that was what a normal country should be.

However, Fiji’s words also finally made him understand why dynasties changed and the common people had no attachment to the court. In fact, the common people had their own scale in their hearts: if the ruler treats me as a national scholar, I will repay him as a national scholar; if the ruler treats me like dirt, I will repay him as an enemy.

*TN: “Hegemonic way” and “kingly way” represent contrasting approaches to leadership and governance, particularly in a historical and political context. The hegemonic way is characterized by dominance and control, often through power and coercion, seeking to impose its will on others. Conversely, the kingly way emphasizes virtue, moral leadership, and the well-being of all, aiming to create a stable and harmonious order through persuasion and positive influence, rather than force.

Chapter 587

Outside the princely estate, Fiji and Pang Yukun walked side by side.

Fiji, who had been severely reprimanded, said dejectedly, "Alas, His Highness's temper is truly unfathomable. Was what I said wrong just now? From ancient times to the present, every dynasty has treated foreign vassal states this way."

"Elder Fiji, whether right or wrong, at least with His Highness, it was wrong. However, if we think carefully, what His Highness said doesn't seem to be wrong either. For example, the Sanmyo Kingdom, if we still treated it with the old methods, it would certainly fall into the hands of Japanese pirates within a few days. And once Japanese pirates have ample food supplies, they will inevitably invade. At that time, our benevolence would be cruelty to the common people of Great Yu Empire. If that's the case, His Highness's thoughts are entirely correct."

"What you said makes some sense," Fiji seemed to realize, "But what about the Great Yu Empire's reputation?"

"Can reputation fill your stomach?" Pang Yukun quoted one of Xiao Ming's frequent sayings.

Fiji opened his mouth, then sighed deeply, "It seems I need to go to Bowen Academy and read more. Perhaps I can understand His Highness's thoughts."

As the two were talking, they suddenly saw Li Kaiyuan carrying a basket of something with two men, walking towards the princely estate.

Pang Yukun stopped him and asked, "What is this?"

"Sweet potatoes," Li Kaiyuan said, wiping his sweat. This batch of sweet potatoes had just been unloaded from the merchant ship, and he immediately sent them over.

Pang Yukun's eyes widened. "These are sweet potatoes?"

“Yes, the Dutch merchant ship delivered them to Dengzhou, and I quickly had them transported back,” Li Kaiyuan said, motioning for his men to leave.

Fiji looked at the somewhat dazed Pang Yukun and asked, “Chief Grand Secretary Pang, why are you so excited?”

“Because this thing is even higher yielding than potatoes,” Pang Yukun said, tears welling up in his eyes. “It seems that from now on, no one in the Great Yu Empire will starve to death.”

“Higher yielding than potatoes?” Fiji was also shocked, his mouth agape. He looked at the contents of the basket, but Li Kaiyuan had already left with his men.

Entering the princely estate, Li Kaiyuan went directly to Xiao Ming.

“Your Highness, these are the sweet potatoes sent by the Dutch,” Li Kaiyuan said, pointing to the sweet potatoes piled in the bamboo basket.

“The sweet potatoes are here!” Xiao Ming was feeling depressed, but at the sight of the sweet potatoes, his spirits instantly lifted.

“They arrived in Dengzhou three days ago. As soon as they docked, I had them sent over. Your Highness, can this really yield thirty shi per mu?” Li Kaiyuan was still a bit disbelieving.

“Of course, how could that be false? Potatoes have already proven themselves, and now I will let sweet potatoes prove themselves too.” Xiao Ming said happily. In his opinion, sweet potatoes were even more valuable than potatoes.

The preservation of potatoes was still an issue, but sweet potatoes could be completely sliced and dried into sweet potato chips. When he was young, he often ate sweet potato chips, and the old people at that time said that they also ate them when they were young, and even ate steamed buns made from sweet potato leaves.

Li Kaiyuan nodded, “If that’s the case, with both potatoes and sweet potatoes, the state’s food problem will be solved.”

“It’s not that simple; we still have to wait until they are widely adopted,” Xiao Ming said with a smile. Abundant food meant population growth.

During the Age of Exploration, the West experienced a population explosion, and he could not fall behind. In his view, after the Great Yu Empire’s civil war ended, there would inevitably be a large-scale decline in population. With abundant food, he could encourage childbirth.

Looking at the sweet potatoes in the basket, Xiao Ming was happy but also a little envious. It had been a long time since he had eaten roasted sweet potatoes. Just then, Ziyuan passed by outside the main hall. Xiao Ming quickly called her over and asked her to take the sweet potatoes to the kitchen to be roasted.

“Your Highness, these are sweet potatoes?” Ziyuan’s eyes darted around.

Xiao Ming knew what the girl was thinking. He had told them about the deliciousness of sweet potatoes on weekdays, so he said, "There are many sweet potatoes. You can take a few to eat then."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Ziyuan said happily.

After delivering the sweet potatoes, Li Kaiyuan had nothing else to do and left the princely estate after excusing himself.

At this moment, Xiao Ming also returned to his bedchamber with a smiling face.

At this time, Fei Yuer was reading a book. Seeing Xiao Ming so happy, Fei Yuer smiled and said, "What makes Your Highness so happy?"

"Li Kaiyuan sent sweet potatoes, and the Sanmyo Kingdom will also send grain soon. Now, the state's grain is about to be harvested, and potatoes will also be harvested in autumn. In this way, the state will have abundant food." The more Xiao Ming thought about it, the happier he became. Food is the paramount concern of the people. With this grain, he wouldn't have to fear anything.

Fei Yuer was also happy for Xiao Ming upon hearing this. When she first came to Qingzhou, she thought she would live a hard life, but she never expected life in Qingzhou to be more comfortable than in Chang'an.

"Congratulations, Your Highness," Fei Yuer smiled.

Xiao Ming felt a surge of pride upon hearing this. The state's construction was progressing steadily, and his heart felt increasingly secure.

...

While the two were talking, the kitchen was already in a chaotic state. The aroma of roasted sweet potatoes attracted Lu Luo and Xiao Huan as well.

After learning that these were the sweet potatoes Xiao Ming had spoken of, the two maids immediately grew eager to eat them, swarming to grab them. Ziyuan looked helpless, but she couldn't be bothered to manage them, because she had already taken a large sweet potato beforehand. With a giggle, she took a light bite, and immediately a sweet and fragrant taste spread in her mouth. The taste was much better than boiled potatoes, and at this time, Lu Luo and Xiao Huan were also eating with relish.

"Your Highness is truly capable, to be able to get such delicious things," Ziyuan ate several bites in a row, then sighed contentedly.

Lu Luo ate the fastest. After finishing what was in her mouth, she squinted her eyes in enjoyment, then looked at the sweet potato in Ziyuan's hand and said unwillingly, "Sister Ziyuan, can you finish such a big sweet potato? Let me help you eat it."

"Oh, you!" Ziyuan rolled her eyes at Lu Luo and gave her a portion. "Your Highness was right, you're just a little foodie."

Lu Luo didn't care; she was happy as long as she had food.

Roasted sweet potatoes were naturally sent to Xiao Ming as well. Xiao Ming wasn't particularly surprised to see the sweet potatoes on the plate. After all, he had eaten plenty of them in modern times. Fei Yuer, however, was different; she excitedly picked one up and stuffed it into her mouth.

Xiao Ming snatched it away empty-handed and said, "Peel it before you eat it." Saying so, he peeled the sweet potato and gave it to Fei Yuer.

Fei Yuer took it with a giggle, took a small bite, and chewed gently, mumbling, "Mmm, it's really delicious!"

Xiao Ming also picked up a sweet potato and ate it. Sweet potatoes, like potatoes, were a great tool for solving famine. After food became abundant, they would not be considered a staple food. Potatoes could be cooked, while sweet potatoes would become ingredients for snacks.

After eating half, Fei Yuer felt choked and quickly drank a few sips of water. It was her first time eating it, and she naturally found it very delicious, but sweet potatoes, like potatoes, were quite dry when eaten plain and could be choking. However, it had to be said that these sweet potatoes were truly delicious.

Chapter 588

The bedchamber was filled with the sweet scent of roasted sweet potatoes.

Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer each held one, eating with relish. Of course, he hadn't forgotten Imperial Concubine Zhen; he had already sent some roasted sweet potatoes to her earlier.

"Your Highness, these sweet potatoes are so delicious and high-yielding. This is truly a blessing for the Great Yu Empire," Fei Yuer chewed slowly, the smile in her eyes growing deeper.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Now with potatoes and sweet potatoes, I am at ease concerning the state's agriculture."

For him, the main things he introduced were these two high-yield crops. As for other cash crops, he wasn't in a hurry. After all, the common people of the Great Yu Empire were currently only seeking basic sustenance, not craving nutritional balance like modern people.

Fei Yuer nodded, then she said, "Now, Your Highness not only doesn't need to worry about agriculture, but you also don't need to worry about the textile industry. After the steam engine entered the textile workshop, the output of cloth increased greatly. Now, the cotton sent from Chu is not enough."

As she spoke, Fei Yuer took a roll of blue cloth from the table and brought it to Xiao Ming.

"This is the cloth woven by the textile workshop?" Xiao Ming spread the cloth in his hand and stroked it. Although this cloth was dyed, its surface was very smooth, and each cotton thread was very tightly woven.

Holding the cloth, he pulled hard on it, which showed that the cloth was very strong. Overall, this was the most exquisite cloth Xiao Ming had seen in the Great Yu Empire.

"This is certainly real. Only the looms in the textile workshop combined with the steam engine can produce such cloth. Now, I am preparing to use these fabrics to produce military uniforms for the army,

but now the steam engine has greatly increased the output of the textile workshop, so the cotton is not enough, and the price of cotton from Chu has also risen because of this.”

At this, Fei Yuer seemed displeased, probably blaming the cotton merchants from Chu for raising prices opportunistically.

Xiao Ming, however, was unconcerned. He said, “Actually, it’s very simple. When the price of cotton rises, the price of cloth also becomes expensive. At that time, we will let our merchants sell it at a high price to Chu, and the profit will be earned back.”

Fei Yuer immediately smiled upon hearing this. She said, “Your Highness is right. I will instruct Lu Luo tomorrow to raise the price of cloth sold to Chu merchants.”

During this period, Xiao Ming had spent less time with Fei Yuer due to the war in Wei. Now that he had some free time, Fei Yuer seemed to have endless things to say.

After talking about sweet potatoes and cloth, Fei Yuer suddenly asked with interest, “Your Highness, yesterday when I was lecturing at the women’s academy, one of the female students mentioned something about feudalism and constitutional monarchy.”

“Who said that?” Hearing this, Xiao Ming frowned.

Fei Yuer saw Xiao Ming’s serious expression and dared not conceal anything, saying, “This female student is none other than Yang Shiman, the daughter of Yang Chengye, the prefect of Dengzhou. I also asked her, but she said that a Dutch merchant told her about dual monarchy and parliamentary monarchy.”

“Dutch merchants,” Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s not surprising. Yang Chengye interacts a lot with the Dutch, so it’s inevitable that he would learn some Western things from them.”

Fei Yuer was his confidante, and Xiao Ming usually taught her a lot of knowledge not present in the Great Yu Empire. However, he had never discussed these national political systems with Fei Yuer.

Now that Fei Yuer asked, he explained, “What the Dutch refer to as feudalism is the current political system of the Great Yu Empire. This system is based on a hierarchical enfeoffment by the noble ruling class, occupying land and peasants as wealth. As for constitutional monarchy, it is the political system of many Western countries now. Generally speaking, constitutional monarchy is divided into dual constitutional monarchy and parliamentary constitutional monarchy.”

Fei Yuer showed an interested expression. After reading the books from Bowen Academy, she gradually became interested in other parts of the world.

Taking a sip of tea, he continued, “The essence of constitutional monarchy is to establish a parliament to limit the monarch’s power. However, the difference is that in a dual constitutional monarchy, the emperor’s power is higher than that of the parliament, while in a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, the emperor may lose some power, or even become a mere figurehead.”

“What is this parliament?” Fei Yuer asked.

“Simply put, it is the supreme power institution that represents the interests of merchants. This institution possesses all the powers of the emperor,” Xiao Ming explained.

Fei Yuer frowned tightly. She said, "These Western countries are really strange. Why can an institution representing the interests of merchants rule a country? If so, wouldn't this country become a tool for merchants to accumulate wealth?"

Xiao Ming was somewhat surprised. He looked at Fei Yuer and asked, "Do you think this kind of national system is not good?"

"Not good," Fei Yuer answered decisively. "Merchants pursue profit. They can do anything for profit."

Xiao Ming smiled, "However, feudal autocracy also has its drawbacks; it's just that the accumulators of wealth change from merchants to powerful families. In essence, there's no difference."

Fei Yuer said, "Your Highness is right. Therefore, a wise monarch can prosper a nation, and a foolish monarch can ruin a nation. But the mandate of heaven is bestowed upon the monarch, so why should Your Highness be interfered with by Western countries?"

Xiao Ming sighed. For him, the real crisis was far from the internal strife of the Great Yu Empire, nor the covetous powerful nations. The biggest crisis actually came from within the Great Yu Empire.

Now, to improve the level of civilization, he was popularizing education in the state, and the result of this was the enlightenment of the people. Once the people's minds were opened, the common people and merchants would actively participate in state affairs.

At that time, it was unknown whether the Great Yu Empire would experience a Glorious Revolution like England's or a French Revolution.

Precisely because of this, the matter brought up by Fei Yuer suddenly cast a shadow over his heart, because perhaps one day, his enemies would be the very people who once supported him.

Because he would not allow events similar to England's Glorious Revolution or the French Revolution to happen in the Great Yu Empire, nor would he allow capital to control the country.

In his opinion, the system is not the decisive factor in a country's rise or fall, because any system is implemented by people, and the ultimate problem lies in the hands of the implementers. Because of this, since ancient times, contemporary China has advocated governance by the virtuous.

However, maintaining a feudal autocracy with the mandate of heaven is also inappropriate. Therefore, he will follow the pace of the times and make some changes to the Great Yu Empire's political system, but he will not strictly imitate the West. For him, a combination of Chinese and Western approaches is more appealing, adopting a middle ground and drawing on the strengths of both to govern the country.

However, discussing political reform before the Great Yu Empire is stable is still too early. He now needs a stable environment to centralize power to end the current warlord chaos. Otherwise, once internal strife arises, it would be equivalent to cutting off his own arms.

Chapter 589

The candlelight flickered in the bedchamber, and outside, the night was pitch black.

Xiao Ming pondered for a long time and then said, "I have a plan in mind. However, since someone in the women's academy brought it up, you should guide them appropriately. Absolutely do not allow irresponsible remarks to spread openly among the students."

"Yes, Your Highness," Fei Yuer said softly.

Xiao Ming nodded. Disturbing internal affairs had always been a Western specialty. He did not want the Great Yu Empire to fall into civil strife before it was revitalized. It would not be too late to attempt political reform when he had built the Great Yu Empire to be strong and wealthy enough.

Moreover, even if such ideas spread among the students now, most common people still wouldn't understand. If political reform were to happen at this time, the beneficiaries would still be these students and merchants, and the common people would gain nothing. Since that was the case, why should he be anxious? After all, for him, the foundation of his rule was the common people.

The two chatted for a while and then went to sleep fully clothed. The next day, Xiao Ming went to the government office. Li Kaiyuan had delivered the sweet potatoes yesterday, but because it was too late, Pang Yukun and Fiji hadn't seen them.

When he arrived, Pang Yukun and Fiji were eating roasted sweet potatoes, and the room was filled with the smell of them.

"Your Highness, these sweet potatoes taste really good," Pang Yukun said, his mouth full of sweet potatoes. Fiji was also eating nonstop.

Xiao Ming smiled, "You've eaten these sweet potatoes. Next is the cultivation of sweet potato seedlings. For this matter, you should go to Kui Wu. Having studied at Bowen Academy for so long, he knows how to cultivate sweet potato seedlings."

"Yes, Your Highness," Pang Yukun swallowed the last bit of sweet potato.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, "By the way, it's almost autumn harvest. You must instruct the government offices in each prefecture to organize militias to strengthen patrols in the fields to prevent the enemy from taking the opportunity to burn the grain."

Pang Yukun's expression became serious. The events of three years ago seemed vivid in his memory. At that time, the powerful families burned wheat fields to sabotage the Battle of Cangzhou, and Xiao Ming himself was almost killed.

Now that there was direct confrontation between Qi and Wei, similar incidents might well recur, which was why Xiao Ming was giving this reminder.

Pang Yukun nodded, "This subordinate will send people to inform the government offices in each prefecture later. Now that every village has militias, it should be better this time."

Fiji had always had mixed feelings about the village militias. In his opinion, the government should be confiscating private weapons, but Qingzhou was actually organizing the common people's own armed forces.

However, after gradually understanding, he slowly realized that this was all based on the common people's support for Xiao Ming and their identification with the state.

The three were discussing sweet potatoes and the autumn harvest when a series of explosions suddenly came from the direction of Bowen Academy.

Pang Yukun said, "It's been a long time since there was a laboratory explosion at Bowen Academy. What went wrong this time?"

Xiao Ming was also a little puzzled. Lu Tong didn't seem to have been doing any dangerous experiments recently, but since there was commotion again, he couldn't just ignore it. So, he said, "You two handle the government affairs, I'll go take a look."

With that, he took Zhao Long and Zhao Hu to Bowen Academy. As soon as he entered the academy gate, he saw plumes of smoke rising from the direction of the chemical laboratory.

He quickened his pace and immediately rushed over.

"What happened?"

Lu Tong was also outside the laboratory, and Xiao Ming asked directly.

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, Lu Tong's face was filled with bitterness. He said, "Your Highness, a student knocked over bottles of sulfuric acid and nitric acid. The boy panicked and took off his clothes to wipe it, then he used fire to dry his clothes. Unexpectedly, the clothes instantly burned to ashes and ignited the laboratory, causing an explosion."

Xiao Ming's expression was strange. He asked, "Didn't he know that clothes soaked in a mixture of sulfuric acid and nitric acid had become smokeless gunpowder?"

Lu Tong said, "This boy is a newly enrolled student, just helping out in the laboratory. He doesn't understand what smokeless gunpowder is at all."

Speaking of smokeless gunpowder, Lu Tong suddenly remembered something. He said, "Your Highness, the laboratory has been developing smokeless gunpowder these days, but it is very unstable, and this problem has not been overcome, so I did not report it to Your Highness."

"That's nothing. How is that student?" Xiao Ming asked.

Lu Tong felt relieved. He said, "He was burned, but it's not a major issue."

Xiao Ming nodded. Actually, the principle of smokeless gunpowder was very simple: just soak cotton in a mixture of concentrated sulfuric acid and concentrated nitric acid for ten minutes, then take it out and air-dry it.

However, the gun cotton, or smokeless gunpowder, produced in this way was very unstable. It needed to be treated with camphor, graphite, and an alcohol-ether mixed solvent and then pressed into shape; otherwise, this gunpowder could easily explode before being fired.

The problem Lu Tong was facing now was the alcohol-ether mixed solvent. If this problem was solved, smokeless gunpowder would become an upgraded version of black gunpowder, serving as a propellant for guns and cannons, and this would increase the range of both bullets and cannonballs.

Originally, Xiao Ming had paid little attention to the development of guncotton, but now that this incident occurred, he had to inquire. As he suspected, the problem Lu Tong faced was indeed the stability of guncotton.

Xiao Ming currently had no solution for this problem and could only let the laboratory try to synthesize it. After all, guncotton was something that not only surpassed Great Yu Empire's technology by many years but even surpassed that of the West by over a hundred years, so it wasn't something easily produced.

However, the fact that Lu Tong dared to develop guncotton showed that he had confidence in smokeless gunpowder. After all, as long as ethylene glycol and propylene glycol were synthesized, the alcohol-ether solvent would basically not be a problem.

Of course, Xiao Ming would also try to find solutions for Lu Tong on this matter. After all, no matter how much Lu Tong and his team learned, they couldn't have as many ideas as he did. However, Lu Tong was still a bit too impatient in this matter. The technical level of guncotton surpassed the West by a century, so it wasn't something that could be achieved in one step so easily.

"Don't be too eager for quick success in this matter. Even if you synthesize ethylene glycol and propylene glycol, with the current output of sulfuric acid and nitric acid, you won't be able to produce guncotton in large quantities. Therefore, your most important task now is to achieve industrial production capable of synthesizing chemical substances. The three acids and two alkalis should also be industrialized for mass production, otherwise, the chemical industry will remain stagnant at an awkward level," Xiao Ming said seriously.

Lu Tong felt ashamed upon hearing this. He admitted that he had been aiming too high recently, all because the steam engine in the physics academy stimulated him.

“Your Highness, I know my mistake,” Lu Tong said, looking embarrassed.

Smiling, Xiao Ming said, “To pursue scholarship and engage in production, you must be down-to-earth. You must proceed step by step.”

Chapter 590

The explosion at Bowen Academy was just a false alarm, which brought a sigh of relief to Xiao Ming.

However, the attempt at smokeless gunpowder still showed him the students’ passionate drive. After more than three years, Qingzhou’s science and technology had not yet completely surpassed the West, but with the efforts of these students, he believed there would be trains, electricity, and internal combustion engines. It wouldn’t take long for the Great Yu Empire to once again stand proudly among the nations in science and technology, becoming a sacred land to which all nations would pay homage.

Having understood the situation, Xiao Ming then instructed Lu Tong on establishing the chemical industry. Afterwards, he used his free time today to inspect various workshops in Qingzhou.

With the establishment of the steam engine workshop, steam engines began to be used in more and more machinery. During the attack on Wei, drilling machines, boring machines, milling machines, and grinding machines all began to use steam engines.

Now, not only did the production speed of gun barrels increase by leaps and bounds, but the production speed of flintlock components also greatly accelerated, as artisans no longer needed to rely on traditional manual grinding methods but directly used mechanical grinding.

Besides the military industry accelerating under the impetus of the steam engine, the textile industry managed by Fei Yuer was also thriving, with greatly improved cloth production and quality.

However, this was only part of the steam engine's role. Lin Wentao was leading the academy's students, preparing to apply steam engines in the chemical and metallurgical industries.

After all, a steam engine could perform both linear motion and be converted into rotary motion through crankshafts and flywheels. It could be said that the steam engine of this era was truly an all-purpose machine. Even in modern times, many industries still used steam engines. His only regret now was that the steam engine could only be used within the small area of Qingzhou, and other prefectures and counties were rarely affected by it.

However, everything is difficult at the beginning, and one must eat one bite at a time.

Upon arriving at the workshop district, Xiao Ming first went to the iron and steel workshop. Lin Wentao had already installed two steam engines there. When he arrived, the steam engines were driving bellows, continuously blowing air into the converter.

Below the converter was burning coal, and on the observation platform above the converter were artisans monitoring the molten steel. Once the molten steel was refined, the artisans below would pull the converter, causing it to tilt.

At this point, the molten steel in the converter would flow out through the tapping hole, then flow down another groove into various molds for shaping.

In addition to the bellows being steam-powered, the iron and steel workshop now also had its own forging hammers. Unlike water-powered forging hammers, these were stable forging hammers powered by steam.

Some large steel structures were gradually taking shape under the pounding of these forging hammers.

Very satisfied with the reforms at the iron and steel workshop, Xiao Ming then went to the paper mill. This industry, since its establishment by Xiao Ming, had always used manual production, so the paper mill's output had always been low.

Now, the steam engine undertook the most important pulping stage in the papermaking process, which immediately increased the output of paper pulp. Now, the artisans only needed to focus on the subsequent processes of sheet formation and pressing. In this way, most artisans were freed up to engage in later work, and paper production also doubled.

Leaving the paper mill, Xiao Ming then went to the white sugar workshop. Similar to the pulping stage for papermaking materials, the work of crushing sugarcane in the white sugar workshop was now also handled by the steam engine.

When combining the steam engine with other machinery, Xiao Ming naturally did not forget to give Lin Wentao the designs for simple machines like crushers. These crushers were produced under the guidance of Lin Wentao and others in the iron and steel workshop.

After all, the structure of a crusher was very simple, just a large cylinder with a fan blade turbine-like structure inside.

Having understood the pilot experiments of the current steam engine, Xiao Ming finally went to Lin Wentao's steam engine workshop. To facilitate obtaining raw materials, the steam engine workshop was located within the workshop area, only a thousand meters away from the iron and steel workshop.

When he arrived at the workshop, Lin Wentao was lecturing students in the workshop's research room.

"Your Highness." Seeing Xiao Ming arrive, Lin Wentao bowed, and the students in the research room looked excited.

Nodding, Xiao Ming looked at the drawing on the blackboard in the research room and said, "Are you researching conveyor belts for coal mines?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Steam engines require a large amount of coal, but there are not many coal mines within Qingzhou, and most are deep mines. If steam engines are used to pump water and transport coal, the output of the mining area will increase significantly. And once coal mines can be used, other mines can also be used, which will allow Qingzhou's metallurgical industry to develop," Lin Wentao said. "Your Highness once said that Qingzhou lacks raw materials, so I thought of developing the machinery needed for mines first."

Hearing this, Xiao Ming smiled with satisfaction. In three or four years, these students' progress was greater day by day, and his daily hard work in writing scientific books had not been in vain after all.

"You truly think what I think. However, what I want to tell you this time is, for example, how about directly separating machinery from steam engines and having a portion of the academy's students be responsible for the research of machinery in various industries?" Xiao Ming said.

In modern times, mechanical engineering is an independent discipline. The steam engine only provides power, and machinery is the purpose of using that power. Now with the steam engine, Xiao Ming can teach the mechanical knowledge from his technology crystal to Lin Wentao and others.

Lin Wentao thought for a moment. Indeed, the academy's main work was now shifting from steam engines to machinery. He said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, this is also feasible. Now that some machinery is being developed from scratch, we do need a dedicated group of people to be responsible for it."

Xiao Ming smiled. The books in Bowen Academy were only a part, arguably just simple junior high school knowledge with some high school knowledge, while mechanical engineering was a proper university major.

Moreover, to prevent technological leaks, he always extracted important technologies from books and compiled them into separate volumes for each laboratory and research institute to study independently.

So he said, "Starting from scratch is too time-consuming. I will give you a book on machinery. You just need to follow the book to manufacture machinery for various industries."

Lin Wentao was somewhat shocked. As he gained more knowledge of science, he increasingly realized that any single discipline in Bowen Academy required a person to expend a great deal of effort to achieve anything, yet Xiao Ming spoke of everything so casually, as if he had a masterful grasp of all knowledge.

Thinking of this, his admiration for Xiao Ming grew even deeper. This admiration was not that of a common person for a monarch, but rather that of a person for someone of profound knowledge.

Having decided on the matter of machinery manufacturing, Xiao Ming chatted with the students of the research institute for a while, and then he went to the Qingzhou Grand Camp. He had prepared the grain and firearms, and the remaining matter was the army.