

I. Dynasty 611

Chapter 611

Gentle and moist sea breezes came in gusts.

After landing on the island, Xiao Ming did not rush to meet the King of Sanmyo, but instead took a stroll around.

According to Xiao Ming's plan, this place was also to be built into a naval port, as it was the front line against Japan, and Japan would certainly not willingly lose the Sanmyo Kingdom.

After all, historically, Japan had always coveted the Sanmyo Kingdom and even the Ryukyu Islands.

In the blink of an eye, it had been half a year since Yue Yun occupied Ryukyu. Now, the construction of the military port had basically taken shape. Cement transported from Qingzhou had allowed for the laying of clean concrete roads.

Overall, the roads here were clean and tidy. The military camp and the dock were built separately, with clear planning. There were also dozens of artillery emplacements on the coast, all equipped with naval guns to defend against pirate attacks.

Rounding the dock and walking a li, one would reach the marine corps camp. Marines and naval soldiers were stationed here. Before even reaching the gate, he heard the soldiers' training shouts from inside. Just then, a person walked out from inside. Seeing Xiao Ming, he quickened his pace.

“Liu Chen, greetings to Your Highness!”

Xiao Ming made a gesture to support him, saying, “Dispense with the formalities.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Liu Chen said.

Xiao Ming lifted his foot and walked into the camp. He recognized Liu Chen, having seen him many times at the naval academy. He joked, “Is life here a bit tough?”

“Reporting to Your Highness, no, it’s not tough. My life was tougher when I used to fish for a living,” Liu Chen said.

Xiao Ming nodded, “It’s good that you’re not afraid of hardship. In the future, the state will have more naval bases overseas, and you navy men will be needed to maintain them. The construction of this Sanmyo Kingdom naval port is good; continue to build according to this standard in the future. Although this place is small, Qingzhou’s food supply also depends on it. Maintaining Great Yu Empire’s overseas interests relies on you.”

“Your Highness trusts us so much, we will certainly not disappoint Your Highness Prince Qi!” Liu Chen said loudly, his tone firm.

Xiao Ming patted Liu Chen’s shoulder. For him, these ordinary generals and soldiers were the cornerstone of the state’s future.

After a brief chat, the three laughed and entered the camp, where they discussed some construction issues of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

Before long, a commotion suddenly arose outside the camp. A soldier came to report: "Your Highness, the King of Sanmyo heard of Your Highness's arrival and has specially come to pay his respects."

"This King of Sanmyo is well-informed," Xiao Ming said with a smile upon hearing this.

Yue Yun said, "This King of Sanmyo is obedient, but he has always been afraid that if we leave, this place will be occupied by Japanese pirates again. At that time, their fate might be very tragic, because the Japanese pirates killed three of his sons during their first occupation here."

Xiao Ming nodded. Occupying overseas territories required considering management costs. If resources could be obtained as desired without management, that would naturally be the best method.

That was why Xiao Ming decided to let the King of Sanmyo continue to manage the area. Once the Great Yu Empire was unified and had enough talented individuals, they would completely take over the Sanmyo Kingdom.

"Let's go, come with me to greet him." Xiao Ming stood up. He felt he didn't need to put on airs of a superior celestial empire. After all, even a visit from a lower-ranked country in modern times would be met with respect.

He needed the King of Sanmyo's help now, and he should make him willing in his heart.

Yue Yun and Liu Chen exchanged glances, but still followed Xiao Ming out.

Outside the military camp, the King of Sanmyo waited uneasily. Seeing a young man emerge, flanked by Yue Yun and Liu Chen, he immediately knelt and said, "I greet His Royal Highness Prince Qi."

"King of Sanmyo, dispense with the formalities," Xiao Ming helped the King of Sanmyo up and said, "The Sanmyo Kingdom has been enfeoffed by the Great Yu Empire throughout its history. Now, due to complex state affairs, we neglected the King of Sanmyo and allowed Japanese pirates to run rampant here, which is truly regrettable."

The King of Sanmyo wore an expression of profound gratitude, shedding tears. He said, "I am indebted to Your Royal Highness Prince Qi for not abandoning us. I hope Your Highness will always look after us from now on and not forget this place."

Xiao Ming nodded, "My personal visit is to put the King of Sanmyo's mind at ease."

Upon hearing this, the King of Sanmyo beamed with joy. He said, "Your Highness, when I came, I had already ordered a banquet to be prepared. I hope Your Highness can share fine wine in my palace."

"In that case, I would be rude to refuse," Xiao Ming said.

Having drifted at sea for several days, Xiao Ming was also a bit tired. At this moment, he needed to relax a bit, so he prepared to attend the banquet with Yue Yun and Liu Chen.

As night fell, Xiao Ming, accompanied by Yue Yun, Liu Chen, and Huang Tingzhi, proceeded to the Sanmyo Kingdom under the protection of soldiers. At this time, the King of Sanmyo had prepared a seafood feast. In such a place, meat was scarce, but seafood was abundant.

The three sat down, immediately attracted by the various seafood on the banquet. There were abalones, lobsters, sea crabs, and various kinds of fish, and even shark fins, all of considerable size. In the eyes of modern people, it would definitely be extremely luxurious.

Looking at the dishes, Xiao Ming was not in a hurry to eat. At this moment, Huang Tingzhi first took out a silver needle and tested each dish. Seeing no anomaly, he nodded.

The King of Sanmyo then remembered something. Japan had occupied the Sanmyo Kingdom for over ten years, and it was inevitable that there would be pro-Japanese individuals on the island. He then said a few words to a guard, and soon two chefs were brought over. He ordered the chefs to taste each dish to prove the safety of the ingredients.

Xiao Ming expressed approval for the King of Sanmyo's attitude.

At this moment, the King of Sanmyo clapped his hands, and suddenly a group of women in red dancing attire fluttered like butterflies.

The leading woman, with her face veiled in white gauze, faced Xiao Ming, occasionally glancing at him during the dance.

Yue Yun and Liu Chen were dumbfounded. The two had been crude men not long ago and had never seen such a spectacle. For a moment, their eyes were fixed on the graceful dancers.

As the saying goes, “After three years in the army, even a sow looks like a tree-climbing beauty.” Xiao Ming noticed their expressions and wondered if he should provide an outlet for these soldiers who were far from home.

The King of Sanmyo kept his eyes on Xiao Ming. Seeing that Xiao Ming was not interested in the leading woman, he felt a little disappointed. When the dance ended, he spoke, “Is Your Highness satisfied with my humble daughter’s dance?”

Xiao Ming was startled upon hearing this. He then realized and said, “This dance is graceful and beautiful, truly pleasing to the eye.”

The King of Sanmyo grew more disappointed. Xiao Ming hadn’t praised his daughter’s beauty at all.

Xiao Ming laughed inwardly. This King of Sanmyo was probably trying a marriage alliance strategy, but he wouldn’t fall for it. After all, his daughter and Fei Yuer were worlds apart.

However, since the King of Sanmyo was well-intentioned, he couldn’t ignore it. After all, this was also for mutual trust. He said, “I have a younger brother who is eighteen this year, and he would be a very suitable match for your daughter.”

Chapter 612

“Thank you, Your Highness, for your great kindness.”

The atmosphere in the palace had been somewhat awkward, but Xiao Ming's words, like a masterstroke, immediately livened it up.

"No need for thanks, King of Sanmyo. A talented man and a beautiful woman, a match made in heaven, that too is a beautiful thing," Xiao Ming said.

The King of Sanmyo was also a shrewd man. This brother of Xiao Ming was also a prince, and for a small country like his, it was still a great rise in status. This was enough for him.

With just a few words, the marriage alliance was settled, and the atmosphere in the palace immediately became lively.

Yue Yun and Liu Chen also became more talkative due to the alcohol.

"...Your Highness, the most dangerous thing in the sea are sharks. Just after driving away the Japanese, I was almost eaten by a shark..." After a few drinks, Liu Chen opened up and began recounting his heroic deeds during his time in the Sanmyo Kingdom.

Yue Yun spat out his wine and said, "You deserved it! You clearly saw the shark's fin exposed, but you had to show off and say you wanted to compete with the shark. In the end, that shark, three or four meters big, charged out. It's lucky it didn't eat you."

Xiao Ming and Huang Tingzhi ate seafood, paying no mind to the two. Huang Tingzhi, in particular, seemed to have never eaten seafood before and was now devouring it.

He was not to be outdone, picking up an abalone and stuffing it into his mouth. It must be said that marine life in this era was very abundant. For example, these abalones, according to Liu Chen, were so densely packed on the reefs that no one even ate them.

However, they wouldn't let such good things go to waste. Now, they ate this stuff frequently in the camp, making Xiao Ming sigh that their lives were indeed quite comfortable.

After eating an abalone, Xiao Ming's gaze fell on a large basin of lobsters in the middle. These lobsters were all enormous. They looked at least half a catty each, freshly caught. Xiao Ming's greasy hand reached for another lobster.

Having eaten and drunk his fill, Xiao Ming let out a satisfied burp. Such a meal would be extremely luxurious in modern times. However, after the meal, it was time to discuss serious matters. He asked, "That pirate Hu Hai, has he still not been captured?"

Yue Yun showed a look of annoyance and said, "Not yet. I suspect he has fled to Japan. Now, those attacking merchant fleets are some small pirates, but he is always a hidden danger. He will certainly not willingly give up the Sanmyo Kingdom."

"Japan will not willingly give up this place either. I believe they will surely return." Xiao Ming understood that what Yue Yun said was true. Since ancient times, this country had never been peaceful, always thinking of invading other countries. Dynasties throughout history had launched several punitive expeditions against Japan, but all ended in failure. However, now that Xiao Ming had arrived, he would not allow them to grow into a threat.

While they were discussing, a large fleet was assembling at Nagasaki port in Japan.

At the dock, Hu Hai was cautiously accompanying a Japanese man. This man wore a loose black kimono and a triangular black hat, with a pair of triangular eyes, his gaze revealing a formidable presence. He was Sakai, who had been defeated in Ryukyu.

“Hu Hai, you are primarily responsible for losing the Sanmyo Kingdom. So, after we set off, have your men sail in front!” Sakai said in a commanding tone.

Hu Hai’s eyes flashed with annoyance upon hearing this. After being defeated by the Qingzhou fleet, he fled to Japan with his remaining routed soldiers. After Japan occupied the Sanmyo Kingdom, it supported him in becoming the de facto ruler of the kingdom.

So now he could only rely on Japan to regain power, but Japan was currently preparing for war against Goryeo and was unable to concern itself with the Sanmyo Kingdom. After much pleading, Yamada Nobunaga only agreed to send a portion of pirates to assist him.

Because in Yamada Nobunaga’s view, it was impossible for Qingzhou to always station so many fleets at the Sanmyo Kingdom’s dock.

“Yes, I’ll go arrange it!” Though annoyed, Hu Hai complied. After all, “when under someone’s roof, one has to bow one’s head.” He now needed Japan to help him reclaim everything he had lost.

Otherwise, he would ultimately become nothing more than a pirate.

Seeing Hu Hai leave, Sakai showed a disdainful look. From beginning to end, he had never thought highly of this fellow. This time, Yamada Nobunaga’s purpose was not to capture the Sanmyo Kingdom, but to capture a Qingzhou warship.

After preparations were complete, Sakai led the pirate ships towards the Sanmyo Kingdom, hoping that this time they would get what they wished for.

Sanmyo Kingdom.

After the banquet, Xiao Ming and the others stayed in the palace. The next day, everyone woke up very late. With fine wine and delicious food, they had slept soundly through the night.

However, at noon, he was suddenly woken by Yue Yun's voice.

"Your Highness, the patrolling warships have spotted a large fleet of pirate ships heading towards the dock," Yue Yun said nervously. If Xiao Ming weren't here, it wouldn't matter, but with Xiao Ming present, he inevitably worried about Xiao Ming's safety.

"Pirate ships?" Xiao Ming frowned. He put on his clothes and stood up. These Japanese pirates really knew how to pick their time. 'Did a traitor among us expose my whereabouts?'

"Your Highness, that's impossible. We just arrived last night, but it takes some time for the Japanese pirates to prepare a pirate fleet. It's just a coincidence this time."

Xiao Ming nodded. "This time, I really don't know if I'm unlucky or they are."

With that, Xiao Ming looked at the more than twenty warships berthed at the dock. For Xiao Ming's safety, Yue Yun had gone to great lengths this time.

"Naturally, they are the unlucky ones," Yue Yun said with a smile. "But please, Your Highness, go to the star fort for temporary shelter. It's not safe in this royal palace."

Xiao Ming nodded. At this moment, the best way was to give them more trouble by replenishing.

After a quick wash, Xiao Ming left the palace and went to the military camp within the star fort. At this time, the soldiers in the star fort were all neatly dressed and had taken their defensive positions, looking as if a great battle was about to begin.

After Yue Yun and Liu Chen had settled Xiao Ming, the two walked together towards the dock.

The news from the patrolling warships indicated that the pirate fleet was not far from here. They had to set sail immediately to meet the enemy and eliminate the Japanese pirates at sea. Otherwise, once the Japanese pirates landed, Xiao Ming could be in danger. Thinking of this, both felt a little nervous.

Upon reaching the dock, they immediately rallied the crew to board the ships. Everything was ready, and Yue Yun and Liu Chen led the fleet north. According to the news from the patrolling warships, there were 200 pirate ships this time, a formidable lineup.

But even so, the two were already very confident in their ability to fight at sea. 200 warships without cannons are nothing more than targets; the only thing to worry about was these ships getting too close.

At this moment, Hu Hai and Sakai could already see the coastline of the Sanmyo Kingdom. A cruel glint flashed in Hu Hai's eyes. This time, he would surely bathe the royal palace in blood, making them understand who was truly the King of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

Chapter 613

The calm sea was like a blue mirror. Under the golden sunlight, the mirror seemed to have countless golden carp swimming in it.

A gentle sea breeze blew, bringing with it a salty scent of the ocean. Yue Yun and Liu Chen commanded the warships to sail smoothly with the wind.

White seagulls circled in the sky above the warships. They had no idea that a war was about to begin.

Leaving the dock, the pirate warships suddenly appeared in everyone's sight. At this moment, Liu Chen picked up his telescope and looked over. The two sides were now only three or four li apart. With the telescope, he could clearly see the personnel on the Japanese warships.

"General, it's Sakai and Hu Hai," Liu Chen said.

"As I expected. Not capturing Hu Hai that day was a hidden danger," Yue Yun also picked up his telescope and began to scout.

There were not many Atakebune among the warships that came to the Sanmyo Kingdom this time, perhaps only about thirty. The other warships, in his opinion, were not warships at all; strictly speaking, they were merely converted merchant ships.

At this time, many people dressed as Japanese samurai stood on these merchant ships, and besides them, there were pirates disguised as soldiers of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

However, when Yue Yun saw the small boats at the very back of the fleet, his expression suddenly changed.

Liu Chen also seemed to notice something. He said, "They brought fire ships this time."

"These Japanese pirates seem to have learned their lesson." Yue Yun's face was solemn. These fire ships were small boats, manipulated by two or three people to charge into the enemy's warships and set them ablaze. Some fire ships even carried explosive barrels. If they were to be stuck by such fire ships, it would be extremely troublesome.

Sometimes, these fire ships didn't even need to be manned; they just needed to drift with the wind into the enemy's fleet to cause damage.

After a moment of thought, he said, "We are currently upwind. Immediately order the fleet to engage in a 'crossing the T' maneuver to prevent them from moving upwind." "Yes, General," Liu Chen said solemnly.

Every time they engaged in naval combat, they dealt with it seriously. Although they were confident, they were not arrogant.

“Two hundred and thirty-six!” Yue Yun counted the number of Sakai’s and Hu Hai’s warships. If they could annihilate this batch of warships this time, he believed that incidents of Japanese pirates attacking merchant ships at sea would become much rarer.

Because these pirates were very active at sea right now.

And this time, they had a total of twenty-four warships stationed in the Sanmyo Kingdom, excluding one second-rate sailing warship, there were also twenty-three third-rate warships.

Currently, the focus of shipbuilding was on these types of warships because, compared to large warships, third-rate warships had a more balanced combination of flexibility and speed. Their sailing speed at sea greatly surpassed that of Japan’s Atakebune. Once targeted, these Japanese pirate warships could not escape.

More than twenty warships appeared on the sea, and Sakai and Hu Hai were both instantly shocked.

“How is this possible!” Hu Hai looked at the suddenly appearing Qingzhou fleet as if a basin of cold water had been poured over his head.

For the past half year, he had regularly sent men to scout the dock. Each time, there were only three warships berthed at the dock. This time, their plan was to directly charge into the dock and seize the Qingzhou fleet’s ships.

Once the Japanese obtained the warships, they would cooperate with him to attack the star fort and completely drive Prince Qi’s army out of the Sanmyo Kingdom.

Sakai's face was extremely grim. "You traitor! You must have sold us out to Prince Qi to claim credit, letting their fleet ambush us here!"

"Lord Sakai, absolutely impossible! I could never betray you!" Hu Hai was also somewhat flustered at this moment.

During this period, they had engaged in many skirmishes with the Qingzhou patrol warships at sea, but the Qingzhou warships' sailing speed, firepower, and maneuverability greatly surpassed those of their own warships.

Every time they attacked a merchant ship and were discovered, there was only one outcome: sinking under the Qingzhou warships' cannon fire.

It was for this reason that Sakai became enraged. Because they were so close now, more than 200 warships couldn't turn around in time. This couldn't help but make him suspect it was a trap.

"Is that so? In that case, you will now lead your fleet forward to block them," Sakai said angrily. He would not be so foolish as to engage the Qingzhou warships at sea now.

Hu Hai's face instantly turned white. He took a step back, also recalling the terror of the Qingzhou warships half a year ago.

“Heh heh, I knew you betrayed us. Now you have two choices: either you lead your men to attack now, or I kill you with my own hands. Which do you choose?”

“Sakai, I didn’t betray you! You can’t treat me like this!” At this moment, two Japanese soldiers responded by grabbing Hu Hai. Hu Hai’s face immediately turned deathly pale.

“Anyone can talk. Now you don’t even want a chance to prove your innocence. How can I believe you?” Sakai said, then gave the two soldiers a look.

The two soldiers immediately pushed Hu Hai to the bow of the ship, while he drew his katana, ready to strike at any moment.

Hu Hai finally despaired. He pleaded, “I’ll go, I’ll go!”

Hearing this, Sakai revealed a satisfied smile. He said, “If you had made this decision earlier, you wouldn’t have had to suffer.”

Hu Hai’s face changed. At this moment, he understood that Sakai and the Japanese daimyo had never treated him as a human being. In their eyes, he was nothing more than a dog.

Despite his inner sorrow, he still directed his fleet to charge towards the Qingzhou warships. Yue Yun had been observing them, and their movements on the ship also fell into his eyes. The chaos on the ship only lasted for a while before ending. Then he saw some warships moving towards his direction.

Yue Yun was a little puzzled, not understanding what was happening, but he only thought about it for a moment before no longer pondering the issue. At this moment, the warships commanded by Liu Chen had slowed down, preparing for battle.

Indeed, soon the warships began to turn, one side facing Hu Hai's fleet. Because Hu Hai's fleet had too many ships, Liu Chen dared not risk letting the warships get too close, otherwise, once Hu Hai's ships approached the warships, they would have countless ways to deal with his warships.

At that time, once contact was made, the enemy sailors would jump into the sea to attack their warships using tactics like scuttling and setting fires. In previous naval battles, they had suffered from these despicable tactics by the Japanese pirates.

And most importantly, with Xiao Ming on the island this time, he was even less likely to take that risk.

This time, Liu Chen's warships were divided into three routes. He led the center, and as he prepared, the left and right fleets outflanked the pirate ships.

They intended to cut off the pirate ships' retreat and annihilate the enemy in one go.

Their responsibility now was to contend for naval supremacy, and they absolutely could not miss any opportunity to eliminate Japan's viable forces.

Hu Hai and Sakai stood at the bow, watching the Qingzhou warships turning, their faces growing increasingly grim. They understood this was a sign that the Qingzhou warships were preparing to open fire.

Chapter 614

On the vast sea, the Qingzhou warships were connected bow to stern, their white sails fluttering in the wind, forming a “T” shape on the sea.

Hu Hai’s warships were coming from north to south. Before the engagement, the two fleets formed a “T” shape, which was the most classic battle formation of the age of sailing warships.

Because this allowed the fleet to unleash 100% of its firepower.

“General, can we begin?” Liu Chen asked.

Yue Yun nodded. He said, “Begin. Resolve these pirates as quickly as possible!”

For him, he had no worries about this battle. In the face of an absolute power disparity, war was merely a one-sided crushing. As long as they weren’t ambushed, they wouldn’t suffer defeat.

“Yes, General!” Liu Chen turned back. He had the flag bearer signal the forward warships.

Small red flags waved in the hands of the signalmen, and then a series of roars sounded. Liu Chen and Yue Yun, standing on the flagship, saw countless black dots flying like lightning towards the distant pirate ships.

Whether it was Japanese warships or Hu Hai's warships, the navies, still relying on traditional boarding tactics, merely charged forward in a disorganized swarm, with no discernible combat strategy.

Now, Sakai and Hu Hai once again demonstrated their ignorance of naval tactics. At this moment, the first batch of thirty-odd warships charged forward like warriors.

Under the grapeshot fired from hundreds of cannons, instantly, more than ten pirate ships were riddled with holes, and nearly all the crew members on board were killed or wounded.

After the first round of cannon fire, Sakai's heart pounded uncontrollably. This was a primal fear of death.

Looking at the destroyed warships in the front row, Sakai's face was like yellow wax, and Hu Hai was so scared that his legs went weak and he directly sat on the ground. The view in front of him suddenly widened, because many of the ships in front of him had completely turned into wooden debris.

The soldiers on the ships screamed in agony. They were either severely wounded by cannonballs or so scared that they jumped into the sea. For a moment, the cries of dying pirates were everywhere. The sea had been dyed red, and the bloody smell quickly attracted the fish in the sea.

"Help, help!" The soldiers in the water cried out in despair, but Hu Hai could only numbly watch his struggling subordinates in the water.

"Quickly send out the second wave of ships." Sakai suddenly shouted hysterically, then he ordered his warship to retreat.

Hu Hai immediately understood. Sakai didn't suspect him of being a traitor at all; he just wanted to use his men as human shields to allow him to retreat calmly.

He was enraged, but the Japanese soldier's sword was at his neck. For his own life, he could only continue to dispatch warships.

However, he overestimated the soldiers' loyalty. In the face of absolute power, the previously fierce pirates turned into cowards. They maneuvered their warships to escape, and the originally well-ordered fleet quickly fell into chaos, with ships squeezing and colliding into each other.

Yue Yun was not going to let any pirates escape. It would be a failure of his ability if he couldn't eat the meat delivered to his mouth.

While the Japanese pirates and Hu Hai's warships were in chaos, the two flanking fleets quickly outflanked the Japanese fleet and also began to use cannon fire.

Caught in a three-sided pincer attack, black grapeshot poured down, and the 200 ships, unable to resist in the chaos, were sunk one by one.

The desperate pirates struggled in the water, trying to grasp any floating debris. If given another chance, they would never again be willing to fight the Qingzhou Navy.

The cannon fire on the sea continued, and Sakai's and Hu Hai's warships were not spared. After falling into the water, the two groped around for a while, then climbed onto a large wooden plank.

At this time, there was no longer any friendliness between the two; instead, they glared at each other like sworn enemies. Sakai resented Hu Hai for getting him into this situation, while Hu Hai hated Sakai for sending him to his death.

However, after exchanging glances, the two began to collectively face the other crew members attempting to climb onto the wooden plank.

Looking at the chaotic scene on the sea, Yue Yun's gaze quickly focused on the two figures, because one of the Japanese-dressed individuals was too conspicuous; that person was Sakai.

"General, Hu Hai is also on it!" Liu Chen pointed to the chaotic area not far away. Many people were fighting over a piece of floating wreckage.

"Heh heh, I wonder where you two can run this time!" Yue Yun suddenly laughed. Ever since defeating Sakai in Ryukyu, Sakai had been attacking merchant ships at sea. Now, he was finally caught in one fell swoop. "Go and capture them now."

"Yes, General!" Liu Chen commanded the fleet to sail towards the battle zone.

At this time, the naval battle had basically come to an end. The difference between sailing gunships and ordinary warships was once again vividly demonstrated.

With the naval battle over, Yue Yun also relaxed. When the warships reached the target location, they rescued the disheveled Sakai and Hu Hai from the sea.

Liu Chen, leading the soldiers, brought the two before Yue Yun. Giving each of them a kick in the back of the knee, he made them kneel.

Yue Yun nodded, "Return to base, bring them to His Highness."

Receiving the order, the warships began to head towards the dock. Many warships had escaped during the battle; only more than fifty genuine warships had been sunk.

He sent five warships to pursue them and returned to the dock with the remaining warships.

At this time, Xiao Ming had already emerged from the star fort. From the star fort, he had watched the entire naval battle, which was, overall, very spectacular.

"Your Highness, we have captured Sakai and Hu Hai." Yue Yun disembarked from the warship and threw the two in front of Xiao Ming. Glancing at Hu Hai, he said, "You are Hu Hai?"

"Yes... yes!" Hu Hai was like a pile of mud at this moment, so scared that he had lost his backbone.

"Do you speak the Japanese language?" Xiao Ming asked again.

“Yes, yes,” Hu Hai said nervously.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Then you will translate my words for me.” He then looked at Sakai and said, “Sakai, Earl Claire asked me to greet you on his behalf when I saw you. He said he would very much like to see you again. I believe I can fulfill his wish this time.”

Xiao Ming said a sentence, and Hu Hai immediately translated it.

Sakai’s eyes filled with deep fear upon hearing this. He shouted, “You can’t hand me over to Claire! He will torture me!”

During the rebellion in Zeelandia, Sakai, with his Japanese mercenaries, killed hundreds of Dutch soldiers. Claire hated him to the core and once said that if Sakai were captured, he would hand him over to him and he would reward him handsomely.

Actually, Xiao Ming had always been concerned about Japan’s movements. He said, “Then it’s simple. Tell me what reason you have that would make me spare you.”

If Sakai had a knife now, he would surely commit suicide, but that was clearly impossible. However, worse than death was torture that made one wish for death. Thinking of the Dutch methods, he said despairingly, “I know the daimyo’s plan to attack Goryeo.”

Chapter 615

“Attacking Goryeo?”

Xiao Ming and Yue Yun exchanged glances. During this time, both the Secret Guard and Yue Yun had detected some movements from Japan, vaguely feeling that Japan intended to use military force against Goryeo, but they were unsure of when or how the attack would happen.

“When do your Japanese plan to attack Goryeo?” Xiao Ming’s eyes shifted. He had to admit that Yamada Nobunaga’s decision to prioritize Goryeo under the current circumstances was a wise one.

Sakai lowered his head, a strange glint in his eyes. He said, “The plan and route map for attacking Goryeo are with me. Please allow me to present them to Your Highness.”

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this.

Upon receiving permission, Sakai reached into his pocket and pulled out what was clearly a dagger in a sheath.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming was greatly alarmed. Just then, Sakai, who had been kneeling before them, suddenly lunged forward, stabbing at Xiao Ming. His eyes were replaced by fanaticism and ferocity, with no trace of his previous humility.

“Be careful, Your Highness!” Yue Yun and Liu Chen were horrified. They immediately lunged at Sakai.

But just as Sakai was fifty centimeters from Xiao Ming, a gun fired. Sakai’s body froze for a moment, then fell with a thud.

At this time, Xiao Ming held a short-barreled musket in his hand. It was precisely with this that he had fired a shot at Sakai’s head in the nick of time.

Sakai, hit, lay sprawled on the ground. Yue Yun and Liu Chen also arrived at this moment. Yue Yun turned Sakai's corpse over, revealing a round bullet hole in Sakai's forehead, from which blood was now oozing.

"Your Highness, I deserve to die." Liu Chen's face was pale, and he knelt before Xiao Ming.

Frowning, Xiao Ming said, "You were too careless. Why didn't you search this villain thoroughly?"

"Your Highness, I was too eager to claim credit and forgot this matter. All the blame rests with me," Liu Chen said, sweat beading on his forehead. Sakai and Hu Hai had been in such disheveled states when they were pulled from the sea that he had overlooked it.

"Fifty strokes, and half a year's salary docked!"

Xiao Ming snorted. He had always been fair in rewards and punishments. Liu Chen and Yue Yun had captured the Sanmyo Kingdom, and he had given them generous rewards. However, such negligence, if not punished, would undermine military discipline.

Yue Yun was still shaken. If anything had happened to Xiao Ming on his watch, he would have been utterly beyond redemption.

He said, "Liu Chen, His Highness has already shown you mercy. Learn your lesson for the future. Let's see if you dare to be so careless again."

Liu Chen was deeply ashamed. He naturally knew that Xiao Ming was being lenient with his punishment. He said, "I will keep Your Highness's teachings in mind."

Xiao Ming also knew Liu Chen's character from Yue Yun. Perhaps because he was from a fishing background, he tended to be a bit casual in his actions. However, every general had flaws and strengths, and Liu Chen was still a capable hand in battle.

This time, he was giving Liu Chen a lesson, so that he, like Lu Fei, could always remember the seriousness of his mistakes.

"These Japanese pirates are indeed insidious and vicious. I almost believed his nonsense," Xiao Ming said solemnly. "Throw his body into the sea to feed the fish. Furthermore, all captured Japanese pirates are to be conscripted into forced labor."

"Yes, Your Highness," Yue Yun and Liu Chen said resentfully. Liu Chen, in particular, wished he could kill every single Japanese pirate in the sea.

Then Xiao Ming looked at Hu Hai, whose body instantly trembled.

"Your Highness, I did not know Sakai intended to assassinate Your Highness. Your Highness, spare my life, spare my life!" Hu Hai kowtowed furiously.

A trace of coldness flashed in Xiao Ming's eyes. He felt he was still a bit too merciful. Having been in this world for over four years, some modern thinking still constrained his actions.

However, Sakai's assassination attempt completely woke him up. Although technological civilization had emerged in the West, barbarism was still the main theme of this world.

"Kill him."

Xiao Ming said coldly. From now on, every action he took would be weighed for its pros and cons. Clearly, Hu Hai was better off dead than alive.

Yue Yun gestured to two soldiers upon hearing this, and the two soldiers immediately dragged Hu Hai out for execution.

Just then, the King of Sanmyo also arrived. Seeing Hu Hai, who used to swagger before him, captured, he was overjoyed.

His men had already informed him of the outcome of this naval battle: Hu Hai's and Japan's warships were all defeated.

"Your Royal Highness Prince Qi, could you hand Hu Hai over to me for personal disposal?" The King of Sanmyo made no secret of his hatred for Hu Hai at this moment.

"Of course."

Xiao Ming said. The Sanmyo Kingdom now needed the King of Sanmyo to maintain its rule, and granting a small favor was a suitable choice.

Hu Hai knew he was going to die and no longer struggled. The King of Sanmyo snatched a long sword from a soldier and plunged it into Hu Hai's chest.

With a scream, Hu Hai's eyes widened, and he slowly fell into a pool of blood.

"Thank you, Your Highness. My revenge is finally exacted," the King of Sanmyo said, grateful to the point of tears.

Xiao Ming said blandly, "Hu Hai is dead, and the Japanese pirates have been severely defeated. From now on, the Sanmyo Kingdom's safety is assured. I hope the King of Sanmyo will remember his duty as a vassal state."

"Yes, Your Highness," the King of Sanmyo said.

Xiao Ming's visit to the Sanmyo Kingdom this time was merely to inspect the area. Qingzhou had many government affairs, and he did not want to stay there for long. After resting for two days, he returned to Dengzhou with the Qingzhou warships.

On the flagship, looking at the gradually disappearing dock, Yue Yun suddenly asked, "Your Highness, why did you not agree to the King of Sanmyo's request for a marriage alliance and accept his daughter

into your harem? Your Highness is now the Son of Heaven, and even ordinary officials have three wives and six concubines. Would it not be wonderful to have another beauty in the harem?"

"Hahahaha... You still haven't seen through the King of Sanmyo's play. Let me ask you, since his sons were all killed by Hu Hai, if he had such a beautiful daughter, would Hu Hai have spared her?"

Yue Yun was startled for a moment, then suddenly realized, "That King of Sanmyo actually dared to deceive Your Highness. He truly needs a lesson."

"Never mind, never mind. When the Great Yu Empire engaged in marriage alliances with barbarians, they didn't even choose princesses. This kind of formal marriage alliance is just for show. My choosing an imperial prince for him is already giving him enough face," Xiao Ming said.

"Your Highness is right. I almost believed it," Yue Yun said with a bitter smile.

The ship drifted at sea for four days. On the fifth day, the warship arrived at Dengzhou dock.

Compared to a year ago, Dengzhou was now visibly more prosperous, with many merchants busy with maritime trade in and out of the city. However, Xiao Ming did not stay long at sea this time, but rested for a day and returned directly to Qingzhou.

Now that Prince Wei was dead and Wei and Qi were connected, he had no idea what reaction the other three vassal princes would have. It was for this very reason that he was eager to return.

Indeed, as soon as he returned to Qingzhou, Pang Yukun immediately found him.

“Your Highness, envoys from Prince Zhao, Prince Liang, and Prince Yan arrived in Qingzhou a few days ago, vehemently criticizing Your Highness for going back on your word and violating the truce agreement. They said that if Your Highness does not return the occupied cities, they will collectively raise an army to attack Your Highness.”

Chapter 616

“When did this happen?”

Sitting on the main seat in the main hall, Xiao Ming’s expression was as cold as water.

When he decided to seize Jinling City, he had anticipated such a result. The purpose of the three princes participating at this time was to weaken Prince Wei while not allowing Xiao Ming to become overly powerful. However, in two months, the Southern Expeditionary Army conquered the thirteen prefectures of Wei, which made them finally realize the real threat.

“As soon as Your Highness went to Jinling City, the envoys from the three princes arrived. Now, Governor Niu has personally gone to Yunzhou City to prepare the city’s defenses.” Pang Yukun’s expression was grave.

Although he was unwilling to see the state embroiled in continuous warfare, he had to admit that it was a chaotic era, and only through war could Xiao Ming gain control of the Great Yu Empire’s royal power.

“I thought they would come to Qingzhou as soon as Jinling City fell, but I didn’t expect them to be a whole month late. It seems they must have reached a consensus during this month,” Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

In fact, he had his own considerations when he decided to attack Jinling City. One of them was that Japan was preparing to use military force against Goryeo. If so, the barbarians would inevitably be drawn into this war, as Goryeo was currently a vassal state of the barbarians, not of the Great Yu Empire.

Although he hadn't received the exact start date of the war between Japan and Goryeo while on the ship, according to the intelligence provided by Wang Xuan, it seemed that the time would not be too long. By then, the barbarians might be unable to wage two wars simultaneously.

If that was the case, Prince Zhao and Prince Liang would not be able to get barbarian reinforcements in time. In this way, he was not afraid of the allied forces of the three princes.

After all, although their ideas were similar on this matter, they were not monolithic and harbored great suspicion towards each other. There was only one emperor of the Great Yu Empire, and everyone wanted to be it.

"Your Highness is absolutely right, but what should we do in response?" Pang Yukun knew that war was unavoidable, and now they could only respond proactively.

Through the war against Wei, Xiao Ming grew stronger with each battle. It was precisely for this reason that he became more confident, and the most important point was that his gaze was not confined to the Great Yu Empire's small plot of land.

In this glorious Age of Exploration, his goal was the oceans and colonies.

The current Western countries had laid the foundation for future accumulation precisely because of the Age of Exploration. The vast number of colonies led to the most widespread distribution of white people in the world today, which is why white people looked down upon other races so much.

Now that he had come to this world, Xiao Ming's ambition was not merely internal struggle. He wanted to establish a vast empire spanning continents and oceans.

For him, it was necessary to end the internal wars as soon as possible, so that a unified Great Yu Empire could stand strong against external threats.

However, he understood that this was a very arduous task. The vassal princes of different surnames had ruled their fiefdoms for generations, and the common people's loyalty to the vassal princes surpassed that to the imperial family.

The reason he could easily occupy Wei was partly due to his military's formidable strength, and partly because Prince Wei and Xiao Ming were both of the imperial family. The common people did not have much resistance towards him, and their will to resist was weak.

Moreover, his identity as a prince meant that inheriting the imperial territory was a matter of destiny.

However, this point would not be of much use when facing the other three vassal princes.

"This time, we cannot respond passively. Prince Zhao has just occupied Sword Gate Pass and has not yet established a firm foothold in Shu. The King of Shu's strength is still present. Now, we need to support the King of Shu," Xiao Ming said after a moment of hesitation.

“Exactly. If the King of Shu can contain Prince Zhao at this time, then Prince Yan and Prince Liang will be easier to deal with.”

Pacing back and forth, Xiao Ming continued, “This time, take a portion of the armor and weapons captured from Wei. Additionally, I captured 8,000 matchlock guns in the Battle of Ryukyu last time, and along with the matchlock guns returned by Luo Hong, send them all to the King of Shu. Of course, there are also export-model cannons; temporarily give the cannons meant for Prince Chu to the King of Shu.”

“All 150 of them?” Pang Yukun felt a pang of pain.

“All of them. You tell Li Kaiyuan to allocate some merchant ships. There will be warships escorting these merchant ships to deliver the weapons to Shu,” Xiao Ming’s resolve was firm. These things were basically not of much use to him, but it might be different for the King of Shu. Now, he only needed the King of Shu to hold back Prince Zhao, and even if he paid a portion of the cost, it would be worth it.

Pang Yukun nodded. Among the three princes, Prince Zhao was the most powerful, and in his opinion, Xiao Ming’s decision was correct.

He continued to ask, “If that’s the case, then I will delay for a few more days, allowing the envoys from the three princes to stay in Qingzhou for a few more days.”

Xiao Ming smiled upon hearing this. Pang Yukun sometimes showed a cunning side. The three envoys were still in Qingzhou now, so a delaying tactic was appropriate.

The two agreed, and Pang Yukun left. At this point, Xiao Ming fell into contemplation.

These vassal princes of different surnames had inherited their positions for as long as the Great Yu Empire itself. Their ability to maintain control for so long proved that they were not fools. In his opinion, this delaying tactic could only hold them back for a month.

After a month, he might have to face war. Among them, Yan was the closest to him, and directly faced the recently occupied Wei, making it his immediate threat.

He believed that Prince Yan must be thinking the same about him now. Perhaps this alliance was even orchestrated by Prince Yan, because once Xiao Ming was defeated, Prince Yan would be the one to gain the most practical benefits.

After all, Prince Zhao and Prince Liang were too far from Wei and Qi. Thinking of this, he naturally set his first target on Prince Yan.

With a plan in mind, Xiao Ming thought of the envoy mission he had recruited some time ago, whose destination was the Ottoman Empire.

Although Japan might tie up the barbarians' forces, Xiao Ming was still uneasy. For him, the only true threat to the barbarians was the Ottoman Empire, because he had learned from Yue Yun that the current Ottoman Empire was powerful, even feared by the West.

The war between the two had never stopped.

Thinking of this, he decided to move to Bowen Academy tomorrow to teach them some simple communication languages. Then he would have them disguised as merchants and travel to the Ottoman Empire on Dutch merchant ships.

“Your Highness just returned, why are you busy with government affairs and not resting?” Fei Yuer entered the main hall at some point and smiled at Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming’s expression softened. He said, “Some urgent matters truly cannot be delayed.”

As he spoke, he saw Fei Yuer gently place her hand on her stomach, so he asked, “What? Is your stomach uncomfortable?”

“Your Highness, the Princess Consort is pregnant,” Xiao Huan volunteered to say for Fei Yuer.

“Pregnant?” Xiao Ming’s face showed surprise.

Ever since Fei Ji and Pang Yukun mentioned this last time, he had not deliberately avoided it. Now, Fei Yuer was finally pregnant.

“How long has it been?” Xiao Ming walked towards Fei Yuer, and the smile on Fei Yuer’s face grew wider.

Chapter 617

“Your Highness, it’s been over a month.”

Fei Yuer lowered her head shyly, her eyes filled with gentle happiness.

The worry in his heart was swept away by the excitement of having a child. Xiao Ming took Fei Yuer’s hand and said, “Don’t do anything during this time. Just rest and take care of yourself. Xiao Huan, now that the Princess Consort is pregnant, you must take careful care of her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Xiao Huan bowed.

Six days ago, Fei Yuer had morning sickness. The imperial physician diagnosed her and congratulated her on her pregnancy. Upon receiving the news, Fei Yuer and Xiao Huan were overjoyed.

It had been nearly two years since Fei Yuer entered the princely estate. Although Fei Yuer didn’t show it, she had always been anxious.

From the day she married Xiao Ming, she was no longer the carefree Fei Yuer, but the Princess Consort of Qi, and even destined to become the empress, reigning over all under heaven. In a harem where status depended on offspring, being childless was terrifying.

After all, she understood that Xiao Ming, as an emperor, could not possibly have only her in his harem. Even for political marriages, new women would be brought into the harem. Which emperor throughout history was not like this?

Xiao Ming didn't understand what Fei Yuer was thinking. Now that the world was still unsettled, he didn't have much time to waste on romantic affections.

But now that Fei Yuer was pregnant, as a father, he also needed to fulfill his responsibilities. Seeing that it was getting late, he directly accompanied Fei Yuer back to the bedchamber.

In the bedchamber, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer chatted and laughed, and he recounted his experiences in the Sanmyo Kingdom. When he mentioned that the King of Sanmyo was interested in a marriage alliance, Fei Yuer clearly tensed up for a moment.

However, she only relaxed when he said he would marry her to the Ninth Prince Xiao Ziyang.

Fei Yuer's reaction made Xiao Ming smile. In his opinion, no matter how male-dominated ancient times were, women still desired exclusive affection.

"Ziyang is sixteen this year; it's time to choose a princess consort for him," Fei Yuer said.

By seniority, Xiao Ziyang was supposed to call Fei Yuer "cousin sister," but he was actually Xiao Ming's younger brother. Among all the princes, Xiao Ming only trusted this one brother.

After all, Xiao Ziyang had both imperial and Fei Ji family blood. Having him marry the King of Sanmyo's daughter as a secondary consort was fair to the King of Sanmyo. After all, the Sanmyo Kingdom was just a small place, and Xiao Ming only needed stability on the island for now.

Speaking of Xiao Ziyang, Xiao Ming asked, "By the way, what has Ziyang been doing lately?" Xiao Ming asked.

After the chaos in Chang'an last time, Xiao Ziyang and his imperial mother came to Qingzhou. After their first meeting, he rarely saw Xiao Ziyang.

"Your Highness is truly forgetful when it comes to important people. Didn't Your Highness arrange for a group of Chang'an officials to study at Bowen Academy, and arrange for him too? He's currently studying at Bowen Academy."

"Studying what?" Xiao Ming asked habitually.

He hadn't thought about it before, but ever since Xiao Wenxuan gave him the throne, he had instinctively started to pay attention to the Chang'an nobles in Qingzhou, among whom he was most concerned about these young princes.

After all, in a royal family where bloodline was paramount, any prince could be a rival for power.

However, fortunately, after the chaos in Chang'an, these princes lost their refuge and posed no great threat to him, as they had no army. But in another sense, he still needed these princes, for instance, in matters of marriage alliances.

Fei Yuer's eyes flickered. She cautiously said, "Ziyang has no particular ambition. He only reads some nautical books."

"Oh? Is he very interested in navigation?"

Xiao Ming said, and for some reason, he suddenly felt relieved. If Fei Yuer had said that Xiao Ziyang was studying government affairs and military matters, he would certainly have had some thoughts.

“He’s never been interested in anything for more than two or three days. Aunt says he probably won’t amount to much in the future,” Fei Yuer said.

Xiao Ming nodded. He understood the meaning in Fei Yuer’s words: they were protecting Xiao Ziyang, afraid that Xiao Ming would find a pretext to kill him.

After all, the current chaos in the Great Yu Empire was caused by princes vying for the throne. If it weren’t for the Crown Prince assassinating the emperor, the Great Yu Empire would not be in this situation. Now, with an adult prince right under Xiao Ming’s nose, according to the thinking of Great Yu Empire officials, they would certainly keep a close eye on this prince.

“Princess Consort, no need to be nervous. I merely asked casually,” Xiao Ming said. He understood that his every word and action would be scrutinized.

Fei Yuer felt relieved. Xiao Ziyang was, after all, her cousin, and their private relationship was very good. She couldn’t bear to see the two brothers fighting each other.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, “Tomorrow, I will go see him and discuss this marriage alliance. The King of Sanmyo’s daughter has already arrived in Qingzhou with me, and the wedding should be arranged as soon as possible, so that the King of Sanmyo’s envoy can return and report.”

“Hmm, if Your Highness finds it inconvenient, I can also persuade him,” Fei Yuer said.

“In that case, have him come to the princely estate for a meal tomorrow.”

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As the two were speaking, Pang Yukun had already arranged for the three princes’ envoys to rest at the Wei Family Restaurant. Since it was a delaying tactic, they were to be treated well with good food and drink.

After three rounds of wine, the three princes’ envoys went upstairs. After Pang Yukun left, the other two came out of their rooms and went into the third person’s room.

“Assistant Minister Wang, please make up your mind. Our informants clearly said that Prince Qi has returned, but this Pang Yukun simply won’t admit it. Isn’t this clearly trying to stall us?”

This time, Prince Zhao had still sent Wang Xi. Prince Yan had still sent Zheng Hao. Prince Liang’s envoy also remained unchanged.

Wang Xi frowned tightly. He said, “You are right. This Pang Yukun intends to stall us. If so, Prince Qi is certainly unwilling to give up the thirteen prefectures of Wei.”

“Is that even a question? Do things that have been eaten come out of the mouth? Assistant Minister Wang, Crown Prince, I think we shouldn’t waste any more time. Let’s each return and prepare for war,” Prince Zhao’s envoy said.

Zheng Hao clapped his hands and said, “That’s what I think too. Wei is not yet stable, and Prince Qi’s army cannot be withdrawn from Wei in time. Attacking Yunzhou directly at this time couldn’t be more suitable.”

Wang Xi, however, was somewhat concerned. Prince Zhao’s army was still engaged in a fierce battle with the King of Shu’s army and could not be diverted at this time. Moreover, Prince Zhao knew very well that even if Xiao Ming were forced to withdraw from Wei, Prince Yan would be the one to gain the most benefit.

Most importantly, their scouts had learned that Prince Yan had also mastered the technology for manufacturing matchlock guns. Coupled with Prince Yan’s long-standing reputation as a wise prince in his fiefdom, Prince Zhao felt that Prince Yan’s threat was no less than Xiao Ming’s.

Furthermore, Prince Yan’s fiefdom was the closest to Chang’an. If Prince Yan were to stab them in the back, it would be troublesome.

Chapter 618

“The two of you should not be anxious. Reckless action might lead to disaster. Currently, Prince Qi has not yet rejected our proposal. If we rashly start a war, wouldn’t it mean losing troops and gaining nothing?”

Wang Xi could not withstand Zheng Hao’s and Cui Zhang’s pressure, but at present, Prince Zhao truly could not spare troops to deal with Xiao Ming.

So, when he came, Prince Zhao instructed him to try to coerce Xiao Ming into making concessions. If that failed, he was to drag it out until the war in Shu ended.

"It's more waiting. If we wait any longer, we'll miss a golden opportunity. Our vassal states are in danger!" Cui Zhang's face showed anxiety; among the three, he was the most anxious.

Now that Xiao Ming had swallowed the thirteen prefectures of Wei, Yan, which bordered Wei, was directly affected. When Xiao Ming suddenly took Jinling City, scouts immediately sent the news to Bozhou.

At that time, Prince Yan was greatly alarmed. Although Prince Yan believed that the truce agreement could only restrain Xiao Ming for a while, he never expected him to tear up the agreement in just half a year.

According to Prince Yan's idea, he planned to use the matchlock guns obtained from Xiao Ming to build a musketeer unit, but in the past six months, he had ordered the conscription of artisans from across the country for forging, and now he had only produced 8,000 matchlock guns, still far from his goal.

So he immediately sent envoys to discuss this matter with Zhao and Liang, attempting to further weaken Xiao Ming or even completely destroy Qi.

"We cannot wait any longer. If Prince Zhao refuses to send troops, Liang is willing to form an alliance with Yan and jointly raise an army to attack Xiao Ming. Now, Xiao Ming is the only imperial relative who poses a threat to us. As long as Xiao Ming lives, we will not have peace for a day. We have served the Xiao family for so many years; it's time for us to take turns sitting on this throne." Zheng Hao's words were very blunt, completely tearing away the three men's superficial facade.

He knew very well that the imperial family was a faded glory. Within their fiefdoms, they no longer referred to themselves as vassal princes, but directly as kings. The former Yan, Zhao, and Liang territories had clearly become the states of Yan, Zhao, and Liang.

For them, even if they didn't want the Great Yu Empire's throne, they hoped to completely shake off the shackles of the imperial family and dominate their own regions.

But as they were dreaming, Xiao Ming became their nightmare. An imperial prince capable of unifying the Great Yu Empire was their greatest threat.

"As expected, Liang is truly righteous." Cui Zhang laughed heartily upon hearing this. He said unceremoniously to Wang Xi, "Assistant Minister Wang, do not think that just because you have the Thirteenth Prince in your hands, you can command the world. Since the founding of the Great Yu Empire, we have been painstakingly managing our own states. We all know each other's true intentions. This time, if your state of Zhao sends troops, we would still honor Prince Zhao as our leader. But now that you are dragging your feet, do not blame us for disrespecting Prince Zhao."

Wang Xi's expression showed displeasure upon hearing this. He said coldly, "Crown Prince, those words are a bit excessive. Do you think Prince Zhao would stop attacking Shu and turn to attack Prince Qi just because you said you would honor Prince Zhao as your leader? Hmph, Prince Zhao knows perfectly well the intentions of your Yan and Liang families. If Xiao Ming is defeated, these thirteen prefectures of Wei and Xiao Ming's cities will belong to Prince Yan, and Prince Liang will seize the opportunity to attack Prince Yong and take Jizhou and other cities, while we can only watch helplessly, serving as your thugs."

Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao's eyes both flickered. They both felt somewhat guilty.

Just as Wang Xi said, they had long been wary of Prince Zhao and had made some secret deals. They never expected that there were also shrewd people around Prince Zhao who saw through them at a glance.

Seeing the two remain silent, Wang Xi continued, "It's not that there's no way to get Prince Zhao to send troops. As long as you send troops to help Prince Zhao take Shu, we will send troops to attack Qi with you!"

Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao both fell silent. What difference would it make if Prince Zhao took Shu and Prince Qi took Wei?

"What? Scared now?"

Wang Xi was relentless. He knew that Prince Yan and Prince Liang had ulterior motives.

"Then Assistant Minister Wang, why don't you tell us what should be done? Since Prince Zhao sent Assistant Minister Wang to Qingzhou, it surely wasn't for entertainment and a frivolous time, was it?" Cui Zhang's face reddened, clearly angry.

"Pfft." Zheng Hao couldn't help but chuckle upon hearing this. He said with a hint of mockery, "Crown Prince, you jest. Assistant Minister Wang wouldn't go to such places?"

Cui Zhang immediately laughed upon hearing this, while Wang Xi's face instantly turned as black as charcoal. Who in the world didn't know he was a eunuch? Among the three, his status was the lowest, and the other two had never looked up to him.

Moreover, the two also knew very well that no matter how much they mocked him, he could only act according to Prince Zhao's wishes.

Forcing back his anger, Wang Xi managed a faint smile and said, "Prince Zhao's meaning is that if Xiao Ming doesn't agree to this condition, your two families can send troops first, and we will come to support you after we occupy Shu."

"When two fight, a third gets the spoils. Prince Zhao is truly playing a good game," Cui Zhang snorted.

Wang Xi was neither slow nor hurried. He said, "Crown Prince, I haven't finished speaking yet. Before that, Prince Zhao will send out the remaining 40,000 cavalry from Chang'an City to show his sincerity. You should believe it now."

Zheng Hao's eyes shifted. He said to Cui Zhang, "This is not impossible. In my opinion, Prince Qi won't shed tears until he sees the coffin. If we jointly raise an army this time, perhaps he will soften up when he sees that we are serious."

"Hmm, that's an idea. Tomorrow, we will go and ask this Pang Yukun again. If Prince Qi still avoids us, we will each return and lead our troops to attack," Cui Zhang said.

The three initially reached an agreement. Wang Xi, feeling displeased, left first. Zheng Hao then also returned to his room to rest.

After the two left, Cui Zhang revealed a strange smile. In fact, everything now was within Prince Yan's plan.

The first part of this plan was to allow Xiao Ming to annex Wei. Then, he would unite with other vassal princes to jointly attack Xiao Ming and make him hand over the thirteen prefectures. This time, their state of Yan could obtain the thirteen prefectures of Wei without losing a single soldier, while Xiao Ming would have wasted his efforts for nothing.

Next door to Cui Zhang lived Wang Xi. Upon returning to his room, his face suddenly contorted. He fiercely spat in the direction of Cui Zhang's room.

"You scoundrel, this eunuch will chop you up with my own hands sooner or later." Wang Xi's heart was filled with extreme hatred. Although Prince Zhao was prepared to send 40,000 cavalry this time, he had little interest in this alliance, the reason being that it only benefited Yan and Liang.

Compared to targeting Xiao Ming, Prince Zhao was truly anxious to annex Shu. In doing so, Prince Zhao would be like the state of Qin, capable of both offense and defense, and controlling a granary. From then on, conquering the world would be a foregone conclusion.

And when that time came, the first one they would deal with would be the cunning old fox, Prince Yan.

Cui Zhang and Wang Xi had different thoughts, and Zheng Hao also had his own ideas.

Prince Zhao and Prince Liang had both submitted to the barbarians, but Prince Zhao had gained the upper hand. He felt quite resentful about this and intended to use this allied army as an opportunity to seize cities in Yong to expand his own territory.

Chapter 619

“Dong dong” of the pendulum clock woke Xiao Ming from his dream.

He got up and checked the time. It was seven in the morning. Now with the pendulum clock, Qingzhou’s way of recording time had changed. Compared to the previous rough recordings, the pendulum clock now provided data accurate to the second.

Yesterday, he was excited for a long time about Fei Yuer’s pregnancy, and they chatted until midnight before finally falling asleep.

“Your Highness has been working tirelessly for days. Why don’t you sleep a little longer?” Fei Yuer lay in bed, her voice a little languid. After becoming pregnant, Fei Yuer had become entirely languid. Xiao Ming was not surprised by this; it was a characteristic of pregnancy. After all, coming from modern times, his technology crystal also had information on this.

In his previous life, Xiao Ming was alone and without support. Now, having come to this world and married with a child, he gradually forgot the past, feeling more and more integrated into this world. Especially at the moment he learned he was going to be a father, a sense of responsibility suddenly surged within him. For his family, he had to be even more careful.

After all, the result of defeat in royal power was only one: being eradicated by other vassal princes.

“You sleep. I still have to deal with the envoys from Prince Zhao, Prince Yan, and Prince Liang,” Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

Fei Yuer seemed a bit self-reproachful. She said, "It's really not the right time for me to be pregnant, precisely during this period of frequent wars. Isn't this just causing trouble for Your Highness?"

Xiao Ming got out of bed and put on his clothes. He said, "Princess Consort, what you said is wrong. These government affairs are my concern. You just need to rest and give birth with peace of mind. I will not let you encounter any danger."

Fei Yuer nodded. Perhaps she was too sleepy. She fell asleep again while Xiao Ming was still trying to speak.

Shaking his head, he dressed neatly and left the bedchamber. After a simple breakfast of porridge and five steamed buns, he headed to the government office.

Upon arriving at the government office, the pendulum clock showed eight o'clock. At this time, the officials in the government office were all handling their respective affairs.

Pang Yukun saw Xiao Ming and said, "Your Highness, yesterday, I dismissed the three. I did not tell them that Your Highness had returned, but from their expressions, they seemed to have known of Your Highness's return. Today, I'm afraid we can't continue to deceive them."

"So, today, I am prepared to personally come out and talk with them, and at the same time, probe their intentions," Xiao Ming said. For him, history had a high degree of similarity. Currently, whether it was the six states attacking Qin, their defeat stemmed from their disunity. Each state had its own agenda, and as the saying goes, "many people mean chaos."

This time, Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao must also have different agendas. If they could be defeated one by one, that would be the most perfect outcome. However, he also understood that there was not much room for maneuver between him and the vassal princes of different surnames.

As soon as the two had finished speaking, an attendant entered the government office to announce that Wang Xi and the other two were waiting outside.

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, and together they left the government office.

“Your Highness.”

Seeing Xiao Ming, the three bowed simultaneously.

Cui Zhang then squinted at Pang Yukun and said displeasedly, “Chief Grand Secretary Pang, didn’t you say His Highness was not in Qingzhou? How do you explain yourself now?”

“Yes, indeed. If we hadn’t met you by chance, who knows when we would have been able to meet His Highness,” Zheng Hao also said.

Wang Xi glanced at the two and said nothing. Having served in Empress Zhao’s court for many years, he was very aware of the concept of propriety.

Their words seemed directed at Pang Yukun, but in fact, they were expressing dissatisfaction with Xiao Ming. Xiao Ming naturally heard it. He feigned ignorance and said, “The two envoys have misunderstood. I entered the city without informing Chief Grand Secretary Pang, so how could he have known? However, what brings the three of you to Qingzhou?”

As he spoke, Xiao Ming invited the three into the government office. At this time, Zhan Xingchang also arrived. In the room where the truce agreement was once signed, the six men once again sat together.

“Your Highness, this is the truce agreement signed back then. Does Your Highness still remember it?” Cui Zhang took out the truce agreement.

At this time, Wang Xi and Zheng Hao also took out their copies of the agreement and placed them on the table.

Xiao Ming did not look at the truce agreement but said, “I naturally remember this matter. However, what concern is this of Prince Zhao, Prince Yan, or Prince Liang? Prince Wei committed treason. I am merely cleaning up the imperial family’s scoundrels. This is my family affair.”

Cui Zhang and the other two were instantly speechless, not knowing how to refute. Wang Xi was the first to react. He said, “Your Highness, it’s not that we are meddlesome. Prince Wei himself dispatched envoys to invite us to discuss this matter. Your Highness broke the agreement first. How can you now turn the tables?”

“Hmph! You coerced me by threatening to send troops, forcing me to sign this truce agreement. You were the ones who took advantage of your power first. You criticize me for attacking Prince Wei, but how do you explain Prince Zhao’s attack on Shu, Prince Yan’s seizure of my imperial Yingzhou and Songzhou, and Prince Liang’s seizure of my imperial Jinzhou and Suzhou?” Xiao Ming retorted.

If he had been passive in the past, now Xiao Ming had enough capability to respond proactively. Therefore, he had no intention of continuing to negotiate with them. Now, everyone understood the situation of the Great Yu Empire.

Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao exchanged glances, their eyes flickering. After the chaos in Chang'an, the two families separately sent troops to occupy several prefectures and counties that once belonged to the imperial family. Together with Prince Zhao, the three divided all the former imperial land in the north.

Last time, Xiao Ming didn't mention it, and they thought Xiao Ming tacitly accepted this fact. They didn't expect Xiao Ming to suddenly bring it up now.

"Hmph, these lands belonged to no one, how could we not seize them!" Cui Zhang said with a rogue-like attitude. On this matter, he was at a loss for words, because if they still acknowledged the imperial family, their actions would be considered rebellion.

Zheng Hao echoed, "That's right. The late emperor is dead. The Thirteenth Prince is merely Prince Zhao's puppet. Without the late emperor's last will, we will not acknowledge an infant as emperor. Because of this, our purpose in occupying these cities is also to temporarily preserve these places for the imperial family, lest they fall into foreign hands."

Wang Xi was furious upon hearing this. These two were practically openly calling Prince Zhao a rebel. He said, "The Crown Prince assassinated the emperor. Prince Zhao's entry into Chang'an was to support the imperial family. The Thirteenth Prince is also Empress Zhao's legitimate son. If the throne is not his, whose else could it be? His Highness Prince Qi is right; you two families are the truly ambitious ones."

Xiao Ming was startled. He had merely casually instigated them, and the three immediately began to quarrel. He instantly understood that the underlying conflicts among these three families were not small.

At that time, even if the three families sent troops together, it would probably be a scene where one watched the other go to its death. Thinking of this, he felt more at ease. However, despite the conflicts, he believed that the three families could still form an allied army. After all, the common interest of the vassal princes of different surnames was to eliminate the imperial family.

In this way, they would no longer have any restraints and could become emperors themselves. However, Xiao Ming would not allow them to form an allied army so easily. The Great Yu Empire was not the only one among them that understood schemes and tricks.

Chapter 620

The atmosphere in the government's council hall seemed permeated with the scent of gunpowder.

Wang Xi's angry accusations made Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao's faces turn ashen, looking as if they were about to burst into curses.

However, a trace of sobriety remained in Cui Zhang's mind. In the face of the larger situation, he calmly said to Wang Xi, "Assistant Minister Wang, don't forget what we are here in Qingzhou for today?"

Wang Xi suddenly jolted awake, realizing at this moment that he had fallen for Xiao Ming's provocation. Now that Prince Zhao had entered the capital and commanded the world, the fact that their two families had each taken the opportunity to seize imperial prefectures was the direct source of conflict among the three families, because Prince Zhao had once issued an edict reprimanding the two for rebellion and demanding they hand over the cities.

Their two families naturally refused. Prince Zhao had gained so much, and they too did not want to suffer losses.

The three calmed down, then simultaneously looked at Xiao Ming. In fact, their purpose in containing Xiao Ming was only one: Xiao Ming the imperial family. If Prince Wei had occupied Qi, they would have likewise sent troops.

Now, Xiao Ming's words had pushed them into a corner. Cui Zhang completely dropped his pretense. He said, "Your Highness, our three families came to Qingzhou today not to negotiate with Your Highness, but to inform Your Highness that if Your Highness does not hand over the thirteen prefectures of Wei, we will surely combine our forces to attack Your Highness."

"In that case, I will await you under the walls of Yunzhou City!" Xiao Ming's tone was also very firm. He clearly knew that he and the three families would ultimately end in a fight to the death. The princes of different surnames would eventually completely exterminate the imperial family.

If he handed over the thirteen prefectures of Wei, he would only hasten his demise.

Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao's hearts trembled. Xiao Ming's face at this moment was resolute, and his eyes revealed an undeniable determination. For Cui Zhang, the ideal situation would of course be for Xiao Ming to voluntarily hand over the thirteen prefectures, but now it seemed impossible.

Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang exchanged glances. Today, these three families were truly too arrogant. They were no longer negotiating, but directly forcing them to abandon the captured Wei territory.

Not to mention that Xiao Ming would not agree to this matter, even the soldiers who fought with their lives would not agree. How could the territory they had shed blood and tears to win be handed over to others?

Xiao Ming's firm stance plunged the three into silence.

Before meeting Xiao Ming, they were confident that they could make Xiao Ming back down, but now it seemed impossible.

If that were the case, they only had one last option.

“Your Highness, in that case, we shall take our leave.” Cui Zhang was the first to stand up and walk out.

Then Wang Xi and Zheng Hao also stood up and left.

After all three had departed, Zhan Xingchang said, “Your Highness, there’s nothing more to discuss on this matter. When we tore up the truce agreement, we knew this day would come. Moreover, even without this truce agreement, the three families would still raise an army to attack us. Now, the only thing we need to worry about is whether the barbarians will get involved.”

Xiao Ming frowned. He slowly said, “Now, the situation in the north can only be resolved through a war. Whether the three princes act first or we act first, the outcome is actually the same.”

“Your Highness is absolutely right, so more talk is useless. Now we can only face this crisis,” Zhan Xingchang said.

Xiao Ming still held a sliver of hope when he came today, but Cui Zhang’s words completely woke him up. His focus was not the truce agreement, but the thirteen prefectures of Wei; that was his purpose.

Pang Yukun nodded. Yesterday, when he mentioned this matter to Xiao Ming, he had no hope for this discussion. Today, sitting together, Cui Zhang and the other two spoke in an unyielding tone.

Now he finally understood why Xiao Ming wanted him to drag out the time as much as possible. However, if that were the case, he wouldn't be able to use normal means to delay the three's return to their respective countries.

So he said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, the three will surely return to their countries at this time, but the weapons we are sending to Shu still need time. I plan to prohibit outsiders from leaving the city under the pretext of apprehending bandits. What does Your Highness think?"

"Hmm, that's a good idea. The three will certainly jump with anger," Xiao Ming said with a smile upon hearing this. Pang Yukun was becoming more and more cunning.

Zhan Xingchang smiled bitterly and shook his head. When two countries are at war, envoys are not executed. This was the only way to deal with these three.

However, remembering something, he said, "Your Highness, the King of Shu is the Thirteenth Prince's full brother, and the King of Shu has already pledged loyalty to the King of Chu. At this time, with the King of Shu in trouble, the King of Chu will surely be equally anxious. Your Highness should inform the King of Chu. In this way, as long as the King of Chu helps the King of Shu to hold back Prince Zhao, dealing with Prince Yan and Prince Liang will be effortless."

“I have exactly that intention. You will have to make this trip. When the King of Chu learns that the three families are raising an army to attack me, he will surely send troops to Shu. After all, in the King of Chu’s view, the entire south is his backyard, and he will not allow Prince Zhao to have a share.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Zhan Xingchang nodded.

Having settled this matter, Zhan Xingchang went back to prepare for his mission to Chu to get the King of Chu to send troops to Shu. He also had Pang Yukun continue preparing aid for the King of Shu.

After relaying these two matters, Xiao Ming headed towards the princely estate.

This time, he resolutely rejected Cui Zhang’s demand. A war in the north was inevitable.

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand the art of compromise, but he too had been pushed to the wall. Even if he handed over Wei, within three years, they would still jointly attack him. As the saying goes, there are no righteous wars in the Spring and Autumn Period, and the current situation in the Great Yu Empire would likewise see no righteous wars.

Strength would ultimately decide everything.

It was precisely with this in mind that he had taken the thirteen prefectures of Wei. Now, he had provisions and a population, and he controlled firearms. The human wave tactic was no longer so terrifying to him. Now, with Wei, the state’s population basically reached six to seven million people.

Wei Family Restaurant.

Cui Zhang and the other two had returned here after leaving the government office. This time, all three looked grim, devoid of their initial arrogance.

Going upstairs, the three tacitly entered Cui Zhang's room. After a moment of hesitation, Cui Zhang said, "When I mentioned combining forces to attack, Xiao Ming showed no fear. This is truly surprising."

"Perhaps you thought Xiao Ming was too simple. When Xiao Ming only had 20,000 men under him, he dared to fight tens of thousands of barbarians in Cangzhou and Jizhou. How could he fear us today?" Wang Xi said blandly.

Zheng Hao had the same worry. Before Xiao Ming's firm stance, they firmly believed Xiao Ming would be afraid, because the first time, Xiao Ming signed the truce agreement under their threat. They never thought that Xiao Ming was merely playing along then.

"Xiao Ming will die at our hands sooner or later. It's better to destroy him while his wings are still undeveloped than to wait until he completely incorporates Wei into his state. This time, we must work together and definitely kill Xiao Ming. In this way, there will be no imperial family members left in the Great Yu Empire who can contend with us."