

I. Dynasty 641

Chapter 641

“Kill!”

The central army soldiers shouted in unison, their roars echoing through the night.

Luo Xin completed the deployment of the field guns in the distance. At this moment, with his command, the cannons roared, and shells flew towards the allied forces’ grand camp.

At this time, the allied forces’ grand camp was lit by torches everywhere. The Liang army was heading towards Liang Capital, and the movements within the grand camp could be clearly seen even from a distance.

Coupled with the chaos caused by the allied forces’ retreat, the sentries of the grand camp did not notice the continuously approaching Yunzhou City army.

The sound of cannons rang out, and the soldiers in the grand camp became even more panicked. Xiao Sa commanded the Liang army to speed up their withdrawal from the grand camp.

Cui Huai was also stunned by the cannon fire and roars. He immediately shouted, “Enemy attack! Enemy attack!”

“General, the Liang army has withdrawn, and Zhao Ang’s cavalry are also preparing to withdraw. Only our Yan army is left, and we cannot defeat the Qi army. General, it’s still not too late to retreat now.”

“Alas!” Cui Huai knew the tide had turned. He sighed in despair, “Heaven intends to destroy our Yan Kingdom! Retreat!”

A group of generals, having received the order, immediately shouted and gathered their soldiers to retreat towards Kaizhou City.

“Boom, boom, boom...”

The brightly lit allied forces’ grand camp was fully visible to the artillerymen. Luo Xin had prepared all the cannonballs and gunpowder this time.

Not only were field guns roaring, but mortars also hurled lime bombs and explosive shells into the allied forces’ grand camp, instantly turning the allied forces’ grand camp into a sea of fire.

At the same time, Niu Ben’s central army continuously pressed towards the grand camp, while the left and right armies also began to array on both sides, constantly compressing the space of the allied forces of the three princes.

The battle first broke out on the right wing. The retreating Liang army encountered the waiting right wing. The right wing, arranged in columns, did not use the traditional three-rank firing but instead used the more ferocious hedgehog formation.

The first rank of soldiers was responsible for firing, while the second, third, fourth, and fifth ranks were responsible for loading. When the first rank of soldiers fired, the soldiers in the second rank handed their loaded flintlock guns to the soldiers in the first rank.

At the same time, the soldiers of the second rank handed over the fired weapons to the third rank, and then took another loaded flintlock gun.

Facing the densely retreating Liang soldiers, the continuous barrage of firepower instantly inflicted heavy casualties on the Liang army.

Having suffered a bloody defeat, the Liang army soldiers, led by their generals, retreated along the northwest direction. In this gap, the Yunzhou army had not yet completed its encirclement.

Ye Qingyun calmly assessed the battlefield situation. The Liang army, desperate to retreat, had no intention of fighting. They only wanted to break out of the encirclement as quickly as possible.

And their plan did not involve annihilating the Liang army here. Their forces were limited, and engaging 300,000 allied troops would result in extremely heavy casualties.

Therefore, from the beginning, they had planned to let the Liang army go, concentrating their forces on annihilating the Yan and Zhao armies. Their attack on the Liang army now was merely to weaken Liang's strength.

After the Liang army soldiers withdrew from firing range, Ye Qingyun led his soldiers, herding the scattered Liang army out of the encirclement like ducks.

At the same time, chariots carrying soldiers headed towards Bai Mu's position, completely sealing off the allied forces' grand camp.

Then, he led the remaining soldiers to constantly move closer to the grand camp. At this moment, fireworks had already bloomed in the sky, a signal for attack.

In the grand camp, Zhao Ang hurriedly assembled his cavalry, but due to the extreme chaos in the camp, many soldiers could not find their generals, and generals could not find their soldiers.

The gunshots grew closer and closer, and Zhao Ang became increasingly anxious. If this continued, none of them would be able to escape. He led the 20,000 assembled men and began to retreat towards Kaizhou.

"Bang, bang, bang..."

With the encirclement complete, the left, right, and central armies simultaneously pressed towards the allied forces' grand camp. Along the way, soldiers continuously stopped to fire as they moved.

Amidst screams of agony, Yan army soldiers fell one after another.

Cui Huai's emotions had now turned from despair to hysteria. In the continuous siege of the city, the Yan army had lost over 60,000 men. Now, only over 100,000 Yan troops remained. With the Liang and Zhao armies both retreating, the remaining Yan army had also lost its numerical advantage.

Yet, like a cornered beast, facing desperate odds, Cui Huai's ferocity surged. He led the elite Black Feather Guards of Yan, not retreating towards Kaizhou, but instead charging directly from the left flank, hoping to cut through.

Kaizhou City, to him, was once an imperial city. Although conquered by Yan, the powerful families in the city had not yet submitted. If he were to return in disarray, he would likely be attacked from both inside and out.

And the left flank was a shortcut to Yan. As long as he could break through there, he could escape back.

"Kill! The first to break through the encirclement will be rewarded with 10,000 taels of silver and made a Marquis of 10,000 households!" Fearing the soldiers might rout, Cui Huai shouted out an even more insane reward.

Under heavy reward, brave men would surely emerge. At this, the Black Feather Guard soldiers shouted and charged forward madly.

Chapter 642

"Archers!"

At the command, the Black Feather Guards, having charged to within fifty meters of Luo Hong's left flank, suddenly unleashed a volley of arrows.

In the moonlight, black arrows arced downwards. Many left flank soldiers grunted in pain and fell.

“Bang, bang, bang...” The firing continued. Wounded soldiers were dragged to the rear, and their vacated positions were quickly filled by other soldiers.

Luo Hong’s left flank, numbering 30,000 men, inflicted heavy casualties on the Black Feather Guards after a volley from their large column, but the remaining Black Feather Guards still surged forward.

At this moment, Luo Hong shouted, “Bayonets!”

“Kill!” Facing the charging Black Feather Guards, the left flank soldiers, arrayed in tight squares, all brandished their bayonets.

At this moment, the black torrent and the dark green wall of bayonets crashed together. Both sides immediately plunged into a melee.

Luo Hong, saber in hand, charged left and right through the Black Feather Guards. The soldiers beside him skillfully used bayonet fighting techniques to engage in close combat with the Black Feather Guards, who were armed with sabers, shields, and spears.

It was then that Luo Hong finally understood why the Qingzhou army trained this single-action bayonet fighting technique daily, and he gradually realized that the advantage of firearms lay in defending cities.

However, in large-scale field battles, the advantage of firearms could easily be lost due to factors such as soldier numbers, weather, and command. At such times, hand-to-hand combat was the only way to save the battlefield.

He also understood why the Qingzhou army had to rely on a chariot formation in the Battle of Jizhou to dare to fight the barbarian cavalry. If they had been attacked by barbarian cavalry in the open field at that time, they might have faced a disastrous defeat.

“Die!”

A Black Feather Guard general, longsword in hand, charged towards Luo Hong. Facing the tightly packed bayonet formation of the left flank, the Black Feather Guard, already scattered by musket fire, fought without cohesion, relying only on instinct. At this moment, the discipline and organization of the two armies were immediately apparent.

Luo Hong raised his saber and parried the Black Feather Guard general’s swinging longsword. With a kick, the Black Feather Guard general immediately fell.

At this moment, the soldiers beside Luo Hong immediately raised their bayonets and stabbed towards the Black Feather Guard general. With a scream, the Black Feather Guard general was struck by three bayonets.

Although they had been subjected to musket volleys, over 20,000 Black Feather Guard soldiers still remained, and their will to fight had not completely disintegrated.

But even so, in the melee with the left flank, the Black Feather Guards gained no advantage, but retreated steadily.

Cui Huai screamed in the army. At this moment, no matter how high a reward he shouted, he could not change the tide of battle. He knew he had lost, and he also understood why Prince Wei had been defeated so completely.

Now, he felt only a deep sense of powerlessness and despair.

As the fierce battle raged, dense gunfire suddenly erupted from the rear of the Black Feather Guards.

The Black Feather Guard soldiers in the rear fell one after another, hit by bullets. A Qi army unit had somehow outflanked them.

It turned out that Lu Fei had already cleared the Yan army in front. Seeing the left flank bogged down in melee, he immediately led a portion of his troops to reinforce them, while the remaining soldiers continued to advance with Niu Ben.

Caught in a pincer attack from inside and out, the Black Feather Guard soldiers in front retreated backward, and the soldiers in the rear, under fire, pressed forward. For a moment, the Black Feather Guard was in complete disarray.

In the chaotic order, the Black Feather Guards were increasingly no match for the left flank. Casualties rapidly mounted. This was when the Black Feather Guards finally collapsed. Facing a completely hopeless battle, they threw down their weapons, knelt on the ground, and raised their hands.

Luo Hong was like a god of slaughter. He reeked of blood, his body stained red with enemy blood. Tightly gripping his saber, he ordered, "Immediately find the generals of the Black Feather Guards!"

Soon, 150 generals and officers, including Cui Huai, were brought to the front of the formation.

Under the identification of the Black Feather Guard soldiers, Lu Fei and Luo Hong quickly identified the ranks of these generals.

“The commander of the Yan army! It seems we’ve caught a big fish!” Luo Hong laughed heartily.

Cui Huai was a tough man. He said, “If you want to kill me, then kill me. Why humiliate us?”

Lu Fei and Luo Hong exchanged glances. The battle was not over yet, and these Yan prisoners were a dangerous factor. If any general were to incite them, it could lead to trouble.

However, Cui Huai held an extremely high position in Yan, second only to Prince Yan. Perhaps he was still a valuable bargaining chip.

After a moment of consideration, Lu Fei said sternly, “Separate all these generals and detain them. They must not be allowed to be with the common soldiers.”

Luo Hong nodded; he was of the same mind.

Cui Huai was startled, but before he could say anything more, soldiers, like tigers and wolves, immediately escorted them towards the Yunzhou City dungeon.

Having lost their generals, the remaining Yan soldiers were like scattered sand, simply accepting the reality of becoming prisoners.

Having controlled the Yanzhou soldiers in the grand camp, Lu Fei and Luo Hong did not stand idle but led their army to continue advancing.

There were still some Yan soldiers fleeing towards Kaizhou, and most importantly, Prince Zhao's 40,000 Black Armored Army.

Currently, the state was still short of horses, which meant they could only remain on the defensive against the barbarians, relying on the advantage of firearms to defend cities and prevent the barbarians from advancing south.

And to truly destroy the barbarians, they still needed cavalry.

It was for this reason that Lu Fei and the other generals coveted cavalry. Now that 40,000 Black Armored Iron Cavalry were trapped, this battle could add a batch of excellent warhorses to the state.

Selecting a batch of high-quality warhorses from these and sending them to the Yan-Yun horse pastures would yield a large number of high-quality warhorses in a few years.

As the two advanced, Zhao Ang had already engaged with the chariot formation. After the chariot formation arrived, Bai Mu's cavalry were dispersed among ten chariot formations.

The soldiers in the chariot formations, armed with firearms, continuously fired at the Black Armored Army, while Bai Mu also occasionally dispatched cavalry from the chariot formations to attack them.

Facing this fortress-like chariot formation, Zhao Ang was helpless. The cavalry had lost its mobility at this moment.

In just three hours, they had lost 10,000 men, and behind them, the Yunzhou army, which had dealt with the Yan soldiers, was constantly closing in.

At this time, the eastern sky had already turned the color of a fish's belly. After a night of fierce fighting, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry were exhausted, both men and horses.

Seeing this, Zhao Ang grew increasingly anxious. He commanded his cavalry to launch another charge against the blocking chariot formation, but they were quickly repelled again by the combined fire of muskets and cavalry.

The sun gradually rose higher, and Zhao Ang could clearly see the Yunzhou City army slowly advancing towards him.

Dense ranks of musketeers marched towards them with neat strides, like reapers of death about to begin their harvest.

With wolves in front and tigers behind, Zhao Ang raised the saber in his hand. If he couldn't bring the Black Armored Iron Cavalry back, he would be a dead man before Prince Zhao anyway. Now he had no choice.

“Kill!” Zhao Ang shouted hoarsely. He led his cavalry in another charge against the chariot formation. This would be his last charge.

Ten thousand horses galloped, and the remaining 20,000 cavalry charged madly towards the chariot formation.

Gunshots erupted again from the chariot formation. Bai Mu, squinting, raised his hand. As Zhao Ang charged to the front of the chariot formation and was once again thwarted by the chariots, he ordered all cavalry to charge.

At this time, Niu Ben and other generals also arrived with the musketeers. The melee continued from morning until noon. In the chaotic battle, Bai Mu, riding alone at the front, charged directly towards Zhao Ang, who was slashing at the state’s soldiers.

The two met, their eyes blazing with hatred. Zhao Ang also raised his saber and charged towards Bai Mu.

The warhorses galloped. In the instant they crossed paths, Zhao Ang’s head flew high into the air. Bai Mu laughed loudly, reined in his horse, impaled Zhao Ang’s head on his saber, and shouted, “The commander is dead! Why do you not surrender quickly?”

At this moment, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry, reputed as the Great Yu Empire’s top cavalry, were routed.

Chapter 643

The midday sun shone upon the vast battlefield before Yunzhou City.

A thick scent of blood, carried by the north wind, was clearly discernible. The once yellow land was now stained crimson by blood. The corpses of Yan and Liang soldiers were scattered across the boundless expanse.

In the sky, crows circled, their low caws seemingly singing an elegy for this war.

A portion of the remaining Black Armored Iron Cavalry still refused to surrender. They charged the chariot formation again and again, while some cavalry headed towards Niu Ben's large column.

"Hollow Square Formation!"

At the high command, the original columns quickly transformed into one hollow square formation after another.

As the Black Armored Army charged, Niu Ben shouted, "Fire!"

"Bang, bang, bang..."

Several hollow square formations simultaneously emitted a puff of white smoke, and the charging Black Armored Army immediately collapsed, men and horses alike.

With Zhao Ang dead, few of the remaining Black Armored Army stubbornly resisted. The odds were overwhelmingly against them, and the outcome of the war was already sealed.

When the sun set, all the remaining Black Armored Army were annihilated.

“We won! We won!”

Suddenly, a soldier shouted loudly, followed by a huge cheer that echoed across the battlefield.

Facing the seemingly invincible allied forces of the three princes, they had fought a brilliant annihilation battle. 350,000 allied forces of the three princes vanished in the blink of an eye.

Eight days of fierce fighting, and the state had not lost an inch of land. The families behind them were also spared from the slaughter of the allied forces of the three princes.

The soldiers’ cheers, echoing through the sky, brought smiles to Niu Ben and the other generals.

Lu Fei wiped a bead of sweat. He said to Niu Ben, “General, we have defeated the allied forces of the three princes. Now Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao will surely cry and beg us.”

“Hahahaha...” Niu Ben was elated. He had been on edge throughout this battle, as 350,000 allied troops was no small number.

But with the cooperation of the Yong army, they successfully prevented the three princes' allied forces from invading the state. At the same time, just as he had promised Xiao Ming, this battle successfully annihilated the vital forces of the three princes' allied forces.

Now, the battlefield, besides the surrendered soldiers, was filled only with the corpses of the three states' fallen soldiers. Although the Second Prince Xiao Sa led the Liang army back,

However, Qi Guangyi and the Yong army had ambushed them halfway, and he believed that news of the Liang army's annihilation would arrive soon.

Luo Hong, Bai Mu, Luo Xin, Ye Qingyun, and other generals also arrived at this moment. Their eyes gleamed with excitement as they exchanged the joy of victory.

They also understood in their hearts that this battle was the key battle that would determine the situation in the north. With their great victory this time, the decisive power in the north would shift into the hands of the state.

"Hehehe, wasn't Yan very arrogant? Now let's see how arrogant they can be," Luo Xin chuckled.

Ye Qingyun echoed, "Exactly. The envoys sent by these three princes dared to flaunt their power before His Highness. It's like an old woman eating arsenic; they're tired of living."

"What 'His Highness'? It's 'His Imperial Majesty' now!" Bai Mu reminded him.

Ye Qingyun was startled, and slapped his own mouth twice. "Loose tongue! Bai Mu is right, it's His Imperial Majesty, it's His Imperial Majesty!"

The others immediately burst into laughter.

At this moment, Luo Hong wiped the blood from his saber and said solemnly, "I truly wish we could fight my way back to Chang'an one day earlier."

These words silenced the generals. Only then did they realize that the war had just begun. Although they no longer longed for Chang'an, it had, after all, once been the imperial city of the Great Yu Empire.

As long as the imperial city remained untaken, they would carry this regret.

Niu Ben looked towards Chang'an City and said, "With the elite forces of the three princes gone, the balance of power in the north has shifted. These rebels won't live much longer."

The generals nodded upon hearing this.

After a pause, Niu Ben said, "Although the battle is over, these captives still need to be dealt with. Now, you will lead your respective divisions to immediately clear the battlefield to prevent an epidemic."

Lu Fei and the others' faces instantly tightened.

The plague was something that made people's faces change color upon hearing it, and it often appeared during times of war. They dared not be careless about this. Each of them immediately organized soldiers to collect and burn corpses.

At the same time, they also collected the weapons and armor from the battlefield. These items could be sent to the Qingzhou steel machinery department for steelmaking, to produce more firearms for them.

Having issued the order to clear the battlefield, Niu Ben immediately sent someone to convey the results of this battle to Qingzhou. This would be the greatest congratulatory gift for Xiao Ming, who had already ascended the throne.

And his mission was not yet over. He would seize this victory to attack Kaizhou and Bianzhou, two cities that originally belonged to the imperial family. After these two cities, they would successively recapture other prefectures and counties.

Three days later, Niu Ben's battle report arrived in Qingzhou.

On this day, Xiao Ming was, as usual, discussing state affairs with his ministers in the council hall. Just then, an imperial courier loudly announced the great victory in Yunzhou and delivered the battle report outside the council hall.

The ministers who heard the news all showed shocked expressions. Xiao Ming was startled, then overjoyed.

He immediately had the imperial courier present the battle report.

Below the council hall, Pang Yukun and Fei Ji stood at the forefront, and behind them were officials from the six ministries, the Chamber of Commerce, and other agencies. After their initial shock, their faces gradually showed ecstatic expressions.

Although they were not on the front lines, they were equally nervous about the battle in Yunzhou, because this battle would determine the rise and fall of the state.

Taking the battle report, Xiao Ming immediately read it. The report detailed the situation of the battle, where the allied forces of the three princes were completely crushed in the decisive battle.

“My dear ministers, in this battle, the allied forces of the three princes were utterly defeated and suffered heavy losses. General Niu can be said to have won a great victory. From this, it can be seen that the allied forces of the three princes were nothing but paper tigers, easily defeated!” Xiao Ming said loudly, his heart filled with ambition.

First the annihilation of Prince Wei, then the defeat of the allied forces of the three princes. The advantage of firearms combined with strict training and discipline allowed the state’s army to easily defeat the traditional feudal armies.

This victory filled him with confidence. Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao were no longer enemies to be feared. Now, he could finally turn his gaze northward.

The internal strife of the Great Yu Empire should also end. The mutual slaughter among kinsmen was meaningless. The true enemies of the Great Yu Empire were foreign tribes.

Those who are not of our kind are sure to have different hearts. Whether it is the barbarians, Japan, or the Western powers, their ambition to destroy the Chinese nation has never disappeared.

Whether in the past, present, or future, he, coming from modern times, could see the historical changes of these hundreds of years more clearly.

Now that he was here, he would seek eternal blessings for his country and nation in this world's jungle.

And as the news of the battle reached Qingzhou, the news of the annihilation of the allied forces of the three princes also reached Bozhou and Chang'an.

When Prince Yan learned this news from a routed soldier, he slumped onto his throne, his face ashen like flour, and his eyes seemed to have lost their luster.

Chapter 644

"Imperial Father, this... this... what should we do?"

In the main council hall of Prince Yan's mansion, Cui Hao wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, his body trembling slightly. He had just returned to Bozhou from Qingzhou a few days ago.

For this battle, Yan had sent all its elites, even the Cui family's most elite Black Feather Guard, but now these 170,000 soldiers were all gone.

Prince Yan seemed not to have heard Cui Hao's words. He gazed at the roof of the main hall, like a clay statue.

Just then, a group of officials suddenly ran into the main hall in a panic. One official exclaimed, "Your Highness, they've rebelled! The Fourth Prince has rebelled! The private forces of the Tian family and the Ji family followed the Fourth Prince and took the city gate! They are charging towards the princely mansion!"

"What!" Cui Hao was so startled that he almost jumped.

Prince Yan seemed to wake up from a dream, both startled and angry. "This ungrateful wretch! I wasted these past few years raising him! I should have killed him when they fled to Bozhou!"

Then he asked, "How many of them are there?"

An official said anxiously, "Your Highness, the Tian family and the Ji family have been plotting for a long time. This time, they lead their affiliated powerful families and followers, numbering over 50,000. Your Highness, if you don't leave now, it will be too late."

"Fifty thousand people! Imperial Father, the Black Feather Guard in the city only has 25,000 men left; they might not be a match," Cui Hao said.

Prince Yan narrowed his eyes. He suddenly laughed madly, "I misjudged that little brat Xiao Ming. The Tian family and the Ji family surely wouldn't have this guts. Xiao Ming must have given them a promise. I never thought I would spend all day fighting snakes, only to be bitten by one now."

At this moment, the sounds of fighting between the Black Feather Guard and the powerful families' private forces could already be heard outside the princely mansion. A group of officials and generals said anxiously, "Your Highness, please make a decision soon."

Prince Yan sighed bitterly. He said to Cui Hao, "Immediately go to Yingzhou. Your eldest brother is in Yingzhou leading 70,000 soldiers to defend against the Prince of Huainan. Now, only that place is safe."

"Yes, Imperial Father," Cui Hao said.

Chang'an, Chengqing Hall.

Seated on the dragon throne, Prince Zhao looked down upon his ministers like an emperor. When the memorial reporting the defeat in Yunzhou City was presented, his heart couldn't help but pound a few times.

The officials and generals in the hall were all watching Prince Zhao. The news of the defeat in Yunzhou City had already spread throughout Chang'an City through merchants and routed soldiers. Now they were all waiting for Prince Zhao's decision.

Empress Zhao, holding the nearly two-year-old Thirteenth Prince, sat behind the beaded curtain. Prince Zhao was just Prince Zhao; during court sessions, Empress Zhao still had to bring the Thirteenth Prince to attend to political affairs. However, in reality, she was merely putting on a show to appease the old officials of Chang'an City.

Upon hearing the news from Yunzhou City, a faint smile appeared at the corner of Empress Zhao's mouth behind the beaded curtain.

"Prince Yan and Prince Liang are truly useless! 350,000 troops couldn't even take one Yunzhou City! Imperial Father, no need to worry. Even if the allied forces are defeated, Xiao Ming's army must be very exhausted. We should seize this opportunity to take Shu as quickly as possible and absolutely not be distracted by this matter!" Zhao Yuanliang said loudly.

Prince Zhao seemed not to have heard Zhao Yuanliang's words. He murmured, "Forty thousand Black Armored Iron Cavalry! These are my Black Armored Iron Cavalry! All 40,000 are gone."

Seeing Prince Zhao in this state, the courtiers in the hall wore various expressions.

Ever since Prince Zhao took control of Chang'an, many ministers had joined his ranks, but others served him in court merely to protect themselves.

Now that the allied forces of the three princes had suffered a major defeat, their keen senses immediately realized that following Prince Zhao would not last long.

If the Battle of Cangzhou was a fluke, and the Battle of Jizhou was a fluke, and the Battle of Wei was still a fluke, then this battle of Yunzhou City was inevitable.

Xiao Ming had proven his army invincible again and again, and everyone had ignored this. Now, the defeat of the allied forces of the three princes completely awakened many people.

Glancing at his somewhat agitated father, Zhao Yuanliang suddenly said, "Dismiss the court."

"Long live our Emperor, long live, long long live!"

After the shouts, the ministers all turned and departed, leaving the imperial palace.

After all the officials had left, Zhao Yuanliang cautiously asked, "Imperial Father."

"Xiao Ming! I will kill you!" Just then, Prince Zhao suddenly drew his saber and began to furiously hack at the desk in front of him.

The exquisite desk was splintered by Prince Zhao's sharp blade.

The Thirteenth Prince was startled and suddenly began to cry loudly. Facing Prince Zhao, who was acting like a madman, Empress Zhao immediately protected the Thirteenth Prince and walked towards the inner chambers.

Zhao Yuanliang also dared not breathe deeply. He knew his father's temper very well. At this moment, anyone who touched him would suffer.

Vermilion Bird Avenue.

Ministers who had left the court walked in twos and threes, whispering to each other.

“With the allied forces defeated this time, I wonder what insights Secretary Ge has?” Near the edge of Vermilion Bird Avenue, three officials in purple robes walked side by side.

Judging by their official robes, all three were top-ranking officials in the court.

The person asking the question had white hair and a thin physique. He was Yu Zhiyong, the Minister of Revenue.

Ge Yiren squinted at Yu Zhiyong. After Fei Ji fled Chang’an, he was promoted to Grand Imperial Secretary.

This was not because he deeply trusted Prince Zhao, but because he was the most senior official in Chang’an City among many, and he was the top scholar in the third imperial examination of that year.

However, although he was the Grand Imperial Secretary, he held no real power. These past two years were merely a nominal position; actual government affairs were handled by Prince Zhao’s people.

“Whether they win or lose, what does it concern us? No matter who replaces them in the Chengqing Hall of Chang’an, don’t we still serve as officials?” Ge Yiren said blandly.

Ni Kuang, the Minister of Rites, walking on Ge Yiren's left, shook his head and said, "Secretary Ge is wrong. Now, Prince Qi has ascended the throne in Qingzhou with the late emperor's imperial edict. If this edict is true, he is the new monarch of the Great Yu Empire. Moreover, this new monarch has a strange temperament, different from ordinary people. Even if he defeats Prince Zhao one day, he probably won't choose Chang'an as his capital."

Yu Zhiyong nodded, "Indeed. A few days ago, I met a merchant from Qingzhou. It is said that the Chang'an officials who went to Qingzhou are all now serving in Prince Qi's state, and Fei Ji has even become a member of the cabinet."

"Cabinet? What is that?" Ge Yiren asked, puzzled.

"This cabinet was established by Prince Qi. It is said to be above the Six Ministries. This cabinet has a total of nine members who jointly deliberate on state affairs. Currently, there are only two members in this cabinet, and there are seven vacant positions," Yu Zhiyong added.

Ni Kuang then said, "Gentlemen, in my humble opinion, this Prince Qi has limitless prospects. It is possible that he will be the future Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. We should prepare early."

Ge Yiren also felt somewhat swayed upon hearing this. He pretended to be indifferent, but who would want to discard their official robes at that moment?

Having served in officialdom for many years, they deeply understood the importance of following the right person.

The deep blue sky held lazy white clouds drifting by.

Ge Yiren looked up at the sky and asked, "Then, in your opinion, what should be done now?"

"As the saying goes, a person cannot hang himself on one tree. Now that Prince Zhao is at the zenith of his power in Chang'an, we can only temporarily bow our heads. However, someone should also deliver a message for us to Qingzhou, lest Prince Qi thinks we are dead set on following Prince Zhao." Yu Zhiyong pondered, "After all, our current status relies on the support of our respective families, lest we drag down our families."

Ni Kuang nodded repeatedly, deeply agreeing.

Ge Yiren was somewhat enlightened. It turned out that the two were instigating him to secretly contact Fei Ji. After all, his relationship with Fei Ji had always been good when Fei Ji was in Chang'an.

Ge Yiren was somewhat swayed, but having been in officialdom for many years, he naturally understood that misfortune comes from unguarded speech. No matter what, Chang'an was under Prince Zhao's rule, and rashly agreeing might invite disaster. After all, no one in Chang'an's official circles could be trusted now.

He said blandly, "The two of you are worrying too much. For thousands of years, no matter who sits on the throne, powerful families remain powerful families. Successive imperial families have always been busy trying to win them over; how could they then vent their anger on us? Moreover, from the news coming from Wei, aren't the powerful families under Prince Wei doing just fine?"

Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang were startled upon hearing this. The two wanted to say more, but Ge Yiren had already left.

Seeing this, the two immediately exchanged glances. Ni Kuang said, "What on earth does this Ge Yiren mean?"

"Who cares what he means? In any case, if he doesn't do it, we will. Although what he said makes sense, who doesn't want a place in the court of the future?" Yu Zhiyong said with his hands behind his back.

Ni Kuang nodded, "Brother Yu is right. If he doesn't participate, we will secretly contact Qingzhou. If Prince Qi's army attacks in the future, and we assist from the inside, won't we also be meritorious officials?"

"Exactly, and that means one less person to contend with us for credit."

After saying that, the two resumed their nonchalant expressions.

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Lin'an.

The news of the three princes' allied forces' defeat also spread here at an extremely fast pace.

Before the great battle, everyone in the Great Yu Empire cast their gaze towards Yunzhou City. Now that the outcome of the battle was decided, some rejoiced while others grieved.

“They actually lost, and so completely. I truly overestimated Prince Yan and the others,” the King of Chu said, looking towards Qingzhou, lost in thought.

Xiao Ming’s enthronement was originally a world-shaking event, and now that the allied forces of the three princes were defeated at the time of his enthronement, this would surely make Xiao Ming’s prestige unparalleled for a time.

“Imperial Uncle, it’s not that Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and Prince Liang are incompetent; it’s that Xiao Ming’s army is too formidable. From the Battle of Cangzhou onwards, Xiao Ming has won battle after battle. This is enough to prove something,” the Third Prince said blandly.

The King of Chu fell silent. Xiao Ming’s enthronement was clearly a slap in the face to Prince Zhao and himself. After all, in the Great Yu Empire, only Prince Zhao and he had claimed the title of king.

However, although he was angry, he was helpless. Now was not the time to openly break ties with Xiao Ming, and with the defeat of the three princes’ allied forces, he dared not harbor any extravagant thoughts about the territories south of the Yangtze River.

After thinking for a moment, he finally sighed. Now, his only option was to continue cooperating with the French to consolidate his military strength.

And to avoid Xiao Ming’s attack, he could only try to temporarily paralyze Xiao Ming. Thinking of this, he looked at the Third Prince Xiao Zhen and said in a strange tone, “Zhen’er, Imperial Uncle has wronged you. For the safety of the Li family, I can only rely on you.”

The Third Prince's face instantly turned ashen, then he suddenly laughed hysterically, "Imperial Father was right! You can't rely on your own brothers, and you certainly can't rely on outsiders! I truly deserve this!"

There was not a trace of guilt on the King of Chu's face. He said, "Don't blame Imperial Uncle for being ruthless. For the sake of Chu, for the sake of the Li clan, I have no choice but to do this."

After a pause, he shouted, "Men! The Third Prince has falsely issued an imperial edict, a grave crime! Immediately detain him and send him to Qingzhou to await His Imperial Majesty's disposition."

"Yes, Your Highness!" The palace guards responded and stood behind the Third Prince. One of them grabbed the Third Prince's arm.

Li Chu Yuan was also in the main hall. He asked, "Imperial Father, are we to pledge allegiance to Xiao Ming?"

"What if we pledge allegiance? It's merely a nominal title. What's important is that after pledging allegiance, Xiao Ming will have no reason to use military force against our Chu. In this way, we can bide our time, secretly develop, and wait for the opportune moment."

Although Li Chu Yuan was somewhat unwilling, it had to be said that this was the best method currently. Xiao Ming, having defeated the allied forces of the three princes, now commanded immense prestige throughout the realm, making anyone hesitate to challenge him.

The Third Prince, hearing this, glared resentfully. He said, "You wait! One day Xiao Ming will slice you into a thousand pieces!"

"You'd better worry about yourself," Li Chu Yuan sneered. "I wonder how Xiao Ming will deal with an imperial prince who has usurped the throne? Hahahaha..."

The King of Chu frowned. "Chu Yuan, do not be rude. Xiao Zhen is an imperial prince, no matter what. Even if Xiao Ming wants to kill him, that is an imperial family affair. This time, to show my sincerity, you will personally go as an envoy to Qingzhou. You will live in Qingzhou for a period."

"Imperial Father!" Li Chu Yuan was greatly alarmed. "Why must I live in Qingzhou?"

The Third Prince looked gleeful and said, "Don't you understand? Of course, it's as a hostage. Only then will Xiao Ming feel at ease."

Li Chu Yuan had actually thought of this, but he found it hard to believe.

The King of Chu sighed deeply. He held Li Chu Yuan's forehead and said, "My eldest son, it's not that Imperial Father is heartless. If Xiao Ming unifies the north, he will inevitably move south to attack Chu."

"Prince Yan and the other two are no match for Xiao Ming. How can Chu alone contend with Xiao Ming? The only way now is to pledge allegiance and send a hostage!"

Li Chu Yuan was a thousand times unwilling in his heart, but what could he do now? The King of Chu had already decided. Could he defy it?

“Yes, Imperial Father,” Li Chu Yuan said, his eyes red and full of grievance.

The King of Chu also felt a little remorseful. After all, this was his own son. So he said, “When you return from Qingzhou, the position of King of Chu will be yours. No matter what Imperial Father does now, it is all for your future.”

“I understand Imperial Father’s painstaking efforts. Going to Qingzhou will first put Xiao Ming at ease, and second, it will allow me to relay news from Qingzhou at any time. This time, I will certainly not fail Imperial Father’s expectations.” Li Chu Yuan gritted his teeth.

The Third Prince sneered repeatedly, then burst into loud sobs. Recalling past glories and seeing his current predicament, he now deeply regretted sacrificing the Great Yu Empire’s future for the throne.

But now, whatever he thought, it was too late. He would be escorted before Xiao Ming, and his younger brother, the King of Shu, would surely be defeated by Prince Zhao due to the loss of Chu’s support. After all, to the King of Chu, he needed Prince Zhao to openly deal with Xiao Ming.

Chapter 646

Cui Xue’er looked at the blooming crabapple flowers in the princely estate, somewhat lost in thought.

Two days ago, her Imperial Mother had returned from Qingzhou, bringing with her an imperial decree for her to enter the palace as a consort.

Although her Imperial Father and Imperial Mother were both very happy, she couldn't bring herself to be happy at all. For her, going to a distant and unfamiliar place to marry a man she had never met was nothing to celebrate.

However, with her parents' command and the matchmaker's words, and moreover, being the daughter of a vassal prince, she simply had no choice.

"Xue'er, what are you thinking?" At this moment, a resonant voice sounded. A man in splendid robes, with a commanding presence and a robust physique, walked towards her.

Upon seeing him, Cui Xue'er's eyes curved into crescent moons, and she said, "Imperial Father, why have you come?"

"Imperial Father came to see you. After all, my daughter is about to become the Imperial Noble Consort of the Great Yu Empire," the Prince of Huainan said loudly.

Upon hearing this, Cui Xue'er immediately pouted, looking as if she was about to cry. She said, "Daughter is about to go to Qingzhou, but Imperial Father is not heartbroken; instead, he is so happy. It seems Imperial Father doesn't care for his daughter at all."

The Prince of Huainan was startled for a moment. He then burst out laughing and said, "Xue'er, it is precisely because you are about to become Imperial Noble Consort that Imperial Father is so happy, because in Imperial Father's heart, only the present Imperial Majesty in this world is worthy of you."

"Yes, yes, His Imperial Majesty first defeated the barbarians in Cangzhou four years ago, then defeated the barbarians again in Jizhou. Daughter's ears are already calloused from hearing it," Cui Xue'er said, covering her ears.

The Prince of Huainan, seeing his daughter's expression, smiled even more broadly. He said, "However, this time His Imperial Majesty truly made Imperial Father look at him with new eyes. Just a few days ago, the allied forces of the three princes were defeated, and His Imperial Majesty's position is now unshakeable. Once Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao are eliminated, the north of the Great Yu Empire will be pacified."

Cui Xue'er merely rolled her eyes upon hearing this; she couldn't care less about such matters.

Seeing his daughter's lack of interest, the Prince of Huainan's eyes shifted, and he got to the point, "Your Imperial Mother has already selected the wet nurses to accompany you into the palace. In the future, with their care, you will not suffer any grievances in the palace."

Cui Xue'er nodded. At this moment, her heart was filled only with apprehension, for she did not know what kind of person she would be facing.

Seemingly sensing his daughter's concern, the Prince of Huainan comforted her, "Now that the world is in chaos, His Imperial Majesty values us greatly. Even for Imperial Father's sake, His Imperial Majesty will treat you well. You can rest assured about this."

Cui Xue'er detected her father's reluctance in his words. She smiled and said, "Imperial Father, you need not worry. It is my honor to join the imperial family. I just cannot bear to leave Imperial Father and Imperial Mother."

The Prince of Huainan's heart ached. The marriage of a vassal prince's daughter to the imperial family was a tradition of the Great Yu Empire, for the sake of the Great Yu Empire's lasting peace and stability.

Just as the two were speaking, a young man in armor suddenly walked over. Seeing the Prince of Huainan, the young man said, "Imperial Father, the army has been assembled and is ready to march on Yingzhou at any time."

Cui Xue'er was startled upon hearing this. She said nervously, "Imperial Father, are we going to war again?"

The Prince of Huainan's expression was grave. He said, "His Imperial Majesty has issued a decree: first, you are to go to the capital within these two days; second, to attack Yingzhou and eliminate the Prince Yan's forces."

Cui Shang'an then looked at Cui Xue'er and said, "Sister, don't worry. Prince Yan is already at the end of his rope. Capturing Yingzhou this time is also credit that His Imperial Majesty is giving us for free. After this battle, I might also go to Qingzhou to serve as a general. Then I can often see you, Sister."

Cui Xue'er felt a sense of relief. She said, "If Brother is with me, I won't worry."

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Qingzhou.

Only five days after the Battle of Yunzhou, another battle report arrived in Xiao Ming's study.

On the day of the Battle of Yunzhou, Xiao Sa led the remaining Liang army to rush back to Liang state capital to support the throne, and was successfully ambushed by the allied forces of Qi Guangyi and Chen Xinran on the way.

“Xiao Sa is dead!” Looking at the contents of the battle report, Xiao Ming was slightly surprised.

“The Second Prince was hit by a musket. When Qi Guangyi found him, he was already lifeless.” This battle report was personally brought back by Niu Ben.

With the battle in Yunzhou over, he no longer needed to remain in Yunzhou. The remaining battles could be left to Lu Fei, Luo Hong, and others.

Xiao Ming was silent for a while. The Crown Prince was dead, and now the Second Prince was also dead. The mortality rate of imperial princes in feudal dynasties was indeed high.

However, Xiao Ming was only slightly surprised to hear that the Second Prince had died, because this prince had little interaction with him and had always wanted to kill him. He was a stranger to this person, so his death was not particularly shocking.

“Your Imperial Majesty, all of Liang’s elites have been killed. Liang is now an empty shell. We should seize this opportunity to take Liang in one fell swoop, especially Juyong Pass, lest Prince Liang goes mad and destroys the pass.” Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming nodded, "You have Qi Guangyi continue to cooperate with the Yong army in attacking Liang. If Juyong Pass is captured, you must ensure it remains in our hands."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty," Niu Ben responded.

He already knew about Prince Yong's allegiance, but even so, they could not fully trust Prince Yong. After all, Prince Yong was still one of the vassal princes.

In their national policy, the feudal lords would eventually be weakened. It was just that for the unification of the Great Yu Empire, they had no choice but to temporarily endure.

Picking up the battle report, he continued to read it. The report also contained news of the capture of Kaizhou and Bianzhou. "Kaizhou? This is a treasure trove!"

Kaizhou in the Great Yu Empire was modern-day Puyang County in Henan. Puyang County is located in the northeastern part of Henan Province, on the banks of the Yellow River, at the border of Shandong and Anhui provinces. In contemporary times, it is known as the hometown of Emperor Shun and the Dragon Capital of China.

According to the data in the technology crystal, Puyang County is rich in mineral resources. Its oil and natural gas production account for 70% and 90% of the total output of the Central Plains Oilfield.

In addition, Kaizhou has abundant underground salt mine resources, with proven reserves of 140 billion tons.

Thinking of this information, what Xiao Ming was most sensitive to was naturally petroleum. This was an essential material for internal combustion engines in the future. Moreover, this place was very close to Qingzhou. The only difficulty was that the mineral layers were too deep, requiring extremely high drilling technology.

“With the allied forces of the three princes defeated, we should seize this opportunity to quickly capture the former imperial prefectures and counties. Besides stationing troops in Kaizhou and Bianzhou, we should have Lu Fei and Ye Qingyun seize the opportunity to continue attacking nearby prefectures and counties, controlling more land and compressing Prince Zhao’s sphere of influence.”

After a pause, he continued, “I have already issued an imperial decree to the Prince of Huainan, ordering him to send troops to attack Yingzhou. The matter of Yan can be fully entrusted to him.”

“The Prince of Huainan?” Niu Ben was somewhat surprised. “Your Highness, can the Prince of Huainan be trusted?”

“I intend to test whether he can be trusted. If he takes Yingzhou and returns the imperial prefectures and counties, then the Prince of Huainan can be used. If he still stubbornly refuses to leave, it means he is ambitious, and I will have to regard him differently.”

Chapter 647

A faint scent of sandalwood permeated the study.

Niu Ben pondered for a moment, his expression worried. “Your Imperial Majesty is absolutely right. If the Prince of Huainan acts, it will save us a lot of effort, and at the same time, it can weaken the Prince of Huainan’s strength. If Yan, Liang, and Zhao are all destroyed, then north of the Yangtze River, only the Prince of Huainan and Prince Yong will remain. But is Your Imperial Majesty prepared to let the vassal

states continue to exist? After all, this internal strife in the Great Yu Empire clearly shows the harm of vassal princes to the Great Yu Empire.”

“What General Niu can see, I naturally can see too. However, since Prince Yong and the Prince of Huainan have submitted to me, I cannot easily use military force against them. The current plan is to appease them and then implement a policy of weakening the feudal lords after the Great Yu Empire is stable. In this way, the common people can be spared the suffering of war, and the problem of the feudal lords can be resolved without bloodshed. Furthermore, the great barbarian menace has not yet been eliminated. I only wish to quell the rebellion as quickly as possible,” Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

It wasn't that he didn't want to solve the problem of the vassal princes once and for all. It was just that everything required a strategy. Since he could pit one against another, why would he challenge all the vassal princes alone?

Moreover, an important issue was that if the war continued, the Great Yu Empire would be completely devastated. Those killed and wounded in the Battle of Yunzhou City were all able-bodied young men of the Great Yu Empire.

Leaving aside the number of deaths in the Battle of Yunzhou, the common people who transported provisions for the allied forces of the three princes also suffered many deaths. This doesn't even include the subsequent plundering and killing of common people by routed armies.

Saying that the allied forces of the three princes were defeated is easy, but in fact, it caused serious war problems for the Great Yu Empire.

To understand this problem, one only needs to look at the contemporary Middle East issue to clearly see what the people in the north are experiencing.

During World War II, soldiers found pleasure in wantonly killing civilians. In this largely uncivilized dynasty, killing during wartime was simply commonplace.

This time, Niu Ben's battle report from the Yunzhou campaign lay on the table, while the news collected by Wang Xuan was hidden beneath it.

According to information provided by the Secret Guard, this time, the allied forces of the three princes were very sinister. Most of the civilian laborers they conscripted came from the occupied imperial prefectures and counties. At the same time, the provisions and supplies for this campaign were also forcibly imposed on the common people of these prefectures and counties.

During their occupation of cities, the common people of these prefectures and counties had already suffered their massacres, and now they were enduring even greater hardship.

If barbarians were to attack at this moment, he truly doubted whether the common people in these areas would eventually assist the barbarians, because these vassal princes might not treat them any better than the barbarians.

Based on these considerations, after much thought, he decided to win over the vassal princes who had submitted, and stabilize the country as quickly as possible. After all, the Great Yu Empire's true enemy was constantly watching him, and having the north completely ravaged was not in his interest at all.

Although these submissive vassal princes were a hidden danger, at least they could maintain stability in their respective regions.

Moreover, after eliminating Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and Prince Liang, Prince Yong and the Prince of Huainan would not pose a threat to the central government and could be slowly assimilated.

“Your Imperial Majesty is farsighted. I seem to have worried too much.” Niu Ben breathed a sigh of relief.

Xiao Ming glanced at Niu Ben. In the past two days, officials like Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang had all mentioned this issue, and their attitude was different from that of Fei Ji and other old officials from Chang’an.

Xiao Ming understood after a moment’s thought. After he ascended the throne and became emperor, the Chang’an officials and the state officials like Pang Yukun were increasingly at odds.

One reason was that Chang’an officials still valued pedigree at heart and looked down on officials from common backgrounds like Pang Yukun. Secondly, these officials were ideologically conservative, unlike the open-minded state officials.

And Pang Yukun and others were beneficiaries of Xiao Ming’s elimination of powerful families. Psychologically, they instinctively harbored a vigilance against powerful families, fearing that if powerful families gained power, they themselves would be purged.

After all, the powerful families of Qingzhou and other powerful families in the Great Yu Empire also had intricate connections, and they held strong opinions against Pang Yukun and others.

Secondly, Pang Yukun was attempting to revive Legalist thought, while these officials from Chang’an still carried strong Confucian ideas, making the two fundamentally opposed.

From Xiao Ming's perspective, he naturally leaned towards Pang Yukun. However, the territory under his jurisdiction was constantly expanding, and he had no choice but to rely on the existing officials to govern the prefectures and counties for him.

He also had a headache facing this contradictory problem, but currently, there was no solution. After all, it had only been five years since he came to Qingzhou.

His achievements in these five years were unprecedented and unrivaled in the Great Yu Empire. But even so, the number of officials he could train was limited. Despite this, there were still some officials trained by Bowen Academy who were inconsistent, still adhering to Confucianism in their hearts, just like conservative officials such as Fei Ji.

However, he was very displeased that this issue was brought up by Niu Ben, because he deeply knew that the army should not have its own ideology, otherwise, it would easily cause trouble.

No matter how much the officials squabble, it's just talk. A modern army acting rashly can cause trouble.

So he said sternly, "General Niu, you are overstepping your bounds. Soldiers only need to obey orders and do not need to concern themselves with government affairs."

Niu Ben's heart trembled upon hearing this. He immediately realized, "Your Imperial Majesty, I am guilty!"

"Do not commit this offense again! I know what you are worried about, but you are overthinking it. Do not forget that it was my idea to slaughter the powerful families back then. Some people cannot cause trouble." Xiao Ming's words seemed to carry a hidden meaning.

“With Your Imperial Majesty’s words, I am at ease.”

Niu Ben bowed and said that Xiao Ming was now the Emperor, and he gradually felt Xiao Ming transforming into an emperor.

“That’s right. I will reward you all for your merits in a few days,” Xiao Ming said with a smile. He still expected these generals to continue fighting for him, so appropriate appeasement was necessary.

Bowing, Niu Ben turned and left the study. At this moment, Xiao Ming put down the brush in his hand and stood up.

Watching Niu Ben’s figure as he crossed the stone bridge, Xiao Ming sighed softly. Only after becoming emperor did he realize that being a foolish monarch was simple, but being a wise monarch was extremely difficult.

Because balancing a group of subordinates was already tough enough. At the same time, he also had to worry about the army. After all, in this era, generals disobeying orders and holding their own power was simply commonplace.

Even in contemporary times, some countries frequently experienced military coups, the fundamental reason being that the army became the private force of certain generals.

And this situation was very common in feudal dynasties. Precisely because of this, emperors placed many restrictions on military commanders.

Now Xiao Ming also encountered this problem. He absolutely could not allow a general to easily rebel with the army when he wanted to kill that general.

After a moment of thought, he felt that the solution to this problem was the nationalization of the army. If so, he would have to crack down on the military historians.

Chapter 648

“Your Imperial Majesty, Tong Hongchang and other powerful families from Wei have been waiting outside the traveling palace for a long time. Should they be summoned in now?”

Qian Dafu’s voice suddenly rang out from outside the door.

Xiao Ming regained his composure, remembering at this moment the matter of receiving the powerful families from Wei.

When Fei Ji returned from Jinling City, he had brought these powerful families to Qingzhou, but because of the enthronement ceremony, he had kept these powerful families waiting.

Now that he had some free time, Fei Ji immediately arranged for these powerful families to meet him. After all, the longer Xiao Ming avoided them, the more anxious these powerful families would become.

“Summon them to wait in the main hall,” Xiao Ming frowned.

According to the intelligence provided by Wang Xuan, these powerful families were the actual administrators of the various prefectures and counties. To collect taxes normally, he would have to rely on them.

The fact that the taxes from the thirteen prefectures were collected so easily this time was entirely due to the cooperation of these powerful families. In his opinion, he would have to rely on these people to collect taxes for a long time to come.

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Qian Dafu departed. Xiao Ming stretched. These days, he, as emperor, wasn’t particularly tired, just a little annoyed. After all, with more and more prefectures and counties under his rule, all sorts of things cropped up.

After reviewing a few more memorials in the study, Xiao Ming then headed to the main hall. Making these powerful families wait was not without reason; it was to display imperial authority.

“Long live our Emperor!”

Seeing Xiao Ming enter the main hall, the powerful families, led by Tong Hongchang, immediately stood up and bowed to Xiao Ming.

At this time, the powerful families of Wei were arranged in two rows. Xiao Ming walked through the middle, his gaze sweeping over them one by one. Sitting on the main seat, he said, “All of you, dispense with the formalities, and be seated.”

Only then did Tong Hongchang dare to look up at Xiao Ming. According to what they knew, Xiao Ming was only twenty-three years old now.

Before they came, they had always thought Xiao Ming was a fierce and intimidating person, but now that they met him, they found him to be a handsome young man with a firm countenance.

“How dare we, humble commoners, sit in the same room as His Imperial Majesty?” Tong Hongchang remained standing, not daring to take a seat. At this moment, his palms were sweating nervously.

The person before him held the fate of their family’s future prosperity.

Xiao Ming smiled faintly. He said, “This must be the Tong family, the only powerful family in Jinling City besides the Zhang family.”

Tong Hongchang, being called out by name, felt both fear and excitement. He said, “Your Imperial Majesty, I am Tong Hongchang, the head of the Tong family. It is just that the Tong family and the Zhang family have always been at odds. I hope Your Imperial Majesty will make a clear judgment.”

“Elder Fei Ji has already told me that all of you who came to Qingzhou this time are powerful families willing to serve me. This time, the tax collection also relied on your great assistance.”

“This is all what we should do. It is our honor to serve Your Imperial Majesty,” the powerful families said in unison.

Xiao Ming smiled upon hearing this. He said, "In that case, I am at ease. But you all should also be at ease. As long as you are willing to serve me, and abide by the law in your respective prefectures and counties, your lives will be comfortable. As for the rumors outside that I will exterminate all powerful families, those are slanders. Do not take them to heart."

Tong Hongchang's forehead beaded with light sweat. Xiao Ming's words seemingly contained no flaw, merely comforting them, yet they were gentle on the surface but firm within.

Conversely, if they did not serve the imperial family and did not abide by the law, it meant they would be exterminated.

His calves trembled slightly. Tong Hongchang said, "We will keep His Imperial Majesty's teachings in mind."

Xiao Ming had said what he needed to say. So he asked, "During this time living in Qingzhou, what are your insights?"

"The prosperity of Qingzhou's commerce and the wealth of its common people are truly rare in the world. Moreover, there are many novel things that have greatly broadened our horizons. This trip to Qingzhou was truly worthwhile."

A powerful family member spoke up.

“Your Imperial Majesty, we are all willing to disband our private forces, but may we engage in commerce? After all, for a family to prosper, if there’s no livelihood, they will starve to death,” a powerful family member said opportunistically.

Tong Hongchang agreed deeply. To save their lives, they had disbanded their private forces and returned the land they had illegally occupied. In their view, only by engaging in commerce could their families continue to flourish.

This idea grew stronger after they came to Qingzhou, because they found that merchants in Qingzhou had a high status and would not suffer bullying from officials.

Many wealthy merchants owned extremely luxurious residences and purchased large numbers of slaves to serve them, living lives even more affluent than these powerful families. How could they not be tempted by such a situation?

The foundation of Xiao Ming’s governance was to strengthen the nation through commerce. Only the prosperity of private capital could make the common people wealthy. After all, this was a truth that had been tested for centuries.

Therefore, Xiao Ming not only did not object to powerful families engaging in business, but even encouraged it. Now, facts proved that the common people of the Great Yu Empire still lacked interest in business; very few farmers voluntarily abandoned their land to work in factories or engage in commerce.

The poisoning of the small-peasant mentality could not be changed in a day or two. Most importantly, they also lacked capital. After all, not everyone had the courage to mortgage their land to a bank for business.

Indeed, there had been considerable criticism among the common people regarding Xiao Ming's policy, with some accusing the government office of merely using the opportunity to annex land.

This matter surprised Xiao Ming somewhat, but thinking about it, it was reasonable. He had overestimated the thinking of the common people in this era. Some things needed to happen naturally before they could trigger a complete revolution.

As for the policy, he had formulated and publicized it. The rest could only be left to the common people themselves.

Moreover, in Xiao Ming's view, not everyone was cut out for business. If a large number of common people blindly engaged in business and failed, the government office would ultimately have to bear the blame.

Therefore, relatively speaking, powerful families were more proactive in business, because almost all of them had participated in business, and they had strong capital. Even if they failed, they would simply look for other business opportunities.

At the same time, Xiao Ming, by reading the information in the technology crystal, gradually understood that when the feudal system disintegrated and moved towards capitalism, the first to benefit were still the aristocratic class, meaning that social change basically proceeded from top to bottom.

The situation in Qingzhou was currently the same. In any case, the common people could not compete with traditional big merchants. Big merchants ate meat, and the common people could only drink some soup.

And after powerful figures like Princess Taiping transitioned into commercial trade, they had even more advantages than the big merchants.

For Xiao Ming, the waters of Qingzhou's commerce were already muddied, and he didn't mind the powerful families coming in to share some of the profits, because with more people sharing, it would prevent one family from dominating.

Otherwise, it wouldn't be long before super merchants appeared in Qingzhou, and this was not something he wanted to see. So he said, "This is certainly possible. I have always encouraged commercial trade."

Tong Hongchang and the others were overjoyed upon hearing this. The prosperity of Qingzhou's commerce had made them eager for days, and now they could finally boldly engage in business with Qingzhou merchants.

Tong Hongchang led a group of powerful families and bowed simultaneously, saying, "Thank Your Imperial Majesty for your great kindness."

Chapter 649

The light outside the main hall gradually dimmed.

Tong Hongchang and the others, having received Xiao Ming's promise, did not stay long. After all, accompanying a ruler was like accompanying a tiger; a wrong word could bring misfortune.

So, after exchanging some innocuous pleasantries, they all departed. And even though Xiao Ming allowed them to do business in Qingzhou, they naturally sought out various connections.

Seeing these powerful families leave one by one, Xiao Ming felt refreshed. He had nothing more to say to a group of strangers. He had given all the necessary reminders, and the rest could be handled by the book.

Now, for him, the most important thing was still the great war of unification in the north. The defeat of the allied forces of the three princes was just the beginning; annihilating them one by one was the key.

And in his plan, Prince Yan was naturally the first one he needed to deal with. Why? Because he was the closest.

Now, the Fourth Prince had launched a rebellion with the Tian and Ji families, and Chu had already lost half its territory, but he was still uneasy about the Fourth Prince.

‘How can another sleep soundly beside one’s bed?’ Yan must be firmly in his grasp.

Thinking of this, he said to Qian Dafu, “Li San should have returned yesterday. Go find him now. I have something to tell him.”

Qian Dafu held his duster. He now looked like a professional eunuch, dressed in black attire with a tall, flat hat. He smiled and said, “Your Imperial Majesty, Li San must be with Liuli right now. To find Li San, you just need to find Liuli.”

“Liuli? Isn’t that Mother Concubine’s maid?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Indeed, Your Imperial Majesty. You might not know, but Li San has long had feelings for Miss Liuli,” Qian Dafu said with a smile.

Xiao Ming nodded. Li San was no longer young; he had reached marriageable age some time ago. He pondered for a moment and said, “Li San is the commander of the Secret Guard, and the Secret Guard is my eyes. Therefore, the loyalty of the Secret Guard is of utmost importance.”

“Your Imperial Majesty is absolutely right. Your Imperial Majesty has always stayed in Qingzhou, but the Great Yu Empire is vast. It’s impossible to know everything. Internal and external affairs are all conveyed to Your Imperial Majesty through the mouths of officials. If they deliberately deceive Your Imperial Majesty, Your Imperial Majesty would be unable to detect it,” Qian Dafu said.

“It is precisely for this reason that I established the Secret Guard, to prevent this from happening,” Xiao Ming said.

Qian Dafu seemed to understand. He said, “Your Imperial Majesty, rather than that, why not bestow a marriage upon Li San and Liuli? In this way, Li San will surely be grateful to Your Imperial Majesty and become even more loyal.”

“That’s what I thought too, but I’m afraid that’s not enough.” Xiao Ming said, “It would be more fitting if Imperial Mother recognized Liuli as her adopted daughter.”

“Adopted daughter! Your Imperial Majesty has truly prepared a generous gift for Li San this time!” Qian Dafu exclaimed.

“This is not just for Li San. Liuli in Chang’an, she risked her life to protect Mother Concubine, and Mother Concubine is also grateful to her. She once mentioned adopting Liuli as her daughter, and this time, I am simply going with the flow.”

“If that’s the case, it would be perfect!” Qian Dafu smiled. “I will go find Li San now.”

After waiting for a while in the main hall, Li San, dressed in a purple cotton robe, walked in. Seeing Xiao Ming, he bowed and said, “Secret Guard Commander Li San greets Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Dispense with the formalities!” Xiao Ming helped Li San up. He said, “When did you return?”

“Reporting to Your Imperial Majesty, I just returned last night.” Li San felt a little guilty. Qian Dafu’s smile when he found him was somewhat strange.

Based on his intuition from years of serving in the Secret Guard, he felt something was definitely about to happen.

“Is Liuli beautiful?”

“Beautiful.” Li San said instinctively, like a lovesick fool, then suddenly panicked. “Your Imperial Majesty, I deserve ten thousand deaths!”

Xiao Ming laughed heartily. He said, “What are you afraid of? I haven’t said anything to you. Besides, this is Qingzhou, and not Chang’an.”

Li San felt uneasy. Meeting a palace maid could be a small or large matter. To exaggerate, it was illicit communication, which could lead to dismissal from office and imprisonment.

Seeing Li San look terrified, Xiao Ming simply said, “You’re not young anymore, twenty-nine this year, aren’t you? This time, I’ll be the matchmaker and bestow Liuli upon you.”

Li San grew even more terrified. He fell to his knees before Xiao Ming with a “thump” and cried, “Your Imperial Majesty, this is all due to my indiscretion, it has no relation to Liuli at all. If Your Imperial Majesty wishes to kill, then kill only me.”

Qian Dafu had been trying to hold back his laughter. At this moment, he advised, “Li San, you’re usually so sharp, how come you can’t even tell the truth from a lie this time? His Imperial Majesty heard about you and Liuli, and feels for you. He specifically decreed a match made in heaven. Why are you crying?”

Li San at this moment stopped crying. He looked at Xiao Ming, then at Qian Dafu. Both looked at him with kind expressions.

It was then that he hesitated and said, “Is Your Imperial Majesty speaking the truth?”

“I am the Emperor, is this something to say casually? Of course, if you don’t like her, I’ll bestow Liuli upon someone else. Then, many people will surely fight for her.”

"Your Imperial Majesty, I like her. I liked her the first time I went to Chang'an." Li San said hastily.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Since that's the case, I will fulfill your wish. However, before your wedding, I have another matter I need you to handle."

"Please enlighten me, Your Majesty." Li San's playful demeanor returned to seriousness.

"The Fourth Prince is quite ambitious. I don't want to destroy Yan only to fulfill his ambitions. The north doesn't need another vassal prince, does it?"

Li San understood. The intelligence from the Secret Guard was shared. He said, "This rebellion was originally the doing of the Tian family and the Ji family. The Fourth Prince is merely taking advantage of others' power, but it's a joke that he wants to take the opportunity to replace Prince Yan in governing Yan."

"For me, I only need to appease the Tian family and the Ji family. He is redundant." Xiao Ming said

"I understand. Before the Prince of Huainan takes Yingzhou, I will eliminate the Fourth Prince." Li San said in a deep voice.

Xiao Ming nodded. When he first arrived in Qingzhou, he was met with an assassination attempt. The assassin was none other than the Fourth Prince. How could he entrust Yan to such a venomous individual? Rather than that, it was better to retaliate, lest he save a snake only to be bitten by it.

Although assassination might be considered an underhanded method, who among those at the pinnacle of power did not have blood on their hands?

A benevolent person cannot lead an army; a righteous person cannot engage in trade. To be an emperor and govern the Great Yu Empire well, one must be ruthless enough to control the world.

“Remember to leave no trace. It’s best if the Tian family and the Ji family do it themselves, to avoid any complications,” Xiao Ming reminded him.

Li San nodded. At this moment, he was full of energy. For him, perfectly handling this matter was his repayment to Xiao Ming. Of course, this matter was not Xiao Ming’s initial reason for seeking him, nor was it an exchange for Liuli.

After discussing this matter, Xiao Ming again asked Li San about Wei’s territory before dismissing him.

Chapter 650

Yingzhou.

This was a city in the southern part of Yan.

Compared to Bozhou, Yingzhou City was not large, only ten li long and wide. After Prince Yan led his officials to flee here, the already small Yingzhou became even more crowded.

“Imperial Father, now that Bozhou is occupied by the Fourth Prince, only half of Yan’s cities remain in our hands. What should we do now?”

In the temporary princely mansion in the city, a group of officials looked at Prince Yan expectantly.

At this time, Prince Yan looked dejected, leaning tiredly on a chair. In the past two days, bad news had come one after another.

The Black Feather Guard ultimately failed to stop the powerful families’ private forces. Bozhou was now completely occupied by the Fourth Prince, and at the same time, the imperial prefectures and counties that Yan had once occupied were successively captured by Prince Qi’s army, with all six cities falling.

Under such widespread betrayal, Prince Yan gradually lost his composure, and his emotions became increasingly volatile.

Prince Yan remained silent, but the officials below grew increasingly anxious. If they continued to stubbornly resist, they would be the ones to suffer misfortune.

An official seized the opportunity to say, “Your Highness, Xiao Ming has already ascended the throne. All he wants is the realm of the Great Yu Empire. If Your Highness submits to Xiao Ming at this time, he will surely be pleased and perhaps will no longer pursue this matter.”

“Yes, Your Highness, Prince Qi’s army is unstoppable. A wise man knows when to submit,” another official said loudly.

“Exactly, it’s still not too late to pledge loyalty now.”

“...”

Following these two officials, others echoed in agreement.

Prince Yan suddenly sneered a few times upon hearing this. He looked at the officials. These officials naturally hoped he would pledge allegiance to Xiao Ming.

Because by then, he would be sliced into a thousand pieces by Xiao Ming, but they would still be officials. Xiao Ming would still use them to govern Yan.

So for him, everyone else could surrender, but he alone could not surrender.

“No need to say more. My mind is made up. Whoever dares to mention surrender again will be treated like this table.” Prince Yan fiercely drew his saber and struck the table before him.

Instantly, the table was split in two by the sharp blade. All the officials present immediately shrank their necks, not daring to speak further.

With a cold snort, Prince Yan waved his hand, dismissing the officials, leaving only Cui Cheng and Cui Hao, the brothers.

At this point, Prince Yan said, "You two keep an eye on these officials. If anyone tries to betray us like the Tian family and Ji family, just..."

Having said this, Prince Yan made a gesture of slitting his throat.

Cui Cheng and Cui Hao exchanged glances and both nodded. Cui Cheng said, "Imperial Father, the Prince of Huainan has already dispatched 100,000 troops to attack Yingzhou, and there are only 70,000 troops in the city. If Yingzhou falls again, we will have nowhere left to hide."

Prince Yan mused, "I might not be Xiao Ming's match, but I will certainly not be at the mercy of the Prince of Huainan. Starting today, immediately conscript soldiers in the remaining five prefectures. Any male over thirteen years old must join the army. Xiao Ming wants to kill me; I will fight him to the death."

"Thirteen years old." Cui Cheng looked surprised, but in his opinion, it seemed already too late.

The Great Yu Empire's conscription age was sixteen. Now, conscripting from the age of thirteen was only because they had no way back.

After a moment of hesitation, the two said in unison, "We respectfully obey Imperial Father's command."

At the same time, the Prince of Huainan and his eldest son, Cui Shang'an, leading an army of 100,000, had arrived in Guangzho yesterday.

Guangzhou was located southwest of Yingzhou, only seventy li away. In the past, this had always been the Prince of Huainan's military stronghold against Prince Yan.

"Imperial Father, I have already sent men to investigate the situation in Yingzhou City. Currently, there are only 70,000 troops stationed in Yingzhou City."

Standing on the city wall, letting the north wind howl by, the Prince of Huainan looked towards Yingzhou City and said, "Seventy thousand men. This Prince Yan is indeed formidable. Even after suffering such a crushing defeat from His Imperial Majesty, he still has so many troops."

Cui Shang'an felt somewhat resentful. "Prince Yan is a first-rank prince, while Imperial Father is a second-rank prince. Not only is his status lower than Prince Yan's, but he also has fewer cities than Prince Yan. Yet, when it comes to loyalty to the imperial family, who can compare to Imperial Father?"

"Hahahaha... My eldest son, those words are wrong. The establishment of vassal princes was determined during the time of Gaozu; the imperial family dares not easily change the titles of vassal princes. But what if he is a first-rank prince? Now, he will still be ruined one by one." The Prince of Huainan's eyes sparkled with wisdom.

"Imperial Father is absolutely right. It is precisely because Imperial Father has always been without ambition that His Imperial Majesty trusts Imperial Father so much, even allowing younger sister to enter the palace and become an Imperial Noble Consort," Cui Shang'an said thoughtfully.

The Prince of Huainan sighed, "His Highness is not at ease with any vassal prince, otherwise, he would not have sent us to attack Yingzhou. This in itself is a test. Imperial Father's personal expedition this time is also to put His Imperial Majesty at ease. I do not want to follow in Prince Wei's footsteps."

Compared to other vassal states, his state had only five prefectures and a population of merely 900,000, making it weak in strength among many vassal states.

In the past, they had always survived in the cracks between various vassal princes, so they had never harbored any intention of betraying the imperial family.

And after Prince Wei was eliminated, he keenly felt that his opportunity had arrived. By taking refuge with Xiao Ming at this time, he would surely have a bright future.

His choice this time could also be considered a gamble, and from the current situation, he seemed to have made the right choice.

Cui Shang'an remained silent. After a while, he said, "But Imperial Father, attacking Yingzhou now has exhausted the state's military strength. If 100,000 men are lost in Yingzhou City, wouldn't it greatly diminish the state's power?"

"Those who achieve great things are not constrained by trifles," the Prince of Huainan said. "Fighting is my loyalty to His Imperial Majesty. If we cannot win, it means we lack the strength, and we have done our best."

Cui Shang'an nodded upon hearing this. "I only hope His Imperial Majesty can understand Imperial Father's utmost loyalty and allow Imperial Father to become a first-rank prince from now on."

Just as the two were speaking, a general suddenly ascended the city wall. He said to the Prince of Huainan, "Your Highness, two Qingzhou merchant ships have arrived outside the city. The merchants on board say they are delivering fifty cannons to Your Highness by His Imperial Majesty's command."

"Cannons!" The Prince of Huainan was overjoyed upon hearing this. "Really?"

"I indeed saw cannons on the ship, and on the other ship were cannonballs and ammunition. The messenger said that attacking a city is difficult due to the city wall's solidity; one only needs to blast the city wall down with cannons. There will be people on the ship to train soldiers how to use cannons," the general said.

The Prince of Huainan laughed heartily upon hearing this. "His Imperial Majesty still remembers me! I have long heard of the advantage of cannons, and with cannons this time, it's like adding wings to a tiger!"

Cui Shang'an's brows also relaxed. Initially, he always suspected that Xiao Ming wanted them to suffer heavy losses, but now it seemed he had misunderstood.

After their excitement, the two immediately followed the general to Guangzhou's dock to receive the cannons. Within five days, they had trained an artillery team consisting of fifty cannons.

After skillfully mastering the use of cannons, the Prince of Huainan and Cui Shang'an personally led their large army majestically towards Yingzhou.