

I. Dynasty 631

Chapter 631

“I have never received any letter from Qingzhou!”

The King of Chu said, suppressing the anger in his heart.

Li Chu Yuan understood. He threw the letter from Qingzhou into a nearby brazier, and the letter turned into ashes in the flames.

The King of Chu then said, “Now, the situation in the north is complex. Even if Xiao Ming can defeat Prince Zhao, Prince Yan, and Prince Liang, he will certainly suffer heavy losses and be unable to move south immediately. While this is happening, we must strengthen our military readiness and rely on the natural defenses of the Yangtze River to resist foreign enemies!”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

All the ministers responded in unison.

Richard and Basil sat upright, looking at the officials. They also stood up and bowed to the King of Chu. Now that they were receiving the King of Chu’s salary, they naturally had to work for him.

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Qingzhou.

Amidst hurried preparations, there were less than seven days left until the enthronement ceremony. During this period, Fei Ji had already arranged all the enthronement procedures, and Pang Yukun had also relayed the news to all the vassal princes.

After waiting for twenty days, Prince Yong, accompanied by Princess Yong, entered Qingzhou City. At the same time, an envoy from the Prince of Huainan also arrived. As they had largely guessed, whether it was the King of Chu, Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, or Prince Liang, none of them paid any attention to the enthronement ceremony.

Not only that, Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao each dispatched troops to form rebel armies heading towards Yunzhou. This was clearly a show of force to give Xiao Ming a hard time.

“Your Highness, the Southern Expeditionary Army and the Dengzhou Army have a total of 30,000 men garrisoning the thirteen prefectures, and the remaining 50,000 men are all rushing to Yunzhou City. The Youzhou Army has dispatched all its cavalry towards Yunzhou City. Including the Qingzhou cuirassiers, we now have a total of 50,000 cavalry available.”

In the Qingzhou Grand Camp, Niu Ben informed Xiao Ming of the entire deployment of the state army. The enthronement ceremony was imminent, but the three princes chose this moment to raise an army to attack. He had no choice but to respond.

Moreover, he also intended to use this opportunity to fight a tough battle, severely weakening the allied forces of the three princes. As he had been pondering, the current situation in the north could not be changed without a decisive, grinder-like battle.

Now with Japan invading from the east, the barbarians pressing hard from the north, and Western powers interfering in the south, he needed at least to end the internal strife in the north and establish a stable environment for development. Otherwise, a country embroiled in war would only consume resources without achieving revolutionary changes.

The reason Britain was able to achieve the Industrial Revolution first was partly due to long-term accumulation, and partly because of its distance from the European continent and its stable social environment. Therefore, his decision to ascend the throne now also took many factors into consideration.

Niu Ben's words somewhat eased Xiao Ming's mind. He said, "Yunzhou City originally had 10,000 Yunzhou troops, plus 10,000 Qingzhou troops, and now another 60,000. The army in the city totals 80,000 men, plus the cavalry, making a total of 130,000 men. More than half of the state's military strength is here."

After a pause, he said to Niu Ben, "Governor Niu, I order you to be the Grand General of the Western Expedition and unify the overall command. This time, you must stop the allied forces of the three princes outside Yunzhou City; there must be no mishap."

Niu Ben cupped his fists and said, "Your Highness, rest assured. I will never let them cross Yunzhou City by half a step."

"Hmm, furthermore, in this battle, you must strive to completely annihilate the armies of the three princes, allowing them no return." Xiao Ming said sternly. For him, the essence of war was to eliminate the enemy's vital forces.

The purpose of Bai Qi burying 400,000 Zhao troops alive was precisely this: from then on, the state of Zhao had no power to resist.

According to the intelligence provided by Wang Xuan, the allied forces of Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao totaled 350,000 men. Among them, Prince Yan sent 180,000, Prince Liang sent 130,000, and Prince Zhao sent 40,000 cavalry.

Xiao Ming was indeed somewhat shocked upon learning that so many troops were marching towards Yunzhou City. However, fortunately, the Great Yu Empire had always lacked cavalry. The combined cavalry of the three allied forces numbered only about 60,000, with the rest being infantry.

And for him, he was not worried about the infantry, because in the face of firearms, these feudal armies armed with traditional swords and sabers were no match at all. His only concern was the cavalry.

However, now that the Youzhou Army and the Qingzhou Cuirassiers were merged, he was not so worried. In terms of equipment and soldier training, he believed his cavalry could prevent these 60,000 cavalry from devastating the prefectures and counties near Yunzhou City.

After instructing Niu Ben, Xiao Ming and a group of generals conducted many more simulations on the sand table of Yunzhou City. Yunzhou City was the gateway to Qingzhou; taking Yunzhou City would allow direct access to Qingzhou.

It was precisely for this reason that they stationed troops in Yunzhou City, just as the barbarians had once planned to pass through Yunzhou City.

Having formulated the war plan, Xiao Ming returned to Qingzhou City. This time, he was not the only one participating in the war; Prince Yong, having arrived in Qingzhou, was prepared for an audience.

Before he came to the military camp, Princess Yong had already taken the first step to meet Imperial Concubine Zhen, implicitly mentioning Prince Yong's attitude. After having a plan in mind, he arranged to meet Prince Yong at noon to clarify some matters.

Overall, he probably only had two true allies in the Great Yu Empire now: Prince Yong and the Prince of Huainan. However, compared to the Prince of Huainan, whose support required a marriage alliance, Prince Yong's support might be simpler.

Although Prince Yong had a bad temper and indulged in pleasure, his straightforward nature made him simple: he would follow whoever was the true emperor.

Upon arriving at the princely estate, Xiao Ming went directly to the main hall. Soon after, Prince Yong, led by Qian Dafu, arrived in the main hall.

"Worthy nephew!"

Seeing Xiao Ming, Prince Yong laughed heartily and walked towards Xiao Ming. His burly physique put some pressure on Xiao Ming.

"Fourth Imperial Uncle." Xiao Ming also smiled. He had not yet ascended the throne, so the etiquette remained as usual. However, compared to his previous boorishness, Xiao Ming could still discern a hint of caution in Prince Yong's demeanor.

Inviting Prince Yong to sit down, Xiao Ming came straight to the point. He gestured to Qian Dafu, who then brought over Xiao Wenxuan's imperial edict.

This imperial edict was also what Prince Yong had always been concerned about. He had to confirm its authenticity, so when he received the imperial edict, he examined it carefully. After a while, he said, "This is Imperial Brother's handwriting, and the silk used for this imperial edict is also exclusive to the palace. It's indeed correct."

After saying this, Prince Yong breathed a sigh of relief. He stood up and said to Xiao Ming, "From now on, I will obey worthy nephew's every command."

Princess Yong had already mentioned Prince Yong's intention to submit when she met Imperial Concubine Zhen, so Xiao Ming was not surprised. He did not stand on ceremony and directly said, "I presume Fourth Imperial Uncle also knows about Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao jointly raising an army to attack me?"

"I have heard of this matter, worthy nephew. Rest assured, I will raise an army and attack these rebels with worthy nephew," Prince Yong said angrily.

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. His own troops were few, but with Prince Yong's, they would be considerable, which would make things much easier for him.

However, his mentioning this matter was not to have Prince Yong participate in the battle for Yunzhou City.

“Capture Bingzhou!”

Prince Yong’s expression showed surprise.

Xiao Ming nodded gently, “Precisely. This time, Prince Liang has dispatched a large army, so Liang’s interior must be empty. At this moment, if Imperial Uncle takes the opportunity to capture Bingzhou, he can easily take it.”

“But can I withstand the allied forces of the three princes under Yunzhou City?” Prince Yong asked, somewhat worried. Now that he had pledged allegiance to Xiao Ming, he naturally had to consider Xiao Ming’s interests as well.

Xiao Ming said confidently, “Fourth Imperial Uncle, rest assured. Even if I cannot defeat them in the field, with these forces, I can hold Yunzhou City. Moreover, once Prince Liang learns that Bingzhou is besieged, he will surely lead a large army back. At that time, Imperial Uncle and I can set up an ambush on Prince Liang’s return route and annihilate them in one fell swoop. The allied forces of the three princes, lacking Prince Liang’s army, will then surely suffer a drastic drop in morale.”

“My worthy nephew has thought it through completely. I will do as you say,” Prince Yong said.

Xiao Ming breathed a sigh of relief. Prince Yong’s allegiance was somewhat unexpected, and it was arguably the greatest good news before his enthronement.

Although Prince Yong's governance of his fiefdom was not exemplary, he still had over 100,000 soldiers under his command, and these soldiers could now become one of the factors influencing the war.

However, with Prince Yong's allegiance, he could not show no appreciation. After all, human hearts are unpredictable. This time, Prince Yong's loyalty was due to Xiao Wenxuan's imperial edict. As a monarch about to ascend the throne, he also had to show appropriate generosity to win over people's hearts and at the same time reassure Prince Yong.

So he said, "I hear that Imperial Uncle is currently lacking both military pay and provisions. I have prepared 300,000 taels of silver and 500,000 shi of grain for Imperial Uncle. These supplies should be able to help Imperial Uncle in an emergency."

Prince Yong was immediately overjoyed upon hearing this. He was precisely worried about this matter. Ever since a famine occurred in Yong two years ago, leading to Prince Qinglong gathering rebels, coupled with the barbarians' plundering and massacring of Yong, the treasury of Yong had become extremely difficult.

It was precisely for this reason that he knew he was no match for Xiao Ming.

"Worthy nephew, you truly think of me. This time, Imperial Uncle will risk his old life to take Bingzhou for you," Prince Yong laughed heartily.

Xiao Ming revealed a faint smile. He was also helpless. He understood Prince Yong's current situation; without the support of this military pay and provisions, Prince Yong's army would likely desert by more than half along the way.

Because the common people of the Great Yu Empire enlisted in the army for a very simple reason: to have a meal. If they couldn't even get food, most of them would choose to desert.

This was also why ancient armies often had the custom of plundering. Especially when provisions were insufficient, military commanders would often allow soldiers to plunder conquered cities, because this would give the soldiers a desire to attack cities.

“In that case, I await Imperial Uncle’s good news,” Xiao Ming said to Prince Yong. However, this time, when dispatching Prince Yong to attack Bingzhou, he also had backup plans.

If Prince Yong successfully captured Bingzhou, it would naturally be a joyous outcome, and from then on, Prince Liang would suffer heavy losses. If Prince Yong failed to capture it, it could still achieve the effect of “besieging Wei to rescue Zhao,” enough to help him defeat the allied forces of the three states.

After discussing this matter, the two chatted for a while. After the enthronement ceremony, there would also be a sacrifice to Heaven and a visit to the ancestral temple. This matter naturally required Prince Yong’s presence.

After all, Prince Yong was now the highest-ranking elder among the imperial relatives. Prince Yong readily accepted this.

Having settled this matter, Prince Yong returned joyfully. At this time, he was genuinely happy in his heart. This act of pledging loyalty to Xiao Ming had brought him so many resources. He seemed to instantly return to the time when Xiao Wenxuan was on the throne, when Xiao Wenxuan would always resolve his urgent needs.

After seeing off Prince Yong, Xiao Ming stood up and walked towards the side hall of the princely estate. With Prince Yong’s matter settled, there was still the matter of the Prince of Huainan to be kept pending.

At this moment, the envoy sent by the Prince of Huainan was chatting with Imperial Concubine Zhen in the side hall. However, unlike regular diplomatic missions, this time, the one who came to Qingzhou was Princess Consort Li of Huainan.

“Mother, it’s been seven or eight years since we last met, hasn’t it? The last time we met was at His Majesty’s fiftieth birthday.”

In the side hall, Imperial Concubine Zhen sat in the main seat, and below her sat Princess Consort Li of Huainan.

Princess Consort Li was similar in age to Imperial Concubine Zhen. Despite the passage of time, it was hard to conceal her natural beauty. Holding Imperial Concubine Zhen’s hand, Princess Consort Li appeared affectionate, as if she and Imperial Concubine Zhen had been close friends for many years.

Princess Consort Li’s words reminded Imperial Concubine Zhen of the past, and a hint of sadness appeared in her eyes. In such a short time, things had changed so much, which was lamentable. However, she clearly understood the role she should play at this moment, so she smiled and said, “Sister is absolutely right. I remember that Sister also brought Xue’er to Chang’an at that time. Although Xue’er was only twelve at that time, she was already a little beauty. I wonder what kind of excellent son-in-law Sister has chosen for her now.”

“Mother, you still remember that mischievous girl? Alas, don’t even mention it. That girl has been spoiled by His Highness. At her age now, she still hasn’t found anyone she fancies. She only says that the current princes are all useless. If there were one as magnanimous and daring as His Royal Highness Prince Qi, she would marry him,” Princess Consort Li said seemingly casually.

Imperial Concubine Zhen's eyes shifted. She said, "Since ancient times, beauties have loved heroes, and this is understandable. Now that Ming'er already has a legitimate consort, I am thinking that it's time to choose secondary consorts for him to continue the lineage. After all, there are too many complexities in the imperial family, and only with more descendants can the ancestral line be assured. At that time, I also thought of Xue'er, but feared that Xue'er would look down on the position of secondary consort, so I dismissed the idea."

"Mother is overthinking. Now that His Highness is about to ascend the throne, this secondary consort will soon become an Imperial Noble Consort. This status is worthy of her. What I fear is that Mother might look down on this girl," Princess Consort Li's face bloomed into a smile.

Imperial Concubine Zhen also smoothed her brow. Princess Consort Li's meaning was clear: Fei Yuer was the Empress, but her daughter was to be an Imperial Noble Consort. This was a bargaining chip.

Although she never interfered in government affairs, she knew that Xiao Ming would find it difficult to quickly stabilize the north without a few capable helpers.

So she said, "I liked Xue'er from the first time I saw her. In that case, I will agree to this matter. I hope Sister will choose an auspicious day to send Xue'er to Qingzhou."

"Mother, that's simple. After I return, I will send a letter to His Highness, asking him to send someone to bring Xue'er," Princess Consort Li said with great joy.

This Imperial Noble Consort was the first rank below the Empress, so it was not a slight to her daughter.

The two chatted for a while longer, then Princess Consort Li stood up and departed.

As soon as Princess Consort Li left, Xiao Ming walked in from outside the side hall. Imperial Concubine Zhen looked at him and said, "This matter has been settled by Mother for you. The King of Huainan's intention is for his daughter to be an Imperial Noble Consort. However, now it seems only the King of Huainan can form a marriage alliance with you. As long as the King of Huainan can obey commands, this Imperial Noble Consort will not be a loss."

"It can only be this way now. I hope he can contain the King of Chu and Prince Yan," Xiao Ming slowly said.

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In the side hall, mother and son stood facing each other.

At this moment, Imperial Concubine Zhen pulled Xiao Ming to sit down. She said, "You have become much more sensible than before. This puts Mother's heart at ease. You are about to become emperor. From now on, you must consider the greater good of the world, not just your personal desires. After all, what you hold in your hands is the well-being of the common people."

After a pause, she continued, "Now the Great Yu Empire is precarious and in grave danger. The common people of Chang'an City all know that the Great Yu Empire's edifice is crumbling. Your Imperial Father truly left this mess to you, which must be difficult for you. But do not blame your Imperial Father. It was already rare for him to maintain peace in the realm all these years. It's just that in the end, he misjudged Prince Zhao."

Xiao Ming nodded. Imperial Concubine Zhen's words were not alarmist. Even if he annihilated Yan, Liang, and Zhao, most of the north would still be in ruins and would require a long time to recover through recuperation. He would also expend vast financial resources to maintain stability in the north.

But even so, war was still unavoidable.

He said, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I might just bring a new dawn to the Great Yu Empire."

Imperial Concubine Zhen's eyes were filled with a smile. She had originally only wished for Xiao Ming to live a peaceful life in his fiefdom, but now he had completely embarked on a different path.

But no matter where Xiao Ming went, she would continue to support him as she always had.

After observing Xiao Ming for a while, she said, "In that case, after you ascend the throne, Imperial Mother will arrange the matter of taking consorts for you. However, there is one more thing Imperial Mother must discuss with you: where will Cui Xue'er live after she arrives?"

Xiao Ming was startled. He understood that Imperial Concubine Zhen was talking about the imperial palace. The princely estate was simply too small and crowded to accommodate too many people.

After a moment of hesitation, he said, "There's no solution before the enthronement, but I have already decided to build an imperial palace. There's an unused civilian area south of Qingzhou City, and I plan to build it there."

"Then Imperial Mother will be at ease. This imperial palace is not only a place for the emperor to rest but also a place for ministers to work. It is certainly no trifling matter," Imperial Concubine Zhen reminded him.

Xiao Ming nodded. Indeed, the Qingzhou government office was a bit crowded now, and many institutions were mixed together. After all, many departments were added after the political reform, and these departments all needed separate office locations.

So, after considering all circumstances, he decided to build an imperial city, which would also be a transformation of Qingzhou City. For him, the traditional civilian settlement model could no longer meet the demands of industrial development.

It was now necessary to break the traditional residential settlement pattern and establish an urban structure suitable for industrial development.

Moreover, urban reform could also stimulate Qingzhou's commercial development. For him, this was killing three birds with one stone.

After briefly discussing this matter, he departed from Imperial Concubine Zhen. He needed to inform the construction camp about this, and also provide them with a blueprint for the imperial city.

For him, the construction of the imperial city needed to consider the issue of electricity. After all, if Qingzhou were to build a power plant in the future, he wouldn't want the imperial city to be in disarray again, so it was better to reserve this part in advance.

In the afternoon, Imperial Concubine Zhen officially issued an edict to Princess Consort Huainan. This edict, of course, concerned Cui Xue'er, and with it, the matter of taking a consort was formally settled.

On the same day, Xiao Ming also settled matters with Prince Yong and the Prince of Huainan. Although his mood was somewhat complex, he finally breathed a sigh of relief, because with the help of the two princes, he would have an easier time. Feeling somewhat at ease, Xiao Ming once again plunged into the preparations for the enthronement ceremony. There was not much time left until his enthronement.

His only worry now was the battle for Yunzhou City, as this would determine the future situation in the north.

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Yunzhou City.

With the influx of the Southern Expeditionary Army and the Dengzhou Army, soldiers in groups of three to five could be seen everywhere in this small city. The common people in the city also sensed that a major battle was imminent, because they had never seen so many soldiers stationed in Yunzhou City.

Even in the Battle of Jizhou two years ago, the soldiers in this city numbered only thirty to fifty thousand.

At this time, the atmosphere in the Yunzhou Grand Camp was solemn. Two days ago, Niu Ben arrived here with the Grand General of the Western Expedition's seal. With the arrival of the commanding general, it meant that war was not far off.

"There are still three days until Your Highness's enthronement. If Your Highness's enthronement ceremony suffers any mishap due to the battle in Yunzhou City, none of you will be able to bear the responsibility. However, if we can achieve a great victory this time, all of you will certainly be rewarded for your merits upon your return." Niu Ben said loudly.

Lu Fei, Luo Xin, Luo Hong, Qi Guangyi, Bai Mu, and a group of other generals were all in the tent. They exchanged glances, their eyes burning with fervor.

After the enthronement ceremony, Xiao Ming would officially become the emperor of the Great Yu Empire, and attacking other vassal princes would be equivalent to suppressing rebels. Moreover, after the enthronement, there would inevitably be promotions for officials and generals.

As the earliest generals to follow Xiao Ming, they were naturally the main force for this promotion. However, before that, they had to ensure that the enthronement ceremony could proceed smoothly.

After all, Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao did not want Xiao Ming to ascend the throne, especially Prince Zhao. Once Xiao Ming ascended the throne, it meant that he would lose his advantage of commanding vassal princes in the name of the emperor.

“Three hundred and fifty thousand men! These three princes seem to be intent on annihilating our Qi territory.” Luo Hong looked at the sand table with a solemn expression. He had never experienced a war of such a large scale.

The scouts who went to reconnaissance reported that the armies of the three princes were so vast that they covered the sky, and besides the soldiers directly involved in the battle, there were also long lines of civilian laborers transporting provisions.

Now, the vanguard of the allied forces of the three princes had already arrived and set up camp under Yunzhou City, but subsequent troops were still arriving continuously.

Among them, Prince Zhao's 40,000 cavalry even attempted to bypass Yunzhou City and penetrate deep into the territory to plunder, burn, and kill, but under the pursuit and interception of Bai Mu's cavalry, they had to abandon this plan.

Because they found that no matter where they went, they would always be discovered first. At this point, risking deeper penetration would likely mean no return.

"Even if another 350,000 come, we're not afraid. We'll bring out all the field guns and blast them into pulp," Lu Fei roared.

Luo Xin raised his eyebrows. Most of the field guns were now concentrated in his hands. He was rubbing his fists, ready for a big fight. Ninety percent of Qingzhou's ammunition reserves were here this time.

Niu Ben frowned. He said, "His Highness told me before he left that we must do our utmost to eliminate the allied forces of the three princes, so this time, you do not need to show mercy. You must strike hard. Moreover, there are also 6,000 rifled flintlock guns being equipped. However, because His Highness mentioned that the production of smokeless gunpowder is very slow, we still have to use black gunpowder for now. But even so, it will be enough to completely defeat Prince Yan's musketeers."

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"Six thousand rifled guns!"

A gasp of astonishment arose in the camp, and the generals' excitement was evident.

During the conquest of Wei, they had already tested the excellent performance of this weapon on the battlefield. This batch of firearms not only had a long range and great power, but also were easy to load and had a fast firing rate.

An ordinary flintlock gun could fire two to three bullets per minute, but this kind of rifled gun could fire double the number of bullets per minute, which was very important for flintlock guns that relied on firing density to inflict casualties on the enemy.

“General, please give these 6,000 flintlock guns to our Southern Expeditionary Army. I am willing to be the vanguard!” Lu Fei stepped forward and cupped his hands to Niu Ben.

Ye Qingyun immediately became displeased. “General Lu, that’s not fair. How can the vanguard be yours, and these flintlock guns also yours? Even without these rifled flintlock guns, our Dengzhou Army is willing to be the vanguard!”

“That’s not right. How come all the good things go to your Southern Expeditionary Army and Dengzhou Army? You’ve already profited from the war in Wei. Now it should be our turn!” Di Ying, the Governor of Yunzhou, said.

“Exactly, you Southern Expeditionary Army and Dengzhou Army shouldn’t always hog all the limelight. This time, it should be our turn.”

“ ... ”

The generals spoke one after another, none giving way to the other.

“All of you, shut up!” Niu Ben roared when he saw this.

The generals immediately clamped their mouths shut, each with a serious expression.

Scanning the eager generals, Niu Ben said in a deep voice, "I know you are eager for battle, but there can be no mishaps in this battle. This is not the time for you to vie for credit. I'll make it clear beforehand: if anyone dares to disobey orders in this battle, or disrupts the formation to rush the attack, I will chop off his head."

"Yes, General!" The generals responded in unison.

Nodding with satisfaction, Niu Ben looked at the sand table. This sand table represented the terrain between Yunzhou City and Kaizhou City. This time, the armies of Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and Prince Liang were relying on Bingzhou, and their large army advanced twenty li outside Yunzhou City to set up camp. Their momentum was undeniably grand.

Although Yunzhou City also concentrated most of the state's army this time, Niu Ben still dared not be careless, because this would be a battle that would determine the situation in the north for the state.

If this action annihilated the 350,000 allied forces, the offensive and defensive balance in the north will be completely altered from then on, and the state will break free from its passive defensive posture.

"Lu Fei, I order you to command the central army. Luo Hong, I order you to command the left army. Ye Qingyun, I order you to command the right army. Bai Mu, you lead 20,000 cavalry to protect the left flank of the infantry. Qi Guangyi, you lead 20,000 cavalry to protect the right flank of the infantry. Luo Xin, you will establish the artillery positions with me." Niu Ben issued orders one by one.

All the generals who heard the orders bowed and responded.

Allied Forces Camp.

While Niu Ben was deploying for battle, here, they were fiercely arguing about the upcoming war. This time, Prince Yan sent his younger brother Cui Huai to command the entire army. Prince Zhao sent General Zhao Ang, and Prince Liang's army was personally led by the Second Prince.

Although the three princes had agreed to jointly attack Qi this time, the soldiers in the allied forces' camp were distinctly separated, not only that, even provisions were managed by each army for itself.

"Why should our Yan army serve as the vanguard, while your armies watch from behind? Since we are allied forces, we should naturally advance and retreat together!" In the tent, Cui Huai looked displeased at the Second Prince and Zhao Ang.

Zhao Ang said upon hearing this, "This allied army is led by Yan. The vanguard should naturally be handled by Yan. Moreover, if Qingzhou is conquered, Yan will benefit the most, won't it?"

Cui Huai's face instantly flushed. He said angrily, "That's wrong! This great army's presence is by no means for Yan's selfish interests. I ask you, if we just watch Xiao Ming grow stronger, who benefits? You are judging a gentleman's heart with a villain's mind!"

“General Cui is absolutely right. Our purpose this time is to destroy Xiao Ming and prevent him from ascending the throne. Is General Zhao Ang unwilling to exert effort because he admits that the Thirteenth Prince is not legitimate?” The Second Prince said blandly.

Whenever the Second Prince thought of Xiao Ming, intense hatred would surge within him. If Xiao Ming hadn’t relentlessly pursued the assassination incident back then, he wouldn’t have been demoted to a desolate place like Bazhou and suffered so much.

This time, Prince Liang’s large army initially did not have him as the main commander, but under his strong insistence, Prince Liang finally compromised. For him, as long as Xiao Ming was alive, his hatred would not be quelled.

Zhao Ang, being cornered by Cui Huai and the Second Prince, his expression shifted, and finally he said, “The Thirteenth Prince is naturally legitimate. Xiao Ming’s enthronement is an act of rebellion.”

“That’s it then,” the Second Prince sneered. “When battle begins tomorrow, I hope both of you can provide strong support.”

Although Zhao Ang was unwilling, facing the aggressive stance of the two, he had no choice but to agree. However, Prince Zhao’s words before his departure still echoed in his ears: these 40,000 Xuanjia iron cavalry were Prince Zhao’s treasures. He would still try to minimize casualties.

At this moment, the Second Prince and Cui Huai exchanged glances, their eyes crossing paths. Both were somewhat wary of each other.

The next morning, wisps of cooking smoke rose from Yunzhou City, and the allied forces' camp also began to light fires and prepare meals. After the soldiers had all eaten their fill, a thunderous sound of war drums suddenly echoed through the camp.

Then the allied forces slowly approached Yunzhou City amidst the sound of war drums.

At this time, a hydrogen balloon in Yunzhou City had already ascended, and the flag signaler on the hydrogen balloon continuously relayed the movements of the allied forces to Niu Ben on the city wall.

"The flag signaler says they observed 150 cannons from the allied forces being pushed towards Yunzhou City," Niu Ben said to Luo Xin.

"General, it seems Prince Yan and Prince Liang have brought out all their family fortunes this time," Luo Xin said.

Niu Ben nodded, "These cannons are yours. Destroy them all."

"Yes, General." Luo Xin nodded. Then he descended from the city tower and headed towards a high ground outside the city. This high ground was now set with a hundred cannons, and there was also an artillery position on a slightly higher piece of land corresponding to it.

Outside Yunzhou City, Lu Fei, Luo Hong, and Ye Qingyun led the left, center, and right armies respectively, arrayed in horizontal lines. These horizontal lines were further composed of smaller horizontal lines of two hundred men each.

On the open land outside Yunzhou City, the two armies drew closer, and the atmosphere on the battlefield grew heavier.

An hour later, the allied forces of the three princes stopped 300 meters from Yunzhou City's army. The musketeers in front began to advance towards Yunzhou City's army.

This time, Prince Yan sent all his musketeers, a total of 20,000 men, and Prince Liang sent all 10,000 of his musketeers from his state.

Hundreds of thousands of troops were arrayed from east to west, the dense soldiers appearing like an ant colony from above.

For both sides, this battle had no elaborate schemes; it was a direct confrontation between the two armies.

"Rumble..."

As the allied forces' musketeers continuously advanced towards Yunzhou City, the sound of war drums grew more fervent, and amidst the war drums, the field guns also roared.

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"Boom, boom, boom..."

Hundreds of field guns simultaneously began to bombard the allied cannons that were constantly approaching the Yunzhou army.

As the allied musketeers continuously approached the Yunzhou army, these allied cannons hidden within the army also seized the opportunity to move forward. However, all of this could not be concealed from the signalmen observing from hundreds of meters high in the hydrogen balloon.

The positions of the enemy cannons were continuously relayed to Luo Xin by the signalmen, and Luo Xin immediately directed the cannons to bombard the directions indicated by the signalmen.

After a volley, a swath of allied soldiers covering the cannons fell. The allied cannons were then completely exposed to Luo Xin's view, and even fiercer cannon fire bombarded the allied cannons, instantly causing screams to erupt.

The tragic situation of the artillery soon reached Cui Huai and the Second Prince. Both their expressions changed upon hearing this. At this moment, a strange glint flashed in their eyes as they looked at the peculiar object rising from Yunzhou City.

"This must be the fabled hot-air balloon," Cui Huai asked.

The Second Prince nodded, "That's right. I saw it once in Chang'an. It is said that in the Battle of Jizhou, the Qingzhou army also used this hot-air balloon to scout the barbarian army."

"Hmph, if I'm not mistaken, there's a hot-air balloon in Chang'an City, isn't there?"

"There is one. Xiao Ming gave it to Imperial Father back then. It should be in Prince Zhao's hands now," the Second Prince said, displeased. This time, Prince Zhao had dispatched 40,000 cavalry, but he was unwilling to even send the hot-air balloon.

Otherwise, how could they be so passive now?

Zhao Ang's eyes were fixed on his nose, feigning ignorance. Now that the losses were from Prince Yan's and Prince Liang's forces, he seemed to feel a bit of joy.

Cui Huai and the Second Prince naturally felt distressed. On the raised ground not far away, strangely shaped cannons continuously fired round after round of shells. Their artillerymen were completely unable to return fire.

However, at this moment, they also gradually realized that the range of their cannons seemed to be inferior to that of the Qi army's cannons.

But the suppression of their cannons did not make them abandon their intention to attack. On the contrary, they ordered the army to continue advancing, after all, their soldiers were more than twice the number of the Qi army.

Now that the Qi army was not defending the city but fighting them in the open, it was an opportunity for them to annihilate them in one fell swoop.

The loss of a thousand artillerymen among 350,000 troops would not affect this war at all.

"Rumble, rumble, rumble..." The sound of war drums grew increasingly urgent. The allied musketeers were still 250 meters from the Yunzhou army.

At this moment, Lu Fei, commanding the central army, ordered his soldiers to raise their muskets. This time, the central army was equipped with 6,000 rifled guns, to be used against the allied musketeers.

Although he could order fire at around 400 meters, Lu Fei understood that the closer the distance, the more concentrated firepower could be unleashed. So, he ultimately decided to order fire at 250 meters, as the accuracy at 400 meters was too poor.

“Fire!” Just as the allied musketeers were slowly approaching the Yunzhou army, Lu Fei finally gave the order.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

White smoke accompanied by flames erupted, and a swath of densely marching allied musketeers 200 meters away suddenly fell.

An allied soldier felt something warm splash on his face, and then his comrade beside him fell. Looking at the Yunzhou City army holding muskets directly in front of him, he suddenly felt a chill down his spine.

But he dared not stop, because behind them were overseers with sabers. If they retreated even half a step, they would be instantly beheaded, and their families back home would also be killed. They had received such military orders upon arriving in Bingzhou.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

Another volley. Another batch of allied soldiers fell around them. The number of musketeers dwindled.

Then came the third round, the fourth round. Every time fire and white smoke erupted from the opposite side, a group of them would fall. Finally, after the fifth volley, some musketeers could no longer bear the fear and tried to escape.

But they had not run far before they were killed by the overseers. These screams made more soldiers attempting to flee stop, and they grit their teeth, advancing step by step towards Yunzhou City.

150 meters, 100 meters, 70 meters. When they reached the firing range of the matchlock guns, they raised their matchlock guns.

At the artillery position, Niu Ben watched the allied musketeers. At this moment, his brows were tightly furrowed, and his expression was grim. He noticed the presence of overseers among the allied forces.

If it were in the past, these musketeers would have scattered after losing ten percent of their numbers. But now, the musketeers coming directly at them had suffered forty percent losses and still hadn't retreated. Instead, they braved the cannon and musket fire and reached a firing distance of 70 meters.

“It seems this will be a tough battle,” Niu Ben said in a deep voice.

Luo Xin's expression was also somewhat surprised. It seemed Prince Yan and Prince Liang had made a firm decision this time, otherwise, they would not have resorted to such cruel methods to force their soldiers to fight to the death.

"Switch to grapeshot! Have the mortars use lime bombs and explosive shells! Field guns, aim at the overseers!" Niu Ben ordered, trying to minimize casualties.

"Yes."

Luo Xin immediately ordered the flag signaler to signal. At this time, the artillerymen began to switch to grapeshot. When cannons had a longer range than flintlock guns, cannons were the main force in warfare.

"Boom, boom, boom..." The field guns firing grapeshot began to bombard the allied musketeers.

A grapeshot shell, fired, instantly turned into a rain of hundreds of projectiles. The musketeers, preparing to fire, screamed and fell in waves, the ground filled with the wails of wounded soldiers.

Lu Fei's expression showed no mercy. They had no personal grudge against these soldiers, but on the battlefield, they were enemies. If they didn't kill them, they would be killed themselves.

Seventy meters was also the effective range of flintlock guns. After enduring a volley from the allied musketeers, he ordered the rifled flintlock guns and smoothbore flintlock guns to fire simultaneously.

Under the fierce cannon fire and musket volleys, the allied musketeers continuously fell. Finally, after suffering seventy percent losses, the allied musketeers could no longer bear it and collectively retreated.

“Those who retreat die!” The overseers roared, their sabers falling upon every fleeing soldier.

But at this point, the threat of death could no longer stop the soldiers from fleeing.

Luo Xin used his telescope to observe these overseers. He ordered the cannons to heavily bombard these overseers who were trying to prevent the soldiers from retreating.

Gradually, the overseers found their numbers dwindling, and they gradually lost their hold over the army in front. Under the fierce cannon fire of the Yunzhou army, more and more soldiers scattered.

Seeing this, Niu Ben breathed a sigh of relief. However, he also sighed inwardly. If Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao could have used such methods against the barbarians, how could the barbarians have bullied the Great Yu Empire?

So, at this moment, his resentment towards Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao grew even stronger. In his opinion, they were nothing more than a group of cruel tyrants.

Chapter 636

“Fool!”

In the camp, Cui Huai was furious. The rout of the musketeers led to chaos in the front lines, preventing the subsequent troops from charging forward and engaging the Yunzhou army in close combat. Thus, they had no choice but to temporarily return to the main camp to regroup and fight again.

The Second Prince's face was grim. Establishing the overseers was his idea, but even so, it didn't prevent this defeat. He said, "All deserters are to be executed without mercy. All these retreating musketeers are to be killed."

"Kill them all? Our Yan musketeers have less than two thousand left," Cui Huai said, heartbroken. He now regretted trusting the Second Prince's words.

If it weren't for these overseers, how could his musketeers have suffered such severe losses?

"Your Yan has two thousand men left, but our Liang has not a single musketeer left. Your overseers are truly skilled; they act without mercy," the Second Prince sneered.

Now that all his musketeers were lost, he would have difficulty explaining himself upon returning. After all, whether it was Yan or Liang, these musketeers were elite troops, and these elite troops were completely vulnerable before the Qi army.

Cui Huai retorted angrily, "Second Prince, what do you mean? Wasn't it your idea to have these overseers? You were the one who said that Yan's overseers would supervise Liang's army, and Liang's overseers would supervise Yan's army."

In this battle, only Zhao Ang suffered no losses. While secretly gloating, he feigned a persuasion, "The two of you, stop arguing. Let's think about how to attack the city. Although we were defeated today, we only lost 30,000 men. We still have over 300,000 men."

“General Zhao is truly speaking without feeling the pain, since it wasn’t your cavalry that suffered losses, of course you don’t feel bad. General Zhao is so eager to fight, how about letting the Black Armored Iron Cavalry break through the Qi army’s formation tomorrow?”

“That’s an idea. The muskets load very slowly, and cavalry can cover several hundred meters in an instant,” the Second Prince also echoed.

Zhao Ang’s face immediately changed. He said, “Don’t forget that the Yunzhou army also has cavalry. If the Black Armored Iron Cavalry is gone, how will you deal with their cavalry?”

This time, the three allied princes had designated Prince Yan as the supreme commander of the allied forces. Cui Huai said, “General Zhao, this is an order.”

Zhao Ang’s face turned extremely grim upon hearing this. He snorted and left the camp.

Cui Huai and the Second Prince looked at Zhao Ang’s departing figure, both revealing a cruel smile. Since they had suffered such heavy losses, how could they allow Zhao Ang to watch comfortably from the sidelines?

Yunzhou Army Grand Camp.

After Niu Ben and the other generals had a simple dinner, they gathered again in the tent. This morning they prepared, at noon they started the battle, and in the evening, they sounded the gongs for retreat.

Although they had gained considerable advantages by utilizing the power of firearms, several hundred soldiers were still killed or wounded under the relentless firing of the allied musketeers.

This battle casualty rate was still acceptable to them, as the allied forces' losses were even greater.

"General, if the allied forces of the three princes continue to fight so recklessly, it will be troublesome. Their musketeers should be used up by now. Next, they should charge with cavalry and infantry!" Lu Fei analyzed.

All the generals nodded.

Luo Hong said, "Three hundred meters is only a few breaths for cavalry. Even for infantry, it's only about twenty breaths to charge through."

Niu Ben agreed deeply. He naturally knew that if they continued to clash head-on like this, they would ultimately lose tens of thousands of men, because once the allied forces charged and turned it into a melee, it would be very disadvantageous for them. After a moment of thought, he said, "From tomorrow onwards, we will hold our ground and not sally forth. We will wear down their morale over some time."

Qi Guangyi said, "General, I request to lead 10,000 cavalry to harass their provisions."

Bai Mu said, "I am also willing to go."

Niu Ben nodded. "Remember, burn their provisions if you can, but never get bogged down in battle."

"Yes, General," Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu said in unison.

After a pause, Niu Ben continued, "I have decided to hold out for five days starting tomorrow. After five days, we will use the chariot formation to completely surround the allied forces' camp. In this way, we can both leverage the advantage of firearms and not worry about infantry charges."

Lu Fei and the other generals nodded upon hearing this. Today, they had merely lured the allied musketeers to engage them. In their opinion, Prince Yan and Prince Liang were overly confident in their musketeers, thinking that these musketeers could achieve an equal exchange in numbers.

In reality, these soldiers were merely targets, and they had gained the vast majority of the allied musketeers at a minuscule cost.

The next day.

When Cui Huai, the Second Prince, and Zhao Ang led their armies to Yunzhou City again, they found that the soldiers who had been arrayed in front of the city yesterday were all on the city walls.

Seeing this situation, Zhao Ang naturally breathed a sigh of relief, while the Second Prince and Cui Huai's faces were grim.

Now they had only two paths before them: one was to attack the city, and the other was to bypass Yunzhou City. However, bypassing Yunzhou City would mean their supply lines were completely exposed under Yunzhou City's nose.

Once the supply lines were cut off, it would be a disaster for them.

So, after weighing their options, they ultimately chose the first option: to attack the city. This time, with 350,000 troops assembled, they had to achieve a satisfactory result.

However, only when they attacked the city did they realize that there was no difference in difficulty between attacking the city and bypassing Yunzhou City.

When the cannons on the city wall began to roar, they knew that today would be a fruitless effort. Just as they thought, by nightfall, besides leaving a pile of corpses under the city, they hadn't even pried off a single brick from the city wall of Yunzhou City.

Then came the second day, the third day...

At the same time, while the allied forces were still engaged in fierce battle under Yunzhou City, Prince Yong's army, taking advantage of Liang's depleted forces, had already arrived under Bingzhou City.

The general leading the Yongzhou army this time was none other than Chen Xinran, Prince Yong's personal general. The army marching to Bingzhou was an elite force personally trained by him, consisting of 20,000 musketeers, 40,000 infantry, and 15,000 cavalry.

Liang's and Prince Yong's fiefdoms bordered each other. Upon receiving Prince Yong's order, they set off from Jizhou and marched all the way to Bingzhou, encountering no resistance along the way.

"General, that's Bingzhou City ahead," a subordinate general said, pointing to the city in front.

Chen Xinran nodded. He said to his subordinate general, "Immediately have someone push up the cannons. His Royal Highness Prince Qi is about to ascend the throne, and His Highness Prince Yong has ordered us to take Bingzhou City at all costs. This is a great gift from Prince Yong to the future Emperor."

"Yes, General," the subordinate general immediately went to inform the artillerymen.

At this moment, Chen Xinran looked at Bingzhou City. Bingzhou bordered Prince Yong's territory, and Prince Yong and Prince Liang had previously had many skirmishes here.

And now they could finally openly attack Bingzhou City.

Chapter 637

"Boom, boom, boom..."

Amidst fierce cannon fire, Chen Xinran launched an attack on Bingzhou City.

Now that Prince Liang had raised an army to attack Prince Qi, with all of Liang's elites dispatched, the various prefectures and counties within Liang were lightly garrisoned, with only a small number of defenders in each city.

Therefore, even though their large army was spotted by scouts upon entering Liang, Prince Liang did not gather troops to meet them in battle.

Among the many vassal states, Prince Yong's state was not considered prosperous, but relatively speaking, the Yong army's soldiers, having defended against barbarians for years, had their own rugged strengths.

Even when Liang had used its full national strength, it had only fought Prince Yong to a stalemate. Now, facing the overwhelming attack of the Yong army, Liang was completely unable to resist.

The artillery first shattered the city gate of Bingzhou. At this moment, Chen Xinran shouted, "Soldiers, charge! The first to enter the city will be rewarded with a thousand taels of silver! After entering the city, looting is permitted!"

Under such heavy rewards, the Yong army soldiers roared and charged towards Bingzhou City. Chen Xinran's order, which condoned looting, also drove these soldiers, who usually lacked military pay and lived in extreme poverty, into a frenzy.

Soldiers blinded by desire were terrifying. The Yongzhou army outside the city stormed into the city gate like wild beasts.

The Yongzhou army launched simultaneous attacks from all four city gates. The Bingzhou army, originally numbering only 3,000, was dispersed and utterly unable to withstand the fierce assault of over 100,000 Yongzhou troops. Soon, the Yongzhou army surged into this city located between Prince Yong's fiefdom and Liang.

The Yongzhou soldiers who entered Bingzhou City quickly swarmed onto the city walls, killing the resisting Bingzhou soldiers one by one. At the same time, most of the Yongzhou soldiers began to plunder indiscriminately within the city.

Chen Xinran rode his horse into Bingzhou City. He looked indifferently at the plundering soldiers. The provisions Xiao Ming provided were only enough for them to take Bingzhou City. If they were to take other prefectures and counties, they would have to find a way to raise their own provisions.

It was precisely for this reason that he condoned the soldiers' looting, as it was the quickest way to solve the provision problem.

Having taken Bingzhou City, Chen Xinran turned his gaze towards Fenzhou. This was his next target. Beyond Fenzhou lay Yanzhou, and after Yanzhou was Liang Capital, where Prince Liang's mansion was located.

Just as Chen Xinran effortlessly took Bingzhou, Prince Liang's mansion in Liang Capital was in chaos.

News of Prince Yong's sudden military advance across the border had reached here, and Prince Liang was greatly alarmed upon learning this.

"How could Prince Yong send troops!"

Prince Liang still couldn't believe it. After Xiao Ming took Wei, he believed Prince Yong would be very wary of Xiao Ming, but now things were developing in an unpredictable direction.

“Your Highness, this old subordinate said we should be wary of Prince Yong attacking. But Your Highness stubbornly believed the Second Prince’s words. Now that the state’s forces are depleted, Liang is doomed.”

Prince Liang’s face was ashen. At that time, some civil officials advised him to ally with Yan and first destroy Prince Yong, then slowly deal with Qi. However, the envoy from Yan, coupled with the Second Prince’s persuasion, ultimately swayed him.

Because Prince Yan promised him that after taking Liang Capital, he would divide Yong and the Sixteen Prefectures of Yan-Yun with him, equally sharing the conquered cities. But now, not a single city had been gained, and Liang’s cities were being seized by Prince Yong.

“My dear ministers, what should we do now?” Prince Liang also lost his composure.

“Your Highness, you should immediately order the Second Prince to lead the troops back, otherwise, it will be too late to regret!” The officials said urgently.

Prince Liang wiped the sweat from his forehead. This time, a single oversight could lead to the collapse of his state. He said, “Immediately order the Second Prince to lead the troops back!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

...

Qingzhou City.

While the battle in Yunzhou City raged on, Xiao Ming's enthronement ceremony was also held in Qingzhou City.

In the days leading up to the enthronement, Qingzhou's newspapers continuously publicized Xiao Ming's ascension to the common people in various prefectures. At the same time, the details of the Chang'an chaos were also fully exposed in the newspapers.

The Crown Prince assassinating the emperor, Prince Zhao usurping the throne, Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince being forced to ascend the throne by Prince Zhao—all these details were meticulously laid out, causing a huge stir in Qingzhou City.

Besides exposing Prince Zhao's rebellious acts, the newspapers also announced the matter of the imperial edict, proving that Xiao Ming's ascension was in accordance with the imperial mandate.

The common people of the state were naturally overjoyed by Xiao Ming's enthronement, for it meant that the wise prince in their eyes would become an emperor who would bless the world. From then on, their lives would be well-fed and prosperous under the protection of this emperor.

So on the day of the enthronement, large numbers of common people spontaneously poured into Qingzhou City. They were all jubilant and excited, shouting "Long live the new emperor!" and eagerly awaiting the start of the enthronement ceremony.

The smiles on the faces of Qingzhou merchants were no less than those of the common people. Under Xiao Ming's rule, their status had been greatly elevated, and they believed that in the near future, Qingzhou would be even more suitable for merchants to live and work.

Similarly pleased were the formerly low-status artisans. Now, their status was not only not low but was gradually becoming equal to that of scholars.

The only ones displeased were probably the Confucian scholars who had offended Xiao Ming. They were now trembling with fear, keeping their tails tucked, not daring to speak recklessly on such a day, otherwise, they might truly be beaten to death by the enraged common people.

After all, Xiao Ming was now considered by the common people to be the true Son of Heaven, and even the reincarnation of the barefoot immortal from the upper realm sent by Heaven to save all living beings.

"Barefoot Immortal!"

In Prince Qi's mansion, Xiao Ming burst out laughing upon learning of the rumors spreading among the common people in the city.

He looked at Fei Ji, who stood silently to one side, and said, "Elder Fei Ji, this must be your doing, right?"

Three days ago, Fei Ji had submitted a memorial to him, speaking of deifying him. At that time, Xiao Ming was reviewing news from the Yunzhou City battle. Seeing that it was not a major issue and not

wanting to argue with Fei Ji about it, he dismissed him and told him to discuss it with Pang Yukun, meaning that if the two agreed, they could proceed.

But now, it seemed Pang Yukun had clearly agreed.

Pang Yukun smiled, "Your Highness, this is a rule from all dynasties. Now that Your Highness is ascending the throne, historians must write biographies for Your Highness, and this also benefits Your Highness in unifying the Great Yu Empire, after all, the common people of the Great Yu Empire still believe in this."

Xiao Ming felt somewhat helpless upon hearing this, but he thought about it and realized that it indeed seemed beneficial to him at this stage. Besides fabricating the reincarnation of a barefoot immortal, Fei Ji had also concocted a story about a true dragon appearing in the sky at his birth.

"Yes, Your Highness, I am also utterly loyal," Fei Ji said with a smile. In terms of flattery, he was still top-notch.

Xiao Ming shook his head and said, "It's getting late. Let's start the enthronement ceremony quickly. The battle in Yunzhou is tense, and I fear there might be an unexpected turn of events."

"Yes, Your Highness," Pang Yukun and Fei Ji both responded in unison.

With that, the two bowed simultaneously and said loudly, "Please, His Royal Highness Prince Qi, enter the hall for the ceremony."

Xiao Ming nodded, took the elegantly dressed Fei Yuer by the hand, and ascended the imperial carriage. Under the protection of guards, they headed towards the Qingzhou government office, which was now temporarily serving as the Council Hall.

Chapter 638

“Begin the imperial procession!”

With Qian Dafu’s long, thin shout, the imperial carriage departed from the princely estate towards the government office.

The streets and alleys of Qingzhou City were already filled with common people. Upon seeing Xiao Ming’s imperial carriage emerge, they all bowed their heads to show respect.

Although the Great Yu Empire had been repeatedly humiliated by foreign enemies, from officials to common people, they never knelt before the monarch.

Sitting in the imperial carriage, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer looked outside through the gaps in the curtains. Seeing so many common people coming to congratulate him on his enthronement, a warmth rose in his heart.

Over the years, his improvements to the common people’s livelihood in his state had earned him their love and support. Coming from modern times, he deeply understood one principle: as long as he could gain the support of the common people, the realm would be stable.

As long as he held public opinion, neither powerful families nor capital were to be feared.

Fei Yuer tightly held Xiao Ming's hand. She was also a little nervous at this moment. Dressed in empress attire, she now appeared graceful and noble.

Perhaps due to the rich diet in the princely estate, Fei Yuer had gained some weight and had some baby fat on her face, which instead made her appear more dignified, like a mother figure ruling the world.

Along the wide street, the imperial carriage arrived at the government office in a quarter of an hour.

At this moment, Pang Yukun and Fei Ji stepped forward from behind, while the officials waiting at the government office gate all stood behind the two.

Pang Yukun, as the Chief Grand Secretary of the cabinet, personally lifted the beaded curtain of the imperial carriage and proclaimed loudly, "Your Highness, please enter the Grand Hall!"

As his voice fell, all the officials inside and outside the government office bowed in welcome.

Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer disembarked from the imperial carriage together. They walked shoulder to shoulder along the bluestone path of the government office's main entrance towards the Council Hall.

The two walked at a steady pace. According to Fei Ji, they were to be seated on the dragon throne in the Council Hall just as the bells of Qingzhou City rang nine times.

Xiao Ming had never heard of this rule. Fei Ji explained that it corresponded to the "nine-five supremacy" (an idiom for the emperor's supreme power).

Stepping into the Council Hall Xiao Ming immediately smelled a rich fragrance of incense. Smoke curled around the hall, with two rows of vermilion-lacquered pillars lining both sides, and the dragon throne in the center.

At the same time, on the right side of the Council Hall, a memorial tablet was placed. Golden characters shimmered on the tablet, inscribed with “The Seat of Hongde, Utmost Benevolence, Utmost Filial Piety, Pure Goodness Emperor.”

The emperor on this memorial tablet was Xiao Wenxuan. As instructed by Fei Ji, Xiao Ming stepped forward and performed the three kneelings and nine kowtows before the memorial tablet.

Then Qian Dafu brought him a cup of wine. He held the cup with both hands and then poured it before the memorial tablet.

Xiao Wenxuan died tragically in Chang’an, so Xiao Ming naturally could not go to Chang’an to pay his respects. Thus, Fei Ji set up a memorial tablet in the Council Hall, which was also a ritual before a new monarch’s enthronement.

After performing the rites, Xiao Ming had bid farewell to Xiao Wenxuan. Then, Princess Taiping, Duke of Song, and other imperial relatives and nobles wept in sorrow, appearing utterly distraught. This was the farewell ceremony.

After the prescribed farewell ceremony was completed, Pang Yukun, leading the hundred officials, suddenly shouted loudly, “Long live, long live, long long live our Emperor! May our Empress live a thousand years, a thousand years, a thousand thousand years!”

Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer stepped forward amidst the congratulations of the ministers. Xiao Ming sat on the dragon throne, and Fei Yuer sat beside him.

Looking at the ministers in the Hall of Political Deliberation, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer sat upright, receiving the officials' homage.

As the cries of "Long live!" echoed in the Hall of Political Deliberation, the common people outside the government office also simultaneously shouted "Long live!" in response. The entire Qingzhou City was in a frenzy.

From then on, their Prince Qi would be the sole emperor of the Great Yu Empire.

Xiao Ming smiled. He had only seen such formal ceremonies on television. He had never imagined that one day he would sit in this position and receive homage from ministers.

Fei Yuer also had an excited expression. She tried to sit up straight, making herself appear more like an empress.

After receiving the homage from all the ministers, Qian Dafu took out Xiao Wenxuan's imperial edict and read aloud: "The late emperor's last will states: 'Since I inherited the great lineage, I have served the ancestral temples for over fifteen years. Although I have been diligent and cautious, like treading on thin ice, I was ultimately framed by treacherous individuals, leading to internal strife and the nation's decline, all of which is my fault. I am truly ashamed before my ancestors.'"

“My seventh son, Xiao Ming, is naturally benevolent and filial, wise and accomplished from an early age. He should, in accordance with the ancestral mandate, ascend to the imperial throne. The imperial clan, princes, and feudal lords shall prioritize their duty as screens and may not leave their fiefdoms without permission. They shall send envoys to honor the new monarch. Those who defy this edict and cause chaos shall be considered rebels, and the entire nation shall attack them!”

After the imperial edict was read, all the ministers chanted in unison, “Your subjects obey the command!”

Xiao Ming nodded. He then said, “Upon my initial ascent to the great throne, I shall certainly exert my utmost efforts to cultivate virtuous governance internally and repel barbarian enemies externally, to seek well-being for all the common people under heaven, and to lay a foundation for ten thousand generations of descendants.”

As he finished speaking, Qian Dafu picked up the prepared imperial decree and read: “To Princess Consort Fei of Qi, who embodies auspiciousness in a noble lineage, and possesses elegance from a renowned family; whose heart is gentle and wise, and whose demeanor is graceful and virtuous; who is complete in all six virtues, and whose pure virtue has long been evident; who in the palace has extensively propagated the four teachings, and truly embodies the motherly example for all under heaven; who, by the compassionate command of the Grand Empress Dowager, has been formally installed as Empress with the ceremonial seal and treasure. By imperial command!”

The first stage of the enthronement ceremony had ended here. At this moment, Pang Yukun shouted, “Roll up the screen! Dismiss the court!”

Amidst another round of “Long live!” congratulations, the hundred officials withdrew from the Council Hall.

Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer then rose and walked out. Below, there were still ceremonies to worship the ancestral temple and offer sacrifices to Heaven.

The enthronement ceremony lasted from morning until evening. After performing all the intricate rituals, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer returned to the princely estate in the twilight, riding in the imperial carriage.

However, the plaque of the Prince Qi's mansion had already been removed and replaced with a gilded plaque bearing the characters "Imperial Traveling Palace."

According to the officials, now that Xiao Ming had ascended the throne, the title of Prince Qi had become a thing of the past.

But since the imperial palace had not yet been built, he could only reside here, so this place should be changed to an imperial traveling palace. In this way, he could legitimately reside here, as a traveling palace was the emperor's temporary residence.

"Your Imperial Majesty! Your Imperial Majesty the Empress!"

Upon their return, the palace maids and eunuchs, arranged in two rows, bowed and shouted in unison.

"Dispense with the formalities," Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer smiled.

These palace maids and eunuchs were all survivors of the Chang'an chaos. Imperial Concubine Zhen had selected the most presentable ones to serve the two.

The former slaves in the princely estate were now assigned to the kitchen. However, the kitchen had been moved to the courtyard next door to the princely estate, as the emperor's bedchamber was not to be permanently inhabited by men other than the emperor.

After accepting the homage from the palace maids and eunuchs, Fei Yuer said solemnly, "From now on, all of you will be serving beside His Imperial Majesty. I hope you will remember that in this palace, you should do more factual work and gossip less. If anyone dares to betray us, do not blame me for my harsh methods then."

"Yes, Empress," the palace maids and eunuchs responded in unison.

At this moment, Fei Yuer's expression relaxed. She said to Xiao Huan, who was serving by her side, "Today is His Imperial Majesty's joyous enthronement. Reward each of them with ten taels of silver."

Xiao Huan had already prepared the silver, as this was also part of the enthronement ceremony, intended to demonstrate both grace and authority to the servants.

Chapter 639

Ciming Hall.

This was once Imperial Concubine Zhen's private hall. Because of Xiao Ming's enthronement, its name was changed to Ciming Hall, as this hall in the Great Yu Empire specifically referred to the residence of the Empress Dowager.

After admonishing the palace maids and eunuchs, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer went to Ciming Hall. This was the last ritual of the enthronement ceremony, to display the Emperor's virtue of filial piety.

Having performed the rites, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer both breathed a sigh of relief. This day's ordeal had left them physically and mentally exhausted; now they could finally rest.

Imperial Concubine Zhen had always disliked these convoluted rituals. If it weren't for her having significantly reduced the number of rituals for this enthronement ceremony, the two would probably have been busy for several more hours.

"These Pang Yukun and Fei Ji, too. The Empress is pregnant, and they still don't simplify things." Imperial Concubine Zhen said, pulling Fei Yuer to sit down.

Fei Yuer said, "Mother Empress, it's nothing. His Imperial Majesty ascended the throne today, and the ministers are all very happy. They all feel that it's better to be grand."

"Alright, alright, you're the best at mediating," Imperial Concubine Zhen said with a beaming smile.

Now that Xiao Ming had ascended the throne and become emperor, she was also at ease. From then on, her son would be above all others, and no one would be able to challenge his authority. Her only worry was whether Xiao Ming would always be a wise ruler.

After a pause, she turned to Xiao Ming and said, "Your Imperial Majesty, Imperial Mother has nothing else to say. Given the current state of the Great Yu Empire, Imperial Mother only hopes that you can be a person who can turn the tide, as you were before."

“Mother Empress, rest assured, I will not indulge in pleasure and forget the original intention of my enthronement,” Xiao Ming said. Suddenly switching to “朕” (Zhen – the imperial pronoun), Xiao Ming felt a bit unaccustomed.

The two sat in Ciming Hall for a while and then came out of the hall.

As days passed, Fei Yuer’s belly grew larger day by day. Compared to before, her movements were more inconvenient, so Xiao Ming did not want her to go out much now.

Returning to the main hall, Xiao Ming helped Fei Yuer sit down on the edge of the bed. At this moment, Qian Dafu arrived outside the hall and asked, “Your Imperial Majesty, it’s getting late. It’s time for dinner.”

Xiao Ming looked at Qian Dafu, whose eyes sparkled with excitement.

After he ascended the throne, Imperial Concubine Zhen had assigned Qian Dafu to Xiao Ming. According to Imperial Concubine Zhen, the eunuch by his side must be trustworthy.

Now, Xiao Ming could only trust Qian Dafu. After a moment of thought, he did not refuse.

Now Imperial Concubine Zhen also lived in the palace. When there was nothing to do, he could just let Qian Dafu chat with her, and Imperial Concubine Zhen’s emotions had also gradually stabilized.

On weekdays, she would typically engage in vegetarianism and recite Buddhist scriptures when idle, thus she did not always require company.

Xiao Ming nodded. At this moment, palace maids entered the main hall carrying dishes. Exquisitely cooked dishes were quickly laid out on the table. These dishes were all personally given by Xiao Ming to the kitchen, in order to supplement Fei Yuer's nutrition.

After the dishes were served, Qian Dafu and the palace maids stood guard outside the door. The bedchamber was brightly lit. Although this was still the princely estate, it now had some traces of palace life.

But even so, for Xiao Ming, it was merely a change in self-address, and replacing servants with palace maids and eunuchs. The realm remained the same realm, which he needed to conquer piece by piece.

"Your Imperial Majesty, our child is moving," Fei Yuer's face beamed with the joy of motherhood.

Xiao Ming's heart suddenly warmed upon hearing this. He said, "So mischievous! He must be a little imperial prince in the future."

Fei Yuer chuckled softly. She stroked her belly and said, "I hope it's a girl, so she won't be embroiled in future disputes."

Xiao Ming's expression saddened. He naturally understood Fei Yuer's meaning. The chaos in Chang'an must have left her with lingering fears. She did not wish for her child to also fall into such cruel political struggles.

However, being in the imperial family, it was already destined that even if she were a princess, she could not escape some fate. But Xiao Ming would absolutely not allow a struggle among princes to reoccur in the Great Yu Empire.

Because he would be the last emperor in the history of the Great Yu Empire. After him, there would be no more imperial power passed down from father to son, generation after generation.

Due to his mastery of the technology crystal, he had to maintain his supreme imperial power. Only then could he fully promote the development of technology. Otherwise, he would simply be carved up.

An emperor who loses power is no different from a dog. Besides, he believed he could use the knowledge from the technology crystal to lead the Great Yu Empire in the right direction.

It was precisely for this reason that he felt there was nothing wrong with him occupying the imperial throne, because no matter in the past or the future, the Great Yu Empire would follow the policy of governance by the virtuous, so that the country would not embark on a path of destruction due to personal interests.

"I will protect him," Xiao Ming smiled gently, making the happiness in Fei Yuer's eyes grow even deeper.

Unable to help herself, she leaned gently on Xiao Ming's shoulder. Facing the bright moon, she began to imagine the days to come.

Xiao Ming also looked at the bright moon in the sky. The enthronement ceremony had ended smoothly. Today's smoothness was all due to the state's soldiers who fought fiercely against the allied forces of the three princes.

He was now a little worried. He wondered what the situation of the battle in Yunzhou City was like?

While he was pondering, the soldiers of Yunzhou City had just ended a battle. The city wall of Yunzhou City was covered with allied soldiers and corpses. Blood had dyed the city wall of Yunzhou City red, and the strong bloody smell was nauseating. Below the city, more corpses of soldiers lay in various shapes.

This was the fifth day of the allied forces' siege of the city. Facing a city defended by cannons and firearms, the allied forces, having lost 18,000 soldiers, were once again routed.

Taking advantage of the night, Niu Ben and his generals directed the soldiers to reinforce the city walls and transport cannonballs and gunpowder. Although the allied forces attacked the city as usual today, they clearly felt the allied soldiers' growing weariness of war.

Despite the allied forces' overseers still enforcing cruel military orders, the soldiers were not committed during the siege, and some even feigned death under the city walls.

When they cleared the battlefield, these allied soldiers would suddenly get up and collectively surrender. Tonight, when they cleared the battlefield, they detained another two thousand allied soldiers who had feigned death.

“General, the number of allied soldiers has clearly decreased these past few days. According to these captives, there are more and more deserters in their army, and the commanders of Yan, Liang, and Zhao are also wary of each other, none willing to send their own soldiers to be the vanguard. Thus, just as His Highness said, these three princes collude, but internal conflicts are rampant, and they are also wary of each other,” Lu Fei said.

Niu Ben nodded. He said, “But now is not the time for a counter-offensive. News of the Yongzhou army capturing Bingzhou has not yet arrived. As soon as the news arrives, it will be time to sally forth and engage the enemy.”

Lu Fei scratched his head. He had long wanted to sally forth and annihilate the allied forces of the three princes, but Niu Ben was clearly much more cautious. Now that the commanding general had spoken, he could only nod.

Chapter 640

Allied Forces Camp.

Xiao Sa (Second Prince) looked at the dimly visible Yunzhou City, his expression grim.

Since the allied forces arrived under Yunzhou City, they had continuously attacked the city for five days, and today was the sixth day. Like the previous five days, from morning till night, the allied forces still could not breach Yunzhou City, which now stood like a copper wall and iron bastion before them.

In the beginning, he thought Xiao Ming’s army relied solely on the advantage of firearms, but facing these powerful, slow-loading weapons, he had believed they could mitigate the disadvantage with sheer numbers.

However, days of fierce fighting gradually made him realize that things were not as simple as he had thought. Compared to firearms, what was more frightening about the soldiers in Yunzhou City was their fearlessness and unyielding momentum.

When allied soldiers ascended the city walls, they faced cold bayonets even more terrifying than muskets. Every time the soldiers on the city walls brandished their bayonets, the soldiers who had ascended the city walls would fall back like a collapsing mountain.

These past few days, not only had he become somewhat agitated, but Cui Huai and Zhao Ang were also in a state of unease. In their common understanding, an allied army composed of the elites of the three princes would easily take Yunzhou City. But now, as time dragged on, morale in the grand camp was at an all-time low, and soldiers were constantly deserting.

Just as he was growing irritated, he suddenly saw a flash of fire light up to the west of the grand camp. Instantly, his heart turned cold.

Soon after, Zhao Ang rushed over, saying impatiently, "Our provisions transported here from Kaizhou have been raided! The Yunzhou City cavalry set the provisions ablaze!"

Cui Huai was also alarmed by this and rushed over. He angrily said, "Your Zhao Kingdom's Black Armored Iron Cavalry are truly useless! Reputed as the Great Yu Empire's top cavalry, they can't even protect provisions!"

Zhao Ang's face was grim. The provisions transported from Kaizhou had always been protected by their Black Armored Iron Cavalry. But from Kaizhou to the allied forces' grand camp was sixty li. How could their 40,000 cavalry protect such a long supply line?

During the days of the siege, the Yunzhou City cavalry repeatedly launched surprise attacks on the provisions in small groups, carrying kerosene. They would burn the provisions and leave, never staying to fight. This made it impossible to find the enemy to engage. His soldiers had also been exhausted these past few days, and now being reprimanded by Cui Huai, he too became annoyed.

“This general’s Black Armored Iron Cavalry are useless, but your Yan army is even more useless! It’s been five days of siege, yet have you captured an inch of Yunzhou City’s wall? It was truly wise of Prince Zhao; he already foresaw that you would be incompetent. This time, he only acted for profit, with insincere hearts and wavering resolve.”

Cui Huai’s eyes were red, like those of a mad beast. The war was going badly, and the soldiers suffered heavy losses. The enthronement ceremony had been completed today, yet they had not set foot in Yunzhou City.

Now, even if he took Yunzhou City, he would have no way to account for it to Prince Yan.

Just as the two were arguing, a cavalryman suddenly arrived in front of the camp in the night, shouting, “Urgent order from Prince Liang! Urgent order from Prince Liang!”

Xiao Sa suddenly had a bad feeling. He hastily ordered the messenger to be let in.

Riding to the front of the camp, the messenger shouted urgently, “Prince Yong has sent a large army to attack Liang territory! They are now approaching Liang Capital! Prince Liang has ordered Your Royal Highness to immediately lead your troops to relieve the siege without delay!”

“Prince Yong!” The Second Prince’s face turned ashen, a hint of panic in his eyes. He immediately said to his deputy, “Now! Immediately return to Qingzhou!”

Cui Huai heard this and immediately blocked the Second Prince. He said, “Xiao Sa, are you going to betray the alliance?”

Xiao Sa was well aware of Liang’s current situation. If the Yong army attacked with full force, Liang would not be able to hold out, especially since the Yong army was equipped with a large number of firearms with Xiao Ming’s support.

He pushed Cui Huai aside and said, “If Liang perishes, what good is this alliance!”

With that, he walked out of the tent and ordered the Liang army to turn back.

“Outrageous, outrageous!” Cui Huai was both shocked and angry. With the Liang army gone, the allied forces had lost half their strength. Now that Yan’s elites were all gone, this battle could not be continued.

Zhao Ang had long intended to retreat. Seeing this, he said, “General Cui, the Liang army has left. This allied force is now only in name. Forgive me for not accompanying you.”

With that, he also left the large tent, gathered his cavalry, and prepared to flee back to Chang’an.

Cui Huai watched helplessly as the Second Prince and Zhao Ang departed. His heart was cold. With the failure of this allied force, Xiao Ming would surely attack Yan to vent his anger.

Slumping to the ground, Cui Huai was at a loss.

Yunzhou City.

Niu Ben also received news from Bingzhou City at the same time.

After reading Chen Xinran's letter, Niu Ben said, "Everything is within His Highness's plan. Now that Bingzhou City has fallen, the Second Prince, having received the news, will surely return to Qingzhou. In this way, the allied forces of the three princes will crumble. Seize this opportunity for the main army to sally forth and annihilate the invading enemy in one fell swoop, taking Kaizhou, Bianzhou, and other imperial cities occupied by Prince Yan."

In the camp, the generals were all rubbing their fists, knowing it was time for them to show their prowess. Lu Fei was the most active, saying, "General, give the order."

Niu Ben at this moment surveyed the generals with a solemn expression. He said, "You've been fighting fiercely all day, and I know you're all exhausted. But if we don't surround the allied forces of the three princes tonight, these armies will escape. Now, Lu Fei, you go from the front towards the allied forces' grand camp. Luo Hong and Ye Qingyun, you will encircle the allied forces' grand camp from the left and right flanks respectively. Smoke and fire will be the signal. Success or failure depends on this one move."

"Yes, General!" The generals roared in unison.

The generals left the camp and immediately gathered their soldiers and charioteers from the three city gates, moving towards the allied forces' grand camp under the cover of night.

At this time, Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu also returned from outside the city. Seeing such a large movement, the two immediately understood something.

They immediately found Niu Ben.

"General, are we preparing for a counterattack?" Qi Guangyi asked.

Niu Ben scanned the terrain on the sand table. He said to Bai Mu, "Bai Mu, you are to immediately lead 20,000 cavalry to outflank the allied forces' grand camp and cut off the retreat of the Yan and Zhao armies. Qi Guangyi, you are to immediately lead 20,000 cavalry towards Bingzhou and, with Chen Xinran, ambush and annihilate the Liang army on the official road leading to Liang Capital."

"Yes, General." The two immediately summoned their cavalry upon hearing this.

On a hazy moonlit night, all the troops in Yunzhou City were mobilized. Niu Ben personally donned his armor for battle this time. If they succeeded in annihilating the allied forces of the three princes, Yan and Liang would be incorporated into the state's territory in a matter of days.

After a brief thought, Niu Ben personally donned his armor. This night raid was too important; there could be no mishaps.

Riding out from the west gate, Niu Ben entered Lu Fei's central army.

At this time, the soldiers of the central army all maintained silence; not a single soldier made a sound. What they wanted this time was surprise.

The twenty li journey was not long. In an hour, the allied forces' grand camp appeared before everyone.

The hussars (light cavalry) in the army continuously relayed messages. After receiving confirmation that Bai Mu had outflanked the enemy and both the left and right armies were in position, Niu Ben drew his saber and roared, "Kill!"