

I. Dynasty 651

Chapter 651

A torrential rain suddenly covered Qingzhou.

Outside the study, the patter of raindrops and the dampness of the rain-soaked earth assailed him, making Xiao Ming momentarily recall some childhood memories.

Sitting under the eaves as a child, he would always smell this natural, fresh scent of rain, but now the scent was even richer, invigorating his spirit.

At this moment, facing the pouring rain, Xiao Ming frowned slightly. A few days ago, he had sent a caravan to deliver fifty cannons to the Prince of Huainan. By now, the Prince of Huainan must have received them.

With these cannons, the Prince of Huainan would suffer fewer casualties during the siege, and once the city fell, the rest would be much simpler.

In his opinion, Prince Yan was merely a spent force. The actions of the Tian family and Ji family were enough to reveal the speculative nature of powerful families.

For these powerful families, they fundamentally didn't care who ruled them; all they wanted was the prosperity of their own families.

Now that Prince Yan had lost Bozhou, the remaining powerful families would inevitably have different thoughts. At such a time, it would be impossible for them to wholeheartedly resist the Prince of Huainan.

Perhaps when the Prince of Huainan breached the city, Prince Yan's army would crumble. Thus, in his view, Prince Yan's demise was imminent, and Prince Liang wouldn't last another month.

If that were the case, he would have eliminated two of the northern three princes, leaving only Prince Zhao.

In this allied army of the three princes, Prince Zhao's forces were the fewest, which showed that this old fox didn't think much of the three princes' allied army. Perhaps for Prince Zhao, the only ones he truly trusted were the barbarians.

His elimination of Prince Yan and Prince Liang actually suited his purpose, saving him the trouble of doing it himself.

Sending fifty cannons to the Prince of Huainan this time was not an impulsive decision by Xiao Ming. Rather, in Xiao Ming's view, he still needed the Prince of Huainan as an assistant to deal with the King of Chu. He did not want the Prince of Huainan to be disheartened after this battle. All he needed was for the Prince of Huainan to withdraw his forces south of the Yangtze River.

As he was thinking, a eunuch suddenly walked through the rain with an oiled paper umbrella towards Qian Dafu. After exchanging a few words, the eunuch departed.

Qian Dafu then walked in and bowed, saying, "Your Imperial Majesty, the Crown Prince of Chu, Li Chu Yuan, has arrived in Qingzhou with the Third Prince in custody."

“When the rain stops, let him come to see me.” Xiao Ming showed no surprise, as he had received an urgent letter from the King of Chu three days ago.

In the letter, the King of Chu fabricated an entire set of excuses, implying that the Third Prince was the true culprit behind the enthronement farce, and that he himself was merely deceived.

Secondly, he expressed his willingness to submit to Xiao Ming, and then proposed that Li Chu Yuan live in Qingzhou, simply put, making Li Chu Yuan a hostage to show his sincerity.

Xiao Ming could only sneer at this trick. If he couldn’t see through such a delaying tactic, he wouldn’t be fit to be emperor.

However, the King of Chu had made a good gamble this time. Xiao Ming truly had no intention of dealing with the King of Chu right now, as the urgent matter was to resolve the issues in the north.

His minimum requirement for the King of Chu was for his state to become a market for goods. For now, he didn’t want the wealthy south to become a mess.

The rain continued from early morning until two o’clock in the afternoon. At three o’clock, Li Chu Yuan, escorting the Third Prince, arrived at the traveling palace.

“Crown Prince Li Chu Yuan of Chu greets Your Imperial Majesty! Long live, long live, long long live our Emperor!”

In the main hall, Li Chu Yuan bowed deeply and shouted.

“Dispense with the formalities.”

Xiao Ming smiled. Although he inwardly detested Li Chu Yuan, he had to maintain appearances.

Li Chu Yuan then raised his head. This trip to Qingzhou truly shocked him. Qingzhou’s prosperity and wealth exceeded his expectations.

This also gave him a deeper understanding of Xiao Ming.

“I greet Your Imperial Majesty! Long live, long live, long long live our Emperor!”

The Third Prince entered the main hall with Li Chu Yuan. After Li Chu Yuan shouted “Long live!”, the restrained Third Prince suddenly knelt and shouted.

Xiao Ming was somewhat surprised. He looked at the Third Prince, who was extremely disheveled at this moment, his body much thinner, showing none of the former glory he had in Chang’an.

Li Chu Yuan seized the opportunity and said, “Your Imperial Majesty, the Third Prince falsely transmitted the imperial edict. If we hadn’t believed him, Imperial Father would not have acknowledged him as sovereign. I hope Your Imperial Majesty will investigate thoroughly.”

Xiao Ming laughed heartily. He said, "The King of Chu and the Crown Prince have taken great pains. Such a rebellious person, I will certainly punish severely."

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of Li Chu Yuan's mouth. So far, their scheme had shown no flaws.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, "In the letter, the King of Chu mentioned that you would reside in Qingzhou for several years. I wonder what you thinks?"

Upon this, Li Chu Yuan was well-prepared. He said, "I am indebted to Your Imperial Majesty's consideration. I have always yearned for Qingzhou, and to be able to stay in Qingzhou is my wish."

"Very good. In that case, you may reside in Qingzhou," Xiao Ming said blandly. He saw no need for excessive politeness with a hostage.

After a few more perfunctory words, Xiao Ming dismissed Li Chu Yuan but kept the Third Prince in the main hall.

At this time, Xiao Ming looked at the Third Prince and said, "Do you know why I kept you alone?"

"Because I still have some use for Your Imperial Majesty." The Third Prince seemed to have sensed this long ago.

"In Chang'an, the ministers all said that the Third Prince was highly intelligent. Now it seems that's true," Xiao Ming chuckled.

"This is merely the ministers flattering me." The Third Prince lowered his head. He knew very well that the cleverer the prince, the sooner he died.

With a soft snort, he said, "Prince Yan is an outsider after all, but you are a member of the imperial family. Now that the Great Yu Empire has come to this state, how could I choose to trust the King of Chu and not trust you?"

The Third Prince's expression shifted slightly. He sighed and said, "Your Imperial Majesty, falsely transmitting the imperial edict was my doing, but this was all at the King of Chu's instruction. Otherwise, without troops or power, how would I dare to ascend the throne?"

"Even so, your crime is enough for me to chop off your head ten thousand times. However, now that the Great Yu Empire is facing a crisis, if you can atone for your sins with meritorious service, I will spare your life."

The Third Prince's voice was a little agitated. He said, "I will immediately write to the King of Shu, urging him to hold back Prince Zhao's army at all costs."

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this.

His purpose in keeping the Third Prince was precisely this. The King of Chu had abandoned the Third Prince, and at the same time, he had abandoned the Fifth Prince, as the Third Prince and the Fifth Prince were full brothers.

The Fifth Prince had always greatly respected the Third Prince and always obeyed his words. The King of Chu's current scheme was merely a delaying tactic, which would undoubtedly give Prince Zhao an opportunity to prolong the chaos in the north by taking Shu.

Xiao Ming, seeing this, naturally did not want the King of Chu's cunning scheme to succeed. Without the King of Chu's support, who knows what outrageous things the Fifth Prince might do?

"This time, it's not as simple as a letter. The King of Shu is at the end of his rope. I will send 20,000 men with you to Shu. Whether you want your life or power, you can only choose one."

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"Twenty thousand soldiers entering Shu!"

The Third Prince's expression was somewhat stiff.

This time, the King of Chu betraying him also meant betraying the King of Shu. After all, with the King of Shu's unruly nature, he would not pledge allegiance to the King of Chu.

As a result, the King of Shu became a lone wolf, unable to hold out much longer against Prince Zhao's attack.

After all, after Prince Zhao mastered the forging technology of matchlock guns, he had trained a musketeer unit. With muskets, coupled with the Black Armored Iron Cavalry and barbarian cavalry, the King of Shu's situation could be said to be very difficult.

If Xiao Ming had not provided him with cannons to defend the city, it would be questionable whether the King of Shu would have survived until now. Therefore, in the Third Prince's opinion, Xiao Ming attached great importance to Bashu. Otherwise, he would not have put aside past grievances and provided cannons and ammunition to the King of Shu, whom he disliked.

Precisely considering this issue, when the King of Chu decided to escort him to Qingzhou, he felt a glimmer of hope, because for Xiao Ming, he still had some use, but for the King of Chu, he was completely a burden.

"This is just the first batch of soldiers. In my opinion, 20,000 elites are enough to help the King of Shu block Prince Zhao's southward advance. Of course, the prerequisite is that the King of Shu pledges allegiance to me. If he doesn't comply, these 20,000 men will be the last straw that breaks his back. Do you understand?" Xiao Ming's tone was beyond doubt.

The Third Prince was silent for a while. He said, "Does Your Imperial Majesty want me to go to Shu to persuade the King of Shu to submit?"

"No, I want you to replace him. The King of Shu is foolish, while you are intelligent. It is more suitable to entrust Bashu to you."

"Entrust it to me? Is Your Imperial Majesty not afraid that I will occupy Bashu and use my military power to claim independence?" The Third Prince was somewhat confused.

Xiao Ming laughed upon hearing this, "I am only asking you to be responsible for the governance of Bashu. As for military matters, I am the one who decides. Do you think these 20,000 men entering Shu are merely to help defend against Prince Zhao?"

The Third Prince's heart sank. At this moment, he finally understood Xiao Ming's true intention. Once the King of Shu pledged allegiance, Xiao Ming could legitimately revoke the King of Shu's princely title, citing his ineffective resistance against Prince Zhao.

And to appease the King of Shu, Xiao Ming would let him replace the King of Shu, but he would only hold the title of King of Shu, without the actual power of a King of Shu.

Seeing the Third Prince fall silent, Xiao Ming reminded him, "For me, this is just one method. Even if Prince Zhao occupies Bashu, I will only have to expend a little more effort in the future."

"The allied forces of the three princes suffered a crushing defeat. How could a single Prince Zhao be a match for His Imperial Majesty? Third Prince, His Imperial Majesty merely cannot bear to see the imperial family continue to fight amongst themselves. This is an opportunity for you to live and continue to enjoy wealth and glory. If you miss it, it will truly be gone." Qian Dafu and Xiao Ming performed a double act.

The Third Prince's expression was complex, clearly struggling internally. He asked, "How does Your Imperial Majesty plan to deal with the King of Shu?"

"How about I let him be a carefree prince?" Xiao Ming picked up his tea and took a light sip. For him, the most important thing now was to stabilize Bashu and prevent Prince Zhao's scheme from succeeding.

As for the Third Prince and the King of Shu, it was fine to keep them for now. After all, without military power, they were just fish on a chopping board.

If the two could honestly be carefree princes, then so be it. If not, they could be killed at any time.

And if his plan succeeded, he would gain the Land of Abundance, Bashu, avoiding a costly expedition while also curbing Prince Zhao's expansion.

"Is Your Imperial Majesty serious!"

The Third Prince's eyes darted around, but he was no fool. He had thought of everything Xiao Ming had. So he said, "If Your Imperial Majesty is sincere, I hope Your Imperial Majesty can bestow upon the King of Shu and me an imperial death-exemption tablet! No one with such a tablet can be killed unless for the crime of treason!"

"Imperial death-exemption tablet!" Xiao Ming looked confused.

Qian Dafu knew that Xiao Ming was not very clear about the past of the Great Yu Empire, so he explained, "Your Imperial Majesty, when the Great Yu Empire was founded, Gaozu once bestowed imperial death-exemption tablets upon three of his generals and established a rule that those who possessed an imperial death-exemption tablet could not be killed unless for the crime of treason."

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this. The imperial death-exemption tablet had also appeared in contemporary history, and it was actually just a form of appeasement by the emperor towards meritorious officials.

In the contemporary historical process, this death-exemption tablet proved to be of little use. Since treason could not be exempted from death, as long as officials played their cards right, they could still kill them. After all, sometimes if you are said to be guilty, you are guilty even if innocent, and if you are said to be innocent, you are innocent even if guilty.

However, if the Third Prince could truly change his ways and loyally support him, there was no need for him to kill him.

So Xiao Ming merely pondered for a moment before saying, "This is easy. As long as you handle this matter for me, I will bestow upon both of you imperial death-exemption tablets, so that you may enjoy a lifetime of prosperity."

The Third Prince breathed a sigh of relief. This time, he had bet correctly. For him, allowing things to continue as they were would only lead to death for him and his brother. Now, to be able to survive was already a great fortune.

"Thank Your Imperial Majesty for your great kindness," the Third Prince bowed deeply.

Xiao Ming was even pleased in his heart. If he were to take Yan, Liang, and Zhao, and then gain Bashu, no one in the Great Yu Empire would be able to shake his position.

The two reached an agreement. Xiao Ming had Qian Dafu arrange a residence for the Third Prince in Qingzhou City for a temporary stay. When 20,000 soldiers were withdrawn from the front lines, he would dispatch the Third Prince and these soldiers by warship and merchant ship along the Yangtze River into Bashu.

After all, with the Prince of Huainan's allegiance, the warships could receive supplies along the Yangtze River. Between the King of Shu's fiefdom and the Prince of Huainan's, there was only the Prince of Ruyang, who possessed only three prefectures, located roughly at the border of modern-day western Hubei and Chongqing.

At the same time, this entry into Shu would also serve as a deterrent to the Prince of Ruyang. Currently, only the Prince of Ruyang had not yet contacted him, and he was unsure what the Prince of Ruyang was thinking.

After gaining control of Bashu, the Prince of Ruyang would be sandwiched between the Prince of Huainan and Bashu, which he controlled. He believed that at this point, the Prince of Ruyang would inevitably become restless.

The Third Prince departed. At this point, Qian Dafu said, "Your Imperial Majesty, besides the Third Prince, the Prince of Huainan's daughter, Cui Xue'er, has also arrived in Qingzhou. Does Your Imperial Majesty wish to see what this Cui Xue'er looks like? Your Imperial Majesty has been working day and night these past few days. Consider it a diversion."

At this point, Qian Dafu suddenly smiled slyly. In his opinion, the Emperor taking a new consort was a perfectly normal thing.

Xiao Ming's heart stirred upon hearing this, but he thought for a moment and dismissed the idea. Since Cui Xue'er had arrived, she would surely enter the palace soon to pay her respects to the Empress Dowager, and he would accompany the Empress Dowager to see her then.

Moreover, Fei Yuer was pregnant and about to give birth. At this time, if he were to indulge in frivolous affairs, he would feel somewhat uneasy, and he also didn't want to give the ministers an excuse to criticize him.

Thinking of this, he said to Qian Dafu, “Forget about this matter. How about you accompany me to see how the imperial palace is being built?”

Chapter 653

After the heavy rain, a trace of pure blue sky emerged from the dense dark clouds. Sunlight pierced through the gap, as breathtaking as a divine blessing descending from heaven.

Qian Dafu looked up at the sky and said, “Your Imperial Majesty, the sky seems to be clearing. We can go out. I will call Zhao Long and Zhao Hu.”

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this. He then went back to change into casual clothes. For him, he still didn’t want to make a big show of walking outside; wearing dragon robes would be too conspicuous.

Moreover, he had grown accustomed to frequently visiting inside and outside the city during his time in Qingzhou. Spending every day in the traveling palace was quite difficult.

On his way back to the bedchamber, he stopped by to check on Fei Yuer. The girl was very sleepy now; his movements while changing clothes didn’t even wake her.

Preventing Xiao Huan from waking Fei Yuer, Xiao Ming left the traveling palace alone and headed south of the city under the protection of his guards.

For Xiao Ming, the ideal capital would naturally be Youzhou. However, for now, Youzhou was temporarily unsuitable as the capital. After all, Youzhou was currently impoverished, and its urban infrastructure was very poor.

According to Pang Yukun, although it was called a prefecture, it was actually inferior to even a county in Qingzhou.

So, after careful consideration, Xiao Ming still intended to make Qingzhou the capital for now, and only consider relocating the capital after Youzhou had developed, which he estimated would take about twenty to thirty years.

“Your Imperial Majesty, it’s quite lively outside, and our Qingzhou is becoming even more bustling.” Qian Dafu said with a smile, which made his already small eyes narrow into a slit.

Zhao Long said, “Those who come are merchants and powerful families. They are very shrewd. They know that His Imperial Majesty is invincible, and Qingzhou is as stable as a mountain, so there will be no war.”

“It’s not just merchants and powerful families. There have also been more vagrants outside the city recently. The government office has set up many porridge distribution points outside the city,” Zhao Hu added.

Compared to before, the two were now even more high-spirited. After all, they were no longer princely guards, but imperial guards, which made many Qingzhou army soldiers envious. In the past, many people were unwilling to take on such a relaxed duty.

Xiao Ming now felt somewhat like a person who had spent half a year in a detention center and was then released. Since his enthronement, he found that his freedom of movement was far less than before.

His daily itinerary basically consisted of the council hall, the study, and the bedchamber. The various affairs of Qingzhou City were all reported to him by officials, and he also conveyed decrees through Qian Dafu.

Suddenly, he had become a canary in a cage. Xiao Ming felt an instinctive wariness towards this confined environment.

Having read many historical records, he knew very well that this was how emperors throughout history were misled by powerful officials and eunuchs around them, because everything he knew came from the mouths of others.

He could only listen to what others said. As a result, he would naturally receive a lot of inaccurate information and information tainted with the powerful officials' personal views.

However, Xiao Ming was also prepared for this situation. This was the Secret Guard, which served as his eyes outside.

However, the Secret Guard also had its limitations. In an era where transportation largely relied on walking and communication largely relied on shouting, the limited Secret Guard personnel were mostly used to monitor important figures, and generally, the lives of the common people could not be timely reported.

Based on this, he had been thinking for the past two days about how to obtain authentic information. After much thought, he concluded that only by making the newspaper office a source of impartial reporting could this problem be solved.

Just as Niu Ben worried that Xiao Ming would let the powerful families gain power, it was now an obvious fact that every official and general had their own ideas and considerations.

For the military, he could only consider the nationalization of the army.

Of course, the nationalization of the army was a false proposition. For him, the essence of the nationalization of the army was the royalization of the army, to ensure his absolute leadership over the army, and to prevent generals from turning the army into their private forces.

After all, in the future, his army would contend with Western powers for colonies. He did not want his generals to establish themselves after occupying a colony.

As for officials, besides having two factions in court to supervise each other, he also planned to adopt a top-down supervision model.

This model was the newspaper he thought of. After all, contemporary facts proved that media exposure played a very good role in exposing official corruption and also helped supervise officials.

The only drawback was that Qingzhou currently had only one newspaper office, which would make some newspaper articles too subjective. So, he planned to establish two more newspaper offices in Qingzhou and open two of them to merchants.

That is to say, there would be three official newspaper offices and two private ones in Qingzhou. In this way, diversified competition would uncover some hidden scandals.

Thinking about the things he needed to tackle next, the group unconsciously arrived in the south of the city. At this moment, a cluster of buildings, under the labor of the construction department, was gradually taking shape.

He cared quite a bit about this imperial palace, where he might live for twenty or thirty years in the future. So, the design of the imperial palace was basically from his own hand, including not only formal buildings but also secret tunnels and the like.

Of course, the original intention of the design was to give this imperial palace some modern flair. Therefore, the construction of this imperial palace heavily utilized brick and wood structures. This structure, compared to pure wood structures, was much sturdier and also saved a lot of construction time.

After all, building walls with red bricks was much simpler than a carpenter's work, and among these red bricks, he also had artisans pre-install ceramic pipes, which would be used for wiring in the future.

It was precisely based on this simple yet ancient design that the construction speed of the imperial palace was unprecedented. At this rate, it could be moved into in just eight months. At a normal speed, an imperial palace would take no less than five or even ten years to build.

"Your Imperial Majesty, this construction department is truly excellent. I have never seen an imperial palace built to such a state in such a short time."

At this time, the city walls and palace gates of the imperial palace had already been built, and the city walls were also dyed red. The group entered through the palace gate. In front was a flight of steps that led up to the Zhengda Guangming Hall (Hall of Grand Rectitude), the main hall.

This Zhengda Guangming Hall was where the imperial court would convene. It was named Zhengda Guangming to constantly remind the officials.

Compared to Chang'an's luxurious imperial palace, Xiao Ming's demands for his own imperial palace were simplicity. So he didn't ask for white jade steps or anything like that. Anything that could be sourced locally was used.

Beyond the Zhengda Guangming Hall were the living quarters for the imperial concubines, each with its own small courtyard. To the right of the imperial palace was the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where the eunuchs resided, and to the left was the East Palace.

Overall, the general layout of his imperial palace was somewhat similar to that of Chang'an's imperial palace, but there were also differences, such as the boiler water tower erected within the imperial palace.

And just as Xiao Ming was inspecting his future palace, a drastic change quietly swept through Yan.

Chapter 654

September 16th.

After five days of marching, the Prince of Huainan and Cui Shang'an led 100,000 Huainan army soldiers to arrive and set up camp under Yingzhou.

After three days of preparation, Cui Shang'an ordered the artillery to bombard Yingzhou City, and Yingzhou City immediately fell into chaos.

"Cannons! Again, cannons! How could the Prince of Huainan have cannons? This must be Xiao Ming's doing, it must be him!"

In the temporary princely mansion, Prince Yan was furious. The reason he was so confident in Yingzhou City was that it had sixty cannons installed, a portion of the cannons he had purchased from Qingzhou.

It was precisely because he was confident in the defensive power of these cannons that he had disdained the Prince of Huainan, believing that his cannons would surely defeat the Prince of Huainan's army disastrously.

But now, everything was beyond his expectations. The Prince of Huainan not only had cannons, but their range far exceeded that of Yingzhou City's cannons.

Now Yingzhou City could only suffer the bombardment of the Prince of Huainan's cannons in vain, and he could not return fire with his own cannons, which immediately made him furious.

It was then that he realized he had been deceived by Xiao Ming. From beginning to end, Xiao Ming had not sold them true cannons.

"Imperial Father, if this continues, our city walls will collapse," Cui Cheng's voice was strained.

One hundred thousand men besieged the city. The densely packed soldiers surrounded Yingzhou City completely. Now they couldn't fight and couldn't escape.

"What if it collapses? Are my soldiers born from city walls?" Prince Yan suddenly drew his saber. "This time, I will personally lead the army to fight the Prince of Huainan to the death!"

With that, Prince Yan strode towards the South City, which was the focus of the Prince of Huainan's attack.

Cui Cheng and Cui Hao did not follow the King of Chu this time. Cui Cheng looked at Cui Hao and said, "Now that the powerful families in the city have turned rebellious, they will absolutely not wholeheartedly resist the Prince of Huainan with us. And Imperial Father refuses to heed advice and submit to Xiao Ming. What should we do now?"

Cui Hao's face was filled with despair. He said, "I lingered in Qingzhou for over a month, and from what I saw and heard, I had already anticipated that the allied forces of the three princes might collapse. But I never imagined such a complete collapse. Now, Xiao Ming's power is immense, and Yan will surely bear the brunt."

"What's the use of mentioning this now? I only ask if Xiao Ming told you, when you were in Qingzhou, how he would spare Yan," Cui Cheng asked urgently.

"When this foolish brother was about to leave, Xiao Ming did indeed have Pang Yukun tell me that unless Prince Yan came to beg for forgiveness, actively renouncing his princely title and state, he would not spare Yan," Cui Hao said.

Cui Cheng fell silent upon hearing this. In his opinion, this was absolutely impossible. He sighed deeply, drew his saber, and pursued Prince Yan.

Seeing Cui Cheng leave, Cui Hao turned and walked in the opposite direction. When Xiao Ming ascended the throne, he had already seen that the allied forces of the three princes would probably achieve nothing.

Pang Yukun had indeed said such words to him, but he had also mentioned that if he were willing to lend a hand, he would be guaranteed wealth and glory in the future.

He was merely the second son of Prince Yan. For him, the land of this state would never be his anyway. In this situation, he was more worried about his own life than about the fate of Yan.

Leaving the temporary princely mansion, Cui Hao walked straight into an alley. He knocked six times on the door of a residence, and then the door opened.

In the courtyard, some powerful families had already gathered. These powerful families were all against Prince Yan continuing to fight the Prince of Huainan. After all, the outcome was already decided, and not everyone was willing to die with Prince Yan.

“Your Highness, when will you raise the army?” a powerful family head asked.

“Imperial Father has already ascended the city walls. We just need to wait for the Prince of Huainan’s cannons to collapse the city walls. At that point, the city will surely fall into chaos, and that will be our time to raise the army.” Cui Hao’s eyes flickered.

He thought to himself: 'Imperial Father, you treated me unkindly, so do not blame my disloyalty. Eldest Brother enjoyed all the prosperity in Yan, but you sent me to Qingzhou to suffer.'

The powerful families all nodded, simply waiting for the city to fall as their signal.

Outside the city, fifty cannons continuously bombarded the South Gate. The fragile south city wall continuously developed deep craters under the cannon fire. These craters expanded, until with a "boom," the entire city gate collapsed.

"Imperial Father, the city wall has fallen!" Cui Shang'an said with delight. He immediately prepared to lead his troops into the city.

"Wait! Not yet." The Prince of Huainan looked at the collapsed city gate on the east side of the main entrance, then looked to the west side. At this moment, the cannons on the west city gate were still intact. He said, "Now, concentrate the artillery fire on the west city wall. Once the city wall collapses, immediately attack the city."

Cui Shang'an then looked at the west side of the city and realized something. He said, "The cannons His Imperial Majesty gave us are truly formidable. Prince Yan's cannons can't even hit us, while we keep hitting them."

The Prince of Huainan's expression was grim. He said, "This is His Imperial Majesty's brilliance. He has long been wary of us vassal princes, which is why he sold some inferior cannons to Prince Yan, Prince Liang, Prince Zhao, and the others."

“Could it be that His Imperial Majesty foresaw the Great Yu Empire falling into chaos long ago?” Cui Shang’an asked, startled.

The Prince of Huainan said, “Who can know that? But this alone is enough to show that our Emperor is not a simple character.”

As the two were speaking, the city wall on the west side also collapsed with a roar under the bombardment. At this moment, both the Prince of Huainan and Cui Shang’an’s spirits were boosted.

Immediately after, the sound of war drums echoed across the entire battlefield, and the morale-boosted Huainan army soldiers roared as they charged towards Yingzhou City.

Inside Yingzhou City, Prince Yan and his personal guards barely escaped the collapsing city wall. Through the breach in the wall, he saw soldiers surging towards Yingzhou City like a tide.

Prince Yan’s eyes were bloodshot. He wielded his saber and roared, “Soldiers, fight to the death with me and the enemy!”

As his voice fell, except for his personal guards who shouted in response, the other soldiers were indifferent. Some of the able-bodied men who had just been forcibly conscripted even trembled with fear.

When had they ever seen a weapon as powerful as a cannon? Moreover, they had been forced into the army in the first place.

“Kill!”

The Huainan army poured in simultaneously from the two collapsed sections. Well-equipped soldiers immediately engaged the defending soldiers in battle.

Some powerful families loyal to Prince Yan also led their private forces to fight bloody battles with the Huainan army. For a moment, screams and sounds of combat filled the city walls. Bodies of soldiers from both sides continuously fell to the ground, and blood flowed on the earth.

Prince Yan personally led his personal guards into battle. As he was in the thick of the fighting, a loud shout suddenly echoed from within the city. A group of powerful family retainers, their foreheads tied with red cloths, surged out from the streets and alleys.

However, they did not fight the Huainan army; instead, they engaged in a bloody battle with the Chu army and the powerful family retainers loyal to Prince Yan. At this point, the already demoralized Chu army instantly collapsed.

Prince Yan seemed to have lost all his strength at this moment. In his daze, a Huainan army general fiercely plunged his sharp sword into Prince Yan’s chest.

Spitting a mouthful of blood, Prince Yan slowly sank into darkness.

Chapter 655

“Prince Yan is dead! Prince Yan is dead!”

A guard protecting Prince Yan shouted out, and the other guards immediately looked at Prince Yan, who lay in a pool of blood. At this moment, all the guards lost their will to fight, and they fled in disarray.

And after the guards collapsed, the soldiers also lost their will to fight. Now that Prince Yan was dead, who would still be willing to fight for him?

Soon, the news of Prince Yan's death spread throughout Yingzhou City with the scattered soldiers. Under the influence of this news, the Yan army fell into chaos.

Cui Shang'an keenly noticed the change in the Yan army. He immediately led his soldiers to launch a fierce attack. At this time, the already demoralized Yan army continuously retreated, and more and more Huainan army soldiers poured into the city.

While the Prince of Huainan attacked Yingzhou, Li San arrived in Bozhou. According to Xiao Ming's plan, the Fourth Prince should also die as Yingzhou City fell.

After meeting with the heads of the Tian and Ji families in Bozhou, Li San brought up the matter of killing the Fourth Prince.

"Kill the Fourth Prince!" Tian Wen said, shocked.

Ji Tong, the head of the Ji family, also showed a surprised expression. He said, "Commander Li, is this truly His Imperial Majesty's order?"

Li San's eyes darted around. Killing the Fourth Prince was naturally Xiao Ming's idea, but this matter could not be pinned on Xiao Ming. After all, fratricide was an unrighteous act, and in the future, it could even become a reason for attack.

So he said, "This matter can only be understood, not explicitly stated. However, if the two of you accomplish it, you will naturally please His Imperial Majesty. As for whether or not to do it, that's up to you two."

Tian Wen and Ji Tong exchanged glances. Both were intelligent men and understood Li San's meaning.

"In that case, Commander Li, please allow us to discuss it," Tian Wen said.

Li San nodded, "In that case, I won't disturb you two." With that, Li San turned and left.

At this point, Tian Wen said, "It seems this is His Imperial Majesty's intention, but His Imperial Majesty does not wish to bear the crime of fratricide."

"That's right. However, if we kill the Fourth Prince, and His Imperial Majesty turns against us later, our fate might not be good either."

"That's true, but if we please His Imperial Majesty this way, the status of our two families will also be secured," Tian Wen said with some anticipation.

Ji Tong pondered for a moment. He said, "However, I have a solution. Rashly killing the Fourth Prince is naturally a heinous crime, but if we charge the Fourth Prince with a crime, imprison him, and then he commits suicide in prison out of fear of punishment, wouldn't that have nothing to do with us?"

"That's right! Brother Ji is indeed brilliant! In that case, we will host a 'Hong Gate Banquet' for the Fourth Prince this noon," Tian Wen chuckled.

Ji Tong also smiled at the same time.

At noon, the Fourth Prince arrived with his guards as arranged. Tian Wen had prepared a banquet in his mansion, waiting for him and his personal generals. In the side rooms on both sides of the main hall, Ji Tong led his private forces, awaiting Tian Wen's signal of dropping a cup.

"Thank you for your kindness, Master Tian!" The Fourth Prince cupped his hands.

Tian Wen said kindly, "Your Royal Highness has been in Bozhou for over a year, and it is truly shameful that I have only now found time to invite Your Royal Highness and your generals for a banquet!"

"You're too kind, Master. It is rather I who doesn't understand the rules and didn't visit first!" The Fourth Prince sat down directly. He was very happy, as he was about to become the new King of Yan.

After a pause, the Fourth Prince asked, "Master Tian invited us here to discuss the governance of Bozhou. I wonder what you wish to discuss?"

Everyone took their seats. Tian Wen said solemnly, "A few days ago, common people complained to me that quite a few fertile lands were forcibly seized by Your Royal Highness and incorporated into imperial estates. Moreover, Your Royal Highness also privately levied taxes on them. I wonder how Your Royal Highness explains this matter?"

The Fourth Prince's expression instantly stiffened. The other household generals immediately fell silent, their faces filled with alarm.

He had indeed done this. To be frank, he didn't trust Prince Yan or these powerful families in Bozhou. So, taking advantage of driving away Prince Yan, he seized land and levied taxes to fill his own treasury for conscription.

After all, for him, without a trustworthy army, he would always be a puppet of these powerful families. However, the land he seized belonged to King of Yan and the Crown Prince of Yan, as well as officials who had fled with them.

He had originally thought that the Tian family and the Ji family would turn a blind eye, but he never expected Tian Wen to bring this up now.

His eyes darted around, and the Fourth Prince said with a forced smile, "What do you mean, Master?"

"What do I mean? Your Royal Highness, the matter of Prince Yan has not yet been settled. It's unknown whether you will be the King of Yan. At this time, it's inappropriate for Your Royal Highness to seize land. After all, the land now rightfully belongs to His Imperial Majesty. As the Governor of Bozhou, I have no choice but to intervene."

“Governor of Bozhou? Master, you jest. Since when did you become the Governor?” The Fourth Prince sneered repeatedly.

Tian Wen then took out the imperial decree that Li San had brought. He said, “This is an imperial decree. His Imperial Majesty has already appointed me as the Governor of Bozhou. As the Governor of Bozhou, I am responsible for managing His Imperial Majesty’s imperial property.”

The Fourth Prince was greatly alarmed. His eyes narrowed. Xiao Ming had enfeoffed Tian Wen but ignored him. He suddenly had a bad feeling in his heart, so he said, “Governor Tian, everything requires evidence. You can’t just convict me based on the nonsense of a few unruly common people!”

Tian Wen said coldly, “Then I will make you truly convinced. Men, bring the ledgers!”

As Tian Wen’s words fell, the door of the side room suddenly opened. Ji Tong, leading his private forces, rushed out and surrounded the Fourth Prince and his generals.

This scene made the Fourth Prince and his generals’ faces turn pale. He vaguely understood something. He sneered, “Xiao Ming is truly cunning. He has endured for so long, and now he is finally going to make his move on me.”

“Hmph, here’s the ledger that records all your crimes!” Tian Wen pointed to the ledger in his hand. “What else do you have to say?”

How could the Fourth Prince willingly surrender? Now that he had fallen into Tian Wen’s trap, he still maintained his composure: “Governor Tian, don’t forget, we are all ants on the same rope. Do you think His Imperial Majesty will spare you in the future? This imperial edict can make you Governor today, and

take your life tomorrow. If that's the case, why bother? If you and I work together, this state of Yan will still be ours to command. At that time, wealth and glory will naturally be enjoyed endlessly."

"Ridiculous! Do you think your privately recruited forces can be a match for His Imperial Majesty? You're playing a good game, but how could we collude with the likes of you!" Tian Wen said at this point, "Fourth Prince, your ambition is evident. Blame it on your greed. Not only do we know about this private recruitment of soldiers, but His Imperial Majesty also knows it perfectly well."

With that, Ji Tong immediately had his private forces detain the Fourth Prince and his entourage and imprison them in the dungeon.

The next day, Li San received news that the Fourth Prince had committed suicide in prison out of fear of punishment.

At this, he immediately dispatched the Secret Guard to the dungeon to confirm. Indeed, as Tian Wen had said, he sneered twice. Tian Wen and Ji Tong were indeed old foxes.

Now that the Fourth Prince was dead, they only needed to eliminate Prince Yan and his son, and Yan would be pacified.

Chapter 656

Night fell, and the Prince of Huainan and Cui Shang'an halted their assault.

After Prince Yan was killed in the chaotic battle, the Yan army fell into disarray. They took the opportunity to attack the city, but unexpectedly, the originally smooth battle was turned around again by Cui Cheng's appearance.

This time, to deal with them, Prince Yan had forcibly conscripted many able-bodied men. The relatively small Yingzhou actually held 250,000 people.

After a fierce battle, they were once again driven out of the city.

‘This Cui Cheng indeed has some ability. However, during the day today, most of the Yan army already fled. Tonight, probably even more soldiers will flee. Precisely because of this, the Yan army will inevitably expend their energy on stopping deserters, and won’t think we would take advantage of this night to launch a surprise attack.’

Cui Shang’an nodded. He had already prepared 10,000 elite troops for a night raid on the Yingzhou Grand Camp. At midnight, he led his soldiers quietly into Yingzhou City through the damaged city walls.

As the Prince of Huainan guessed, as night fell, more and more soldiers fled from the Yan army’s grand camp. The patrolling soldiers were constantly distracted by the escaping soldiers.

In the darkness, the patrolmen could not distinguish between deserters and enemy troops. In this situation, Cui Shang’an quickly led his soldiers to the Yingzhou Grand Camp.

“Light the arrows,” At this time, the Yingzhou Grand Camp was brightly lit. Then Cui Shang’an gave the order.

Upon receiving the order, a dozen torches lit up. Soldiers took arrows with oil-cloth wrapped tips, lit them one by one on the torches, and drew their bows.

“Fire!”

At Cui Shang'an's command, a sky full of flaming arrows flew towards the Yan army's grand camp. The arrows accurately landed on the Yan army's tents. These tents, sewn from cotton cloth, ignited instantly, and the fire spread rapidly, illuminating the Yan army's grand camp brightly.

The towering flames illuminated the night sky. At this moment, the Prince of Huainan led the soldiers outside the city and immediately charged into the city.

Cui Shang'an's objective was merely to disrupt the Yingzhou Grand Camp and cause chaos.

The Yan army's grand camp fell into chaos. At this moment, the Prince of Huainan stood up and shouted, “Kill!”

“Kill!” His response was the furious shouts of the Huainan soldiers. They charged into Yingzhou City like ferocious tigers descending from the mountains.

A Yan army soldier woke up from his sleep. Amidst the raging flames, he rushed out of his tent in terror, without even time to put on his clothes. But what greeted him were Huainan army soldiers covering his entire body. Before he could even shout, he felt a chill in his chest, then he watched his own blood spurt from his chest. Before dying, extreme fear made him let out one last shriek.

The Huainan army charged into the grand camp like tigers entering a flock of sheep. The Yan army soldiers, as soon as they rushed out of their tents, died under their swords and sabers. Some were even stabbed through the heart in their sleep.

Chaos quickly spread throughout the Yan army's grand camp. The entire camp was filled with the stench of death. Cui Cheng, protected by his personal guards, rallied his soldiers. He looked at the flaming camp, his body even colder than winter blades. A voice told him that the Yan army was completely finished this time. The Huainan army soldiers, clad in armor, slaughtered them like cattle and sheep, leaving behind only cold corpses wherever they went. He had organized several attacks, but the terrified soldiers offered no resistance and were quickly disintegrated.

During the day, he had been able to repel the Huainan army because his troops had no idea that Prince Yan had died in battle. Now, all the soldiers knew, and the Yan army's morale had plummeted to rock bottom.

"Your Highness, let's go! If we don't leave now, it will be too late!" a general said, covering his arm. At this moment, his arm was bleeding from a cut inflicted by a soldier. If not for a few Yan soldiers who had timely helped him resist, he would have likely lost his life.

Cui Cheng looked at the flaming grand camp, stomped his foot fiercely, and swung onto his horse, fleeing towards the west gate under the escort of dozens of riders.

When Cui Shang'an attacked, the Prince of Huainan, according to plan, led his soldiers to capture the Yan army's west gate. In the darkness, they still used cannons. Although the Prince of Huainan had witnessed the power of firearms, he never expected such immense destructive power in warfare. The Yan army soldiers guarding the gate, numbering at least three to four thousand, were all defeated by a few volleys of cannon fire.

After taking the West Gate, the Prince of Huainan said to a cavalry general beside him, "General Qi, the pursuit of the routed soldiers is entrusted to you."

“Yes, Your Highness!” he then shouted, “Soldiers, it’s time to reap the enemy’s heads! Charge!”

“Kill!” The soldiers’ morale was high.

The thunderous sound of hooves pounded like war drums. Hearing this sound, the Yan army soldiers completely lost the will to fight and fled in disarray. More often, they threw down their weapons and surrendered to the Huainan army.

When the Prince of Huainan and Cui Shang’an entered the camp, they encountered almost no resistance along the way. Yan army soldiers were kneeling everywhere.

Leading the cavalry to dismantle the last resisting forces of the Yan army, the Huainan army soldiers did not stop but lit torches and pursued westward directly. They had already learned that Cui Cheng had fled westward.

However, the Prince of Huainan was not in a hurry, because the west city gate had already been taken by them, and other city gates were also successively taken. Now Cui Cheng had nowhere to escape.

So, he simply ordered his soldiers to clear the battlefield. Because of the surprise attack, most of the Yan army soldiers had not mounted their horses, and a large number of warhorses were tied in the stables, allowing him to gain a great advantage.

Besides warhorses, he also captured many common people from the Yan army. He ordered that those common people who did not resist should not be killed. This time, over 50,000 common people were

captured, along with nearly 80,000 surrendered and captured soldiers, making a total of 130,000 Yan people taken prisoner.

The clearing of the battlefield continued until the next morning. At this time, the Huainan army's cavalry returned, with General Qi, their leader, holding Cui Cheng's head.

Upon reaching the Prince of Huainan, General Qi dismounted and threw Cui Cheng's head onto the ground. He said, "Your Highness, Cui Cheng refused to surrender and has been killed by this subordinate."

The Prince of Huainan nodded. Yan had always oppressed Huainan, so he deeply resented Prince Yan. This attack on Yan was also in line with the will of the people.

Now Prince Yan was dead, and Cui Cheng was also dead. However, he suddenly thought of a question and said, "I remember Cui Cheng also had a younger brother, Cui Hao. Where is he?"

Cui Shang'an then said, "Imperial Father, after Cui Cheng learned of Cui Hao's rebellion, he led his troops and slaughtered the powerful families involved in the rebellion. This Cui Hao was killed by him."

"Is that so? So, the Prince Yan's lineage is completely cut off." The Prince of Huainan sighed. "Yan is destroyed."

Chapter 657

It was already autumn, and compared to the intense heat of midsummer, Qingzhou City was now a bit cooler than a few days ago.

Five days ago, after inspecting the Imperial Palace, Xiao Ming put the matter of the newspaper office on the agenda.

This newspaper office, known as media in later generations, besides possessing top-down supervisory power, had the most important role of guiding public opinion.

After the newspaper office was established, he utilized its characteristics to consolidate his power.

However, Qingzhou was becoming increasingly prosperous, and daily events multiplied. The limited space of one newspaper was far from sufficient to meet Qingzhou's current needs.

Considering this reason, he ultimately decided to increase the number of newspaper offices.

However, regardless of whether these newly established newspaper offices were officially run or privately run, the newspapers would still need to be censored before publication, rather than allowing them to report whatever they pleased.

Coming from a later era, Xiao Ming deeply understood that media was a double-edged sword. If he did not occupy this ground, it would eventually be occupied by his enemies.

Therefore, whether officially or privately run, the newspaper had to bear the "imperial" surname, and in matters of principle, it could not go against his will.

"Your Imperial Majesty, if more newspaper offices are established, how should the reporters previously sent to various prefectures and counties be handled?"

In the council hall, Fan Zeng said loudly. He was now wearing a red official robe and held a fourth-rank position.

After ascending the throne, Xiao Ming naturally greatly promoted his old subordinates. Fan Zeng was no exception; he gave him the position of Chief Propagandist.

As the name implied, the Chief Propagandist's duty was to be responsible for the court's internal and external propaganda, and also included the future censorship of other newspaper offices and newspapers.

After a moment of thought, Xiao Ming said, "The true duty of a reporter is to record the sufferings of the common people, not to read newspapers. After the court is dismissed, you will incorporate all these newspaper readers into the Ministry of Propaganda. Their duties will remain unchanged, but they will no longer have any connection with the newspaper office. From then on, propaganda belongs to propaganda, and reporters only act as reporters."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty." Fan Zeng was delighted.

This establishment of additional newspaper offices was undoubtedly a happy event for him. Previously, he only managed one newspaper office, but now he could manage five.

Moreover, his current status had clearly moved beyond the newspaper office, making him a crucial institution of the court.

Now that Xiao Ming had incorporated the scholars who read newspapers into the court, he had many more people at his disposal.

Pang Yukun and Fei Ji had no concept of this newspaper office. The two could not yet understand what role the Ministry of Propaganda would play in the future, so they remained silent regarding Xiao Ming's idea of establishing more newspaper offices.

Fan Zeng retreated to his rank. At this moment, Niu Ben stepped forward and said loudly, "Your Imperial Majesty, the battle report from Yingzhou City has arrived from the Prince of Huainan. Prince Yan and his eldest son Cui Cheng have both fallen in battle, and his second son Cui Hao has also been killed. The Prince Yan's lineage is extinguished."

As soon as Niu Ben spoke, whispers filled the council hall, and an atmosphere of ecstasy enveloped the hall.

"Congratulations, Your Imperial Majesty! From now on, the Great Yu Empire will no longer suffer from the menace of Yan," Pang Yukun said, his expression excited.

Fei Ji also said, "Yan is destroyed. Your Imperial Majesty is one step closer to uniting the Great Yu Empire. Now, only Prince Liang and Prince Zhao need to be eliminated, and the northern territories will be pacified."

Xiao Ming laughed heartily at this moment. In fact, he had already received this news in advance. Not only was Prince Yan's lineage extinguished, but the Fourth Prince had also died in prison. Now Yan was without a leader, just waiting for him to send officials to govern.

“Prince Yan is dead. From now on, there will be no more Yan. Chief Grand Secretary Pang, Elder Fei Ji, you two draw up a list of officials to be sent to Yan. After I review it, I will have these officials take office in the prefectures and counties.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty,” the two bowed in unison.

After a pause, Xiao Ming looked at Niu Ben again. He said, “Yan is destroyed. How much longer will Liang take?”

Niu Ben detected a hint of displeasure in Xiao Ming’s tone. The Prince of Huainan had successfully taken Yingzhou City, yet the state’s army still hadn’t taken Liang Capital. This was indeed somewhat inexcusable.

However, there was indeed a reason why Lu Fei and the others had been so slow to eliminate Yan. Niu Ben said, “Your Imperial Majesty, Lu Fei and Luo Hong led 50,000 soldiers who should have reached Liang Capital, but a barbarian cavalry unit emerged on the way to Qingzhou.”

“Barbarian cavalry?” Xiao Ming frowned.

At the same time, the atmosphere in the council hall became grim. The barbarians, the northern enemies who made Great Yu Empire officials tremble upon hearing their name, had finally been unable to restrain themselves.

The expressions of the officials were all noted by Xiao Ming. The faces of the officials from Chang’an all showed fear, while the officials led by Pang Yukun looked calm.

Niu Ben continued, "This subordinate also just received news from Lu Fei that this barbarian cavalry unit numbers 50,000. They are not engaging Lu Fei head-on, but instead constantly attacking the supply lines, forcing Lu Fei to send a large number of troops to protect provisions, delaying the attack on Qingzhou."

"Fifty thousand people?" Xiao Ming frowned. "The cavalry the barbarians dispatched to Prince Zhao was 50,000. How can this be such a coincidence?"

"Reporting to Your Imperial Majesty, this cavalry unit was indeed dispatched by the barbarians to Prince Zhao. According to captives captured by Lu Fei, under the barbarians' mediation, Prince Zhao and Prince Liang have now put aside their past grievances and intend to combine their forces to jointly counter our attack."

Xiao Ming breathed a sigh of relief. He said, "Wang Xuan has relayed news that the barbarians have dispatched troops to assist Goryeo in resisting Japan, and are currently unable to move south. This time, the barbarians did not send other cavalry. Their dispatch of 50,000 cavalry to cut off our supply lines is merely to buy time, as they are actually unable to send a large army to reinforce. General Niu, seize this opportunity to annihilate Liang and Zhao in one fell swoop! Do not delay any longer, for once the barbarians withdraw from Goryeo and launch a major southward invasion, the nation will have no peace!"

Niu Ben suddenly felt the burden on his shoulders grow heavier. After the crushing defeat of the three princes' allied forces, Xiao Ming's strategy changed accordingly.

Compared to his previous conservatism, Xiao Ming's military strategy was now more aggressive. The formidable combat power of the state army made him very confident, and he believed that unifying the north was no longer a problem.

And after unifying the north, he could block the barbarians outside the Great Wall, implementing a strategy of defending against enemies beyond the national gate.

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, I will immediately proceed to Liang Capital and eliminate Prince Liang.” Niu Ben said with cupped fists.

Nodding gently, Xiao Ming scanned the entire court of civil and military officials. Seeing no one else step forward, he subtly signaled Qian Dafu.

Qian Dafu immediately shouted, “If you have anything to report, do so early. Otherwise, the court is dismissed!”

All the courtiers had nothing to report and were preparing to disperse. At this moment, Lin Wentao, in a corner of the council hall, suddenly woke up as if from a dream. He said urgently, “Your Imperial Majesty, I have something to report.”

Lin Wentao’s voice immediately attracted everyone’s attention, because the officials all knew that many strange things in Qingzhou originated from Lin Wentao.

Xiao Ming also showed an interested expression. He said, “What does my dear minister wish to report?”

“Your Imperial Majesty, I have recently manufactured a steam locomotive according to Your Imperial Majesty’s instructions. I wonder if Your Imperial Majesty would like to observe it?”

