

## **I. Dynasty 681**

### Chapter 681

The soldiers marched in neat steps into Tong Pass.

Inside the pass, Sun Lirong had already descended from the city wall. Looking at the well-disciplined soldiers led by Chen Guodong, Sun Lirong suddenly felt a strange sensation.

However, this strange feeling was quickly replaced by a desire for silver.

“General Chen, Prince Zhao will surely reward you for bringing him so much silver!” Sun Lirong laughed heartily, but in his heart, he was thinking about how to seize these silver.

Chen Guodong and Ye Qingyun had already entered the pass. Chen Guodong still wore a fawning smile, while a cold glint flashed in Ye Qingyun’s eyes.

The Qingzhou soldiers who accompanied him this time were all elite veterans. Although there were only five thousand of them, it was enough to capture the city gate.

Sun Lirong had not yet realized the approaching danger. He exchanged pleasantries with Chen Guodong as they walked to the front of the boxes.

Just as Sun Lirong reached out to open a box, Ye Qingyun suddenly struck, drawing the ceremonial sword from his waist and stabbing it into Sun Lirong’s heart from behind.

The stab was fatal. Sun Lirong fell to the ground without even a scream. The other Zhao army soldiers were greatly alarmed and rushed towards Ye Qingyun and Chen Guodong.

“Kill!”

The Qingzhou army soldiers who had entered the city simultaneously charged at the Zhao army soldiers. Although they had been killing enemies with firearms, their close-combat skills had never fallen behind.

Moreover, the tempering of war made them experienced. Each move was devoid of useless flourishes, and every strike was fatal.

Sun Lirong’s death caused some confusion among the soldiers at the city gate. After clashing with the Qingzhou army, they were pushed back repeatedly.

The Zhao army soldiers were terrified and continuously retreated into the pass.

Just then, Ye Qingyun lit a flare. With a loud bang, colorful flames burst into the sky.

It was almost dusk. In a forest about five li from Tong Pass, Niu Ben saw the fireworks from the direction of Tong Pass.

At this moment, he said to Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu, “You two lead the cavalry to reinforce immediately! I will follow with the main army!”

“Yes, General.”

Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu said, and the two rode their horses, leading the cavalry towards Tong Pass.

Niu Ben then led the main army to follow closely behind.

When he arrived, Ye Qingyun had successfully controlled the city gate and city walls, while Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu, leveraging the advantage of their cavalry, quickly controlled the other city gates.

“General, Sun Lirong, the defender of Tong Pass, is dead. The garrison in the city is leaderless and no match for us. They have already been routed,” Ye Qingyun said.

Niu Ben nodded. The cavalry led by Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu outnumbered the defenders, so there was no reason why they couldn’t capture it.

He ordered Lu Fei to lead soldiers into the city to further eliminate the remaining Zhao army in the pass. At the same time, he said to the Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran, “Your Highness, General Chen, with Tong Pass taken, Chang’an is right before us. I hope you two can lend your full support to capture Chang’an in one fell swoop.”

The Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran now held the Western Expeditionary Army in high esteem. In their eyes, this was truly an elite force.

The two bowed to Niu Ben and said in unison, "Just give the orders, General."

Niu Ben nodded. The reason Tong Pass was so easily captured this time was partly due to their successful plan, but the most important factor was the problem with the Tong Pass garrison.

Previously, Tong Pass could garrison at least a hundred thousand soldiers, but now, the vast Tong Pass only had thirty thousand soldiers.

First Hulao Pass, then Tong Pass, Prince Zhao's weakness was apparent to him. Now was the opportunity to annihilate Prince Zhao in one fell swoop.

As the large army entered the city, the remaining garrison within the city was quickly cleared out. That night, Niu Ben once again gathered his generals to formulate a plan to attack Chang'an.

Unlike before, Niu Ben's attack plan this time was quite bold. He ordered Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu to lead the cavalry directly to Chang'an first.

If Chang'an's defenses were weak, they were to seize the opportunity to harass. At the same time, he instructed Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu to establish contact with the powerful families in Chang'an. At this point, if these powerful families still couldn't see the situation clearly, it could only mean they were too foolish.

However, in Niu Ben's opinion, as soon as Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu's cavalry arrived, it would be the final straw that broke Prince Zhao's back.

Because at that time, the powerful families in Chang'an would inevitably side with them to deal with this rebel.

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Chang'an.

The sudden increase in soldiers on the streets made the common people uneasy. In the past month, the peaceful atmosphere in Chang'an had gradually become somewhat eerie.

And the news of Luoyang City being plundered by the Zhao army made them even more worried, fearing they would suffer the same fate as the people of Luoyang.

"Father King, the Qi army is approaching fiercely. I always feel that Chang'an is not a place to stay long. Why don't we plunder the wealth and take the common people back?"

In the imperial palace study, Zhao Yuanliang advised.

Prince Zhao caressed the exquisite ceramics in the study with infatuation. These were official kiln porcelains that only an emperor could enjoy, and now he had to abandon all this. He was unwilling.

“Hmph, if it weren’t for Deng Yuan and Wang Xi’s incompetence, why would I be in such a sorry state now!” Prince Zhao roared in anger.

Zhao Yuanliang naturally completely shifted the blame for the defeat at Juyong Pass. In fact, he was the commanding general of the Battle of Juyong Pass.

But he was greedy for life and afraid of death, never even going to the battlefield, staying in Yuanzhou the whole time.

Although he hated Xiao Ming intensely, he felt a certain fear towards Xiao Ming’s army in his heart. His previous trip to Qingzhou left him with lingering trepidation.

“Father King is absolutely right. But Wang Xi being imprisoned is fine; this Deng Yuan still has some use. I hope Father King reconsiders.”

Prince Zhao nodded, “You have some logic there. Let Deng Yuan remain in the army to atone for his sins with meritorious service.”

Zhao Yuanliang breathed a slight sigh of relief. He continued, “But is Father King still planning to stay in Chang’an? This is not a place to stay long, after all.”

Prince Zhao already had the intention to evacuate Chang’an. The imperial treasury of Chang’an had been completely plundered by him. Besides this imperial palace, there was nothing left for him to cling to.

However, a glimmer of hope still lingered in his heart. If King Qi no longer advanced westward, he might not have to withdraw from here. After all, who would willingly leave this prosperous place?

“Now we just await news from Tong Pass. But you should also prepare. Once the news is unfavorable, immediately burn Chang’an and forcibly relocate the common people to Yuanzhou.” A ruthless glint flashed in Prince Zhao’s eyes.

He cared nothing for the rise and fall of the Great Yu Empire. In his eyes, there was only his own royal power. For this, he could destroy everything, and betray everything.

“Yes, Father King, I will go and prepare now.” Zhao Yuanliang rejoiced inwardly. Like Prince Zhao, even if he couldn’t obtain the imperial power of the Great Yu Empire, he still wanted to enjoy wealth and glory in his own feudal state.

After a pause, he suddenly remembered something and asked, “Father King, what about the Thirteenth Prince?”

“Let the Thirteenth Prince be left for Xiao Ming. I’d like to see how he treats a two-year-old prince,” Prince Zhao sneered.

Zhao Yuanliang chuckled simultaneously. Then he bowed and left the imperial palace. However, his and Prince Zhao’s triumph came to an abrupt halt the next day.

Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu led a large cavalry force and appeared outside Chang'an City.

## Chapter 682

"Are these troops outside the city really Xiao Ming's?"

In the Ge Residence in Chang'an City, Ge Yiren eagerly asked his butler.

"Master, it's absolutely true. Your humble servant heard it firsthand from the commanding general. This cavalry unit, upon reaching the outskirts of Chang'an, declared themselves from Qingzhou and delivered General Niu's calling cards to many prominent families outside the city," the butler said.

Ge Yiren's expression was complex upon hearing this. He said, "So, Tong Pass has fallen then."

Beside Ge Yiren were two other people, Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang. Upon learning that cavalry had appeared outside Chang'an, the two had come to Ge Yiren's home to discuss countermeasures.

"Lord Ge, Prince Zhao suffered a great defeat in the Battle of Juyong Pass. The elite forces Prince Zhao lost in that battle are gone. Prince Zhao is now at the end of his rope. Now that Xiao Ming's troops have arrived, it means Niu Ben has successively captured Hulao Pass and Tong Pass. If we still remain on the sidelines at this moment, by the time Niu Ben takes Chang'an, we will all be traitors who have sided with the enemy," Yu Zhiyong said, somewhat anxious.

Ni Kuang said, "That's right. Besides, Prince Zhao has gone mad. He plundered Luoyang and drove the common people into the Zhao territory, and now he has similar intentions for Chang'an. Lord Ge, Chang'an is the foundation of our powerful families. If it falls, you and I will be like homeless dogs."



Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang were anxious, but Ge Yiren was not at all, because he had already sent a secret letter to Niu Ben during the Battle of Juyong Pass.

However, this was not enough for him. To integrate into Xiao Ming's imperial court in the future, he had to come with merits. So he said, "I understand your intentions. Prince Zhao is wicked and has incurred the wrath of heaven and the resentment of the people. How can we continue to serve such a tyrant? We should join forces with the current Emperor to justly punish him."

Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang immediately became excited. This was the first time Ge Yiren had directly stated his intention to oppose Prince Zhao.

Ge Yiren glanced at the two and continued, "There's no time to lose. Let's each gather our family's private armies and at the same time contact our clan members in the Imperial Guards to instigate an uprising."

"Lord Ge, if that's the case, we will go back and make preparations." The two cupped their hands and turned to leave.

Watching the two depart, Ge Yiren said to the butler, "Immediately gather the private armies that have infiltrated the city and have them await my command to open the city gates at any time."

"Yes, Master." The butler's expression was solemn. These private armies were arranged by their Ge family to be in the city. If exposed, their Ge family would have no way out.

While the officials each sought a way out for themselves, news of the cavalry also reached Prince Zhao, startling him greatly.

“Tong Pass has fallen! Why didn’t Sun Lirong send anyone to deliver news?” Prince Zhao paced back and forth. The sudden appearance of this cavalry completely disrupted his plans.

Zhao Yuanliang said, “Father King, I’m afraid Sun Lirong has either surrendered or died.”

“At crucial moments, not a single one of them is useful.”

Prince Zhao furiously knocked over the memorial in front of him. In the past two years, he had truly experienced the feeling of holding great power.

But now, all of it was about to leave him. He was truly unwilling.

Xiao Ming’s cavalry was already outside the city, and the musketeers would arrive sequentially. He simply could not win against an allied army of over two hundred thousand.

But it was too late for him to withdraw from Chang’an now. There were no more than thirty thousand trustworthy soldiers in Chang’an City.

This number of soldiers was clearly no match for this cavalry unit.

Zhao Yuanliang was also thinking about this problem. He said, "Father King, let's retreat. It's too late if we don't leave now."

Prince Zhao, having long experience on the battlefield, was much calmer than Zhao Yuanliang. In this situation, there was only one path left: desperate resistance. They simply could not escape.

He believed that those who had once humbly bowed to him were now sharpening their knives, ready to act against him. A ruthless glint flashed in his eyes. He said to Zhao Yuanliang, "There's no escaping. But I will not leave a prosperous Chang'an for Xiao Ming. Immediately gather the army and massacre the city."

"Massacre the city!" Zhao Yuanliang was horrified. He said in disbelief, "Father King, this..."

"Yuanliang, Xiao Ming will not spare us. Our State of Zhao is about to be annihilated," Prince Zhao's voice contained a hint of desolation.

Zhao Yuanliang felt a pang of sadness. How glorious he had been in the past two years, with countless gold and silver treasures, and endless beautiful women. Now, all of this was about to be stripped away.

Like Prince Zhao, in his despair, a surge of madness abruptly welled up in Zhao Yuanliang's heart. "Xiao Ming, all you will get is scorched earth."

He nodded heavily, and Zhao Yuanliang turned to leave. Immediately after, desperate screams suddenly echoed from within the imperial palace.

Prince Zhao's Imperial Guards, at this moment, transformed from protectors of the imperial palace into destroyers. Receiving orders, the guards raised their butcher knives against the eunuchs and palace maids within the palace.

The once beautiful and peaceful imperial palace suddenly turned into a Shura hell, with soldiers burning, killing, and looting.

At the same time, another unit of the Imperial Guards entered the city. They raised their butcher knives against the common people, killing anyone they saw, including some officials and common people.

Whenever they massacred a civilian house, they would set it on fire, and for a time, beacons of smoke rose from all over Chang'an City.

The Zhao army's atrocities quickly spread throughout the city. The common people and officials in Chang'an City fled in all directions in terror, but some officials remained very calm.

They immediately assembled their private armies in the city, distributed weapons and armor to them, and headed directly towards the city gates.

Now, the only force that could stop Prince Zhao was the army outside the city.

The abnormality in Chang'an City also attracted the attention of Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu. The rising plumes of smoke puzzled them greatly.

“What’s going on?” Qi Guangyi asked.

At this time, eight thousand powerful family private armies had already gathered around them. These private armies were supported by prominent families outside the city.

As Niu Ben had said, when they arrived outside Chang’an, these powerful families were quite sensible, completely accepting their demand to jointly suppress Prince Zhao.

Bai Mu said, “The smoke is rising one after another. I’m afraid there’s a big problem in Chang’an City.”

Qi Guangyi’s eyes darted around. He said, “Could it be that the powerful family’s private armies inside the city have started fighting Prince Zhao first?”

“That shouldn’t be the case. Fighting is fighting, but this looks like they’re burning houses. Could it be that Prince Zhao is massacring the city!” Bai Mu exclaimed in surprise.

Qi Guangyi had just thought of this. He said, “It’s highly possible. Prince Zhao has always been cruel. He’s capable of doing this.”

After a pause, he said, “We can’t wait any longer. If we wait, Chang’an City might become a ruin.”

Bai Mu looked at the army composed of powerful family members. At this moment, a powerful family member said, "Generals, don't worry. My clan leader has already ambushed troops within the city. This time, they will surely open the city gates to meet us."

No sooner had his voice fallen than a scout cavalryman rode up on horseback and said, "General Qi, Chang'an's North Gate has opened."

Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu were overjoyed. They immediately led the cavalry towards Chang'an City. This was a great opportunity to gain merit.

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Flames and thick smoke obscured the sky over Chang'an.

Screams, wails, and desperate shouts of those on the verge of death converged to form the background music of Chang'an City at this moment.

The barbarity of human nature was utterly displayed by the Zhao army soldiers at this moment. In their eyes, the common people of Chang'an were no longer human, but pigs and sheep to be butchered at will.

"Kill!" Zhao army soldiers burst out of one civilian neighborhood and plunged into another. The streets were littered with bloody footprints left by Zhao army soldiers.

Old people and children on the streets, before they could escape, were hacked down by Zhao army soldiers. From dark corners, hysterical cries of women intermittently pierced the air.

A terrifying atmosphere enveloped Chang'an City. However, the wolf-like Zhao army, as they continued their massacre towards the South City, encountered resistance.

Some powerful family private armies suddenly appeared on the streets and engaged them in battle.

This situation curbed the Zhao army soldiers' massacre. They continuously suffered casualties as they advanced.

"Prince Zhao conspired against the late Emperor, framed the former Crown Prince, and coerced Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince. Such a rebel can be killed by anyone! Common people, Prince Zhao is now attempting to massacre the city! If you do not resist now, none of you will survive! Join us in killing the enemy!"

Ge Yiren was greatly alarmed upon learning that the Zhao army was massacring the city. He understood that Prince Zhao had completely gone mad.

Decisively, he immediately sent a portion of his private army to the North City to seize the city gate. At the same time, he, along with Ni Kuang and Yu Zhiyong, led another portion of the private army to organize the common people and prevent the Zhao army's massacre of Chang'an.

"Kill this dog villain!"

With Ge Yiren leading, a portion of the leaderless common people were organized. Facing death, these common people were unwilling to simply surrender.

“Kill Prince Zhao! Uphold the imperial family!”

“Kill Prince Zhao! Uphold the imperial family!”

“ ... ”

The common people were filled with righteous indignation. Amidst their shouts, they charged towards the Zhao army soldiers who had raised their butcher knives against them.

However, the powerful family private armies and common people, being less experienced than the seasoned Zhao army soldiers, were steadily pushed back after a round of fighting.

Ge Yiren and the other two observed this scene. This situation was within their expectations. However, if they did not resist, they would surely die.

Between waiting to be killed and being killed after resisting, the three chose the latter.



The resisting common people and powerful family private armies dwindled with each battle. Ge Yiren felt anxious. He kept looking towards the North Gate.

Just as their resistance was about to collapse, a sudden sound of horses' hooves, like thunder, approached them.

When that sound resonated as if in his ear, Ge Yiren saw cavalry clad in silver-white cuirasses, riding warhorses.

Each of these cavalymen and their horses were strong and robust. The sabers made of fine steel in their hands gleamed with a cold light. In an instant, these cavalymen directly charged from Vermillion Bird Avenue into the Zhao army soldiers who were engaged in the massacre.

The Zhao army, engrossed in their slaughter, had no time to react. When they turned around, they only saw sabers cutting down upon them.

The sounds of battle erupted. The Zhao army, upon contact with the cavalry, was cut through the middle by the Qingzhou cavalry, like water encountering hard stone.

A portion of the Zhao army believed these were still the private armies of powerful families. With contempt in their hearts, they charged towards these cavalymen.

However, in the instant of engagement, they realized this was a fiercer army than themselves. These cavalymen were extremely skilled in handling horses, and even more skilled in killing enemies.

The cavalry, even when plunging into crowds, could still protect and coordinate with each other. What terrified them most was the ferocity of this cavalry.

Before them, they instantly became lambs to be slaughtered.

The most valuable thing on a battlefield was morale. Facing the cowardly common people, these Zhao army soldiers' morale was high, and the pleasure brought by plunder made them exceptionally ferocious.

However, an army with a strong will was something they could not compare to.

More and more cavalry poured in from the North City. The Zhao army soldiers, who had been massacring common people, were driven by the cavalry and fled towards the South City.

After the cavalry had established a foothold, powerful family private armies from outside the city arrived, their numbers continuously increasing. They cooperated with the cavalry in the charge.

A weight lifted from Ge Yiren's heart upon seeing these cavalry. He then found Qi Guangyi.

"General, I am Ge Yiren." Upon reaching Qi Guangyi, Ge Yiren directly stated his name.

Qi Guangyi was just about to head to the imperial palace to capture Prince Zhao. Hearing this name, he stopped and said, "Are you the Ge Yiren who sent us the intelligence?"

Ge Yiren was overjoyed. He nodded vigorously, "Precisely."

Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang exchanged glances. Only then did they realize that this Ge Yiren was a sly old fox, who had already secretly established contact with King Qi's army.

Qi Guangyi's expression softened. He said, "So it is Lord Ge. General Niu asked me to greet you when I saw you."

"General Niu is truly too polite," Ge Yiren laughed aloud.

After exchanging pleasantries, Qi Guangyi directly asked, "Lord Ge, how many of Prince Zhao's troops are there in the city?"

"General, there are only sixty thousand of Prince Zhao's troops in the city. Most of Prince Zhao's troops have gone to Yuanzhou, but they have been defeated at Juyong Pass. Besides Prince Zhao's troops, there are also fifty thousand Imperial Guards in the city. These Imperial Guards rebelled with Prince Zhao when the late Emperor was alive," Ge Yiren said.

"One hundred and ten thousand people."

Qi Guangyi frowned. They had brought a total of forty thousand men this time. If the Zhao army recovered and launched another attack, they might not be able to withstand it.

Seemingly discerning Qi Guangyi's worry, Ge Yiren said, "General Qi, I am not without talent. I am willing to go to the Imperial Guards' camp to persuade them to surrender, provided the General can spare their lives."

Qi Guangyi was overjoyed upon hearing this. He said, "If that is the case, when the General arrives, I will surely ask for merit for Lord Ge."

Ge Yiren grew even happier. He continued, "I, your old servant, hold considerable prestige among the powerful families in Chang'an. At this time, I can gather some more helpers for the General."

Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang then said eagerly, "General, we too can gather our private armies to fight for the General."

The smile in Qi Guangyi's eyes deepened. He knew that these people, seeing Prince Zhao's power waning, were eager to switch allegiance and gain merit.

Now that Prince Zhao was within reach, as long as Prince Zhao was eliminated, the north would be unified from then on. Granting these people some merit was no big deal.

He said, "Then I shall rely on the three of you to assist me in suppressing the rebellion."

The three bowed. Ge Yiren went to the Imperial Guards' camp, while Yu Zhiyong and Ni Kuang went to rally their private armies.

At this juncture, more and more powerful families learned that Xiao Ming's army had arrived. They all brought their private armies to assist in the battle.

The fighting continued from noon until evening. By early morning the next day, the powerful family private armies who came to assist had reached twenty-five thousand men, and Ge Yiren also brought news of the Imperial Guards' surrender.

Qi Guangyi was not in a hurry to attack now. He ordered his men to surround the city gate, waiting only for Niu Ben to arrive.

#### Chapter 683

As dawn broke, soldiers in dark green military uniforms carrying flintlock guns appeared on the official road outside Chang'an City.

Having learned that Prince Zhao was trapped in Chang'an, Niu Ben immediately led his army on a forced march overnight, finally arriving outside Chang'an City this morning.

"Chang'an."

Luo Hong and Luo Xin were moved to tears when they saw Chang'an City. This was their birthplace, and where they had lived for over twenty years.

They recalled having to evacuate Chang'an and seek refuge in Qingzhou two years ago. Now, two years later, they stood before Chang'an City once more. However, unlike their distressed state the first time, they were returning as victors this time.

"General, the remaining Prince Zhao soldiers in the inner palace are still resisting with artillery. Your arrival is all that's needed; we can just use artillery to blast open the inner palace." Qi Guangyi rode up to them.

Niu Ben said, "Prince Zhao is now like a turtle in a jar, so there's no rush. The most important thing now is to capture the nearby prefectures and counties to avoid being attacked from both sides."

Upon hearing this, Qi Guangyi laughed and said, "General, you worry too much. The powerful families in Chang'an now are all eager to pledge allegiance to the Emperor. The prefectures and counties around Chang'an have already surrendered to me."

"That's good then." Niu Ben nodded and added, "Prince Zhao has already been abandoned by everyone. Such a heartless person deserves his retribution."

Along the way, Niu Ben had witnessed the suffering of the common people. To fund his wars and manufacture firearms, Prince Zhao had continuously imposed high taxes on the people, leading to widespread destitution.

This was not the worst of it; along what was said to be the migration route of the Luoyang people, he saw piles of white bones. For the sake of his royal power, Prince Zhao had become insane.

Before arriving in Chang'an, his heart was already filled with hatred for Prince Zhao.

“The General is absolutely right,” Qi Guangyi said, clenching his fist. “Before the General arrived, Prince Zhao even ordered a massacre. If it weren’t for Ge Yiren and other powerful families leading their private armies to act as inside agents and open the city gates, most of the people in Chang’an City would likely be gone.”

Luo Hong and Luo Xin were even more enraged upon hearing this. Luo Hong said, “He’s a beast! General, please entrust this attack on the inner palace to me. Many soldiers from the firearms battalion have relatives in Chang’an; I want to avenge them.”

Niu Ben slowly nodded and said, “Then let Prince Zhao pay his blood debt.”

The group talked for a while at the city gate. Niu Ben led his large army into the city. The Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran exchanged glances, a sense of relief in their eyes. This battle, they knew, meant they could return to their own feudal states.

This expedition had been very long, and unlike Niu Ben’s army, they were already exhausted.

As soon as they entered the city, a large crowd of common people suddenly swarmed forward. They carried flatbreads and offered clean water, distributing food and water to the soldiers.

This scene genuinely surprised Niu Ben, and he couldn’t help but look at Qi Guangyi.

Chuckling, Qi Guangyi said, “General, this wasn’t my idea. The common people insisted on coming themselves. They said we saved their lives and hoped we could eliminate the rebels soon and bring peace back to Chang’an.”

Upon hearing this, Niu Ben's stern expression softened. He looked at the people and said, "The Emperor says that the common people are the foundation of the world. As long as the people are with us, we will have soldiers and food wherever we go. It seems this is truly not false."

The other generals all smiled, their belief in unifying the north growing stronger. They knew that only through unification could the common people live stable lives.

In the past two years, they had fought from north to south, and then from east to west, witnessing too many tragedies along the way.

Due to the war, feudal lords had exploited the people, bandits and brigands ran rampant, killing people in the countryside, and production ceased, leaving the people starving and cold.

A once prosperous world had been shattered by war, and the population suffered immense losses.

Now, bodies of common people could be seen everywhere on the roads, either killed by soldiers or dying from hunger and cold.

The moment they entered Chang'an, this civil unrest that had swept across the Great Yu Empire finally came to an end.

Over ten thousand soldiers entering the city immediately filled the empty barracks in Chang'an. After settling the soldiers, Luo Hong and Luo Xin led forty thousand men to advance towards the inner palace.



They prepared artillery and muskets to bury Prince Zhao's forces.

"This Prince Zhao really did install a lot of cannons in the inner palace," Luo Xin said, putting down his telescope from five hundred meters away. Because he understood the range of the exported cannons, he wasn't worried about being hit at all.

This time, Niu Ben had Luo Hong and Luo Xin in charge of the assault on the city, accompanied by soldiers from the former firearms battalion.

This time, they shared a common hatred and were eager to kill Prince Zhao.

"How do you plan to attack the city?" Luo Hong asked.

Luo Xin said lazily, "How else can we attack? Do we need to be polite with Prince Zhao?"

Turning around, he shouted, "Blast the city gate to pieces! Fire!"

Under his command, the field artillery fired simultaneously, producing a continuous roar.

Although the inner palace walls were sturdy, they could not withstand the continuous bombardment from so many cannons. After holding out for another twenty minutes, the main gate tower collapsed directly.

Luo Xin did not stop then but continued to bombard the walls on both sides, continuously widening the opening.

When a hundred-meter collapsed area appeared before him, he finally ordered the shelling to stop.

“Kill!”

As the cannon fire ceased, Luo Hong charged into the inner palace first. Soldiers who once belonged to the firearms battalion followed closely, wielding bayonets and rushing like madmen behind Luo Hong.

Niu Ben did not personally command this time. According to Niu Ben, if Luo Hong couldn't even capture the inner palace now, there was no need for him to return and see him.

With the breach opened, the rest became simple, and more and more soldiers rushed into the inner palace.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

When they encountered Prince Zhao's soldiers, Luo Hong would always command his soldiers to complete a volley, then raise their bayonets and fight the Zhao army.

In the battle with Qi Guangyi, the Zhao army soldiers had already been defeated, and their morale had significantly dropped.

Now, a group of musketeers with even higher morale than cavalry charged in, and they were even more unable to resist.

Although they carried the fierce fighting style of the Zhao army and fought just as furiously, the advantage of firearms and regular bayonet combat techniques continuously increased their casualties.

After more and more musketeers flooded into the inner palace, the will of this resisting Zhao army began to crumble. Luo Hong noticed this and attacked the Zhao army even more fiercely.

The battle continued from morning until evening. With their continuously expanding advantage, Luo Hong successfully led his soldiers to capture the inner palace.

In what was once the Chengqing Hall, they found Prince Zhao sitting on the dragon throne, while Zhao Yuanliang was kneeling on the ground, trembling.

Chapter 684

Blood gathered into streams, and the air was filled with a thick smell of blood.

The bodies of Zhao army soldiers lay haphazardly, piling up in the open space in front of Chengqing Hall.

Luo Hong, covered in blood, stormed into Chengqing Hall like a god of slaughter. He walked directly towards Prince Zhao on the throne, grabbed him from the dragon chair, and threw him down.

Aged Prince Zhao stumbled and rolled down the steps, his forehead hitting a step and bleeding.

“Hahaha...” Prince Zhao, humiliated by Luo Hong, did not get angry but laughed wildly. As he laughed, however, a hint of desolation suddenly entered his voice.

Luo Hong drew his sword and pointed it at Prince Zhao, scolding, “Rebel, I’d like to see how long you can keep laughing!”

He said to his soldiers, “Tie them all up.”

Two soldiers immediately tied up Prince Zhao and Zhao Yuanliang. Just then, Luo Xin also walked in and reminded him, “Brother, there’s also Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince.”

Luo Hong nodded with a grim face. He immediately led the other soldiers to the imperial harem, leaving the front matters to Luo Xin.

The path to the imperial harem was littered with the bodies of palace maids. Seeing this scene, the gloom in Luo Hong’s heart grew thicker.

However, important matters were at hand, so he dared not delay.

The Thirteenth Prince was put on the throne by Prince Zhao, but the common people in Chang'an, who did not know the truth, thought that this Thirteenth Prince was the current Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. Therefore, the Thirteenth Prince's identity was now very special.

"General, look!"

While Luo Hong was deep in thought, a soldier suddenly pointed to a well in the palace. By the well was none other than Empress Zhao.

Upon seeing this, Luo Hong immediately rushed over with his soldiers.

"Your Majesty."

Luo Hong stopped three meters from Empress Zhao. Seeing them approach, Empress Zhao made a move that horrified them: she stood by the edge of the well.

Empress Zhao was in a daze. Unbeknownst to them, a hint of crow's feet had appeared on her beautiful face. She looked blankly at Luo Hong and said, "It seems King Qi's army has indeed arrived. Let me ask you, is Prince Zhao dead?"

Empress Zhao was the empress of the late Emperor. Now that Xiao Ming had ascended the throne, by right, Empress Zhao should also be one of the empress dowagers.

Out of loyalty to the late Emperor, Luo Hong still did not dare to slight Empress Zhao. He said, "Prince Zhao has been captured. Whether he lives or dies awaits the Emperor's judgment."

"The Emperor? Has Xiao Ming ascended the throne?" A hint of surprise appeared in Empress Zhao's eyes.

"Yes, the late Emperor left a will, instructing His Highness King Qi to ascend the throne."

Upon mentioning Xiao Wenxuan, Empress Zhao's emotional fluctuations became even more apparent. She couldn't help but sob softly, murmuring, "Your Majesty, I have failed you. It is I who allowed the Great Yu Empire to become like this. I deserve to die."

Empress Zhao cried sadly, and Luo Hong felt a touch of pity. He said, "Your Majesty, please restrain your grief. As the saying goes, 'without destruction, there can be no construction.' Now that the north is unified, there will be no need to worry about the threat of the feudal lords anymore."

Empress Zhao stopped crying upon hearing this. She gently stroked the Thirteenth Prince, who was only two years old, in her arms. After a long silence, she said to Luo Hong, "I know why you are here. You must be looking for the Thirteenth Prince. One mountain cannot hold two tigers, and the world cannot have two masters. Does Xiao Ming want you to kill the Thirteenth Prince?"

With despair in her eyes, Empress Zhao took another step closer to the well. She said, "Go back and tell Xiao Ming that I have failed him, and I will not cause him any more trouble."

Luo Hong was shocked. He hurriedly tried to dissuade her, “Your Majesty, think thrice. The Thirteenth Prince is just a two-year-old infant. What wrong has he done? The Emperor will not lay a hand on the Thirteenth Prince. As long as Your Majesty publicly reveals the truth of the Chang’an rebellion, Your Majesty and the Thirteenth Prince can continue to enjoy wealth and honor.”

Empress Zhao merely gave a bitter smile upon hearing this. “Rebellion is a crime that implicates the whole family. I cannot escape.”

With that, she stepped forward to jump into the well, but at that moment, the Thirteenth Prince suddenly cried. Empress Zhao’s body instantly froze.

Luo Hong’s eyes darted. He immediately strode forward, grabbed Empress Zhao, and pulled her and the Thirteenth Prince away from the well.

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty.” Luo Hong said to the soldiers, “Protect Her Majesty well.”

Empress Zhao’s eyes held a hint of sorrow, but she no longer struggled.

There were no more people to capture in the palace. Luo Hong brought Prince Zhao and his son, and Empress Zhao and her son to the main camp.

They dared not stay in the imperial palace, even though the current imperial palace was in Qingzhou, staying here would still be a great disrespect.

Back at the camp, Luo Hong reported the results of the battle to Niu Ben and then told him about Prince Zhao and Empress Zhao.

“General, how should Prince Zhao and his son, and Empress Zhao and her son be dealt with now?” Luo Hong asked.

After a moment of contemplation, Niu Ben said, “The identities of Prince Zhao and his son, and Empress Zhao and her son, are all very sensitive. It’s not convenient for me to deal with them. For now, we can only send them to Qingzhou and await the Emperor’s decision.”

Luo Hong nodded. Indeed, such matters were not something he could be involved in.

He cupped his hands and prepared to leave. At that moment, Niu Ben’s voice rang out again, “Wait a moment, I have something else to tell you.”

“Just give your orders, General.”

“Chang’an has been taken by us, and Prince Zhao has been captured. The State of Zhao now exists in name only. However, even so, there are still many things we need to do. A few days ago, I received an imperial decree from the Emperor. The Emperor wants us to press on with our victory, capture the cities of the State of Zhao in one go, and completely cut off the possibility of advancing south. After much thought, I have decided to let you independently lead the army to reclaim the State of Zhao and stay there to guard the strategic passes. What do you think?”



Luo Hong was overjoyed upon hearing this. Niu Ben's arrangement was a sign of his trust, and he preferred Chang'an over Qingzhou.

"Thank you for your guidance, General." Luo Hong expressed his gratitude.

Niu Ben smiled and said, "Your father is my close friend, so it's only right for me to look after you brothers. After all, one should not avoid recommending a worthy person even if he is a relative. However, guarding the State of Zhao is a serious matter. You must not mess things up for me, otherwise, I won't be able to cover for you in front of the Emperor."

"General, rest assured, I will be diligent and dedicated," Luo Hong said.

Niu Ben nodded and then allowed Luo Hong to leave.

Watching Luo Hong depart, he refocused his gaze on the map in front of him. With Prince Zhao captured, the State of Zhao was now theirs for the taking, and this also signaled the end of the war in the north.

However, they would now face their true enemy, the Golden Tent Khanate.

In the imperial decree, Xiao Ming had made it very clear that the Golden Tent Khanate was withdrawing troops from Goryeo. It was obvious that the purpose of this withdrawal was to focus on dealing with the Great Yu Empire.

In his opinion, the Golden Tent Khanate was definitely not as easy to deal with as the feudal lords within the country. This was a very savage race, and most importantly, every person in this race was a soldier.

If the Golden Tent Khanate was determined to fight to the death with the Great Yu Empire, it would definitely be much more difficult than dealing with these feudal lords.

#### Chapter 685

The weather grew colder day by day, and the dew on the plants gradually turned into white frost. It was clear that the long winter was approaching.

The battle report from Chang'an reached Qingzhou via courier station yesterday, and the news of Prince Zhao's capture immediately stirred up a thousand waves.

The common people cheered, not only to celebrate the victory of the war but also to look forward to their sons and husbands returning from afar.

The officials naturally thought much more than the common people. With Prince Zhao captured, the fragmented Great Yu Empire was reunited once again. Essentially, the Great Yu Empire had achieved superficial unification.

This form of unification was even stronger than when Xiao Wenxuan was in power. After all, the Princes of Wei, Yan, and Liang were all dead, and Prince Zhao would ultimately not escape death either.

As a result, the remaining feudal lords were only the Princes of Chu, Huainan, Yong, Ruyang, and Shu.

In the eyes of the officials, among these feudal lords, only the Prince of Chu could be considered a threat; the other feudal lords were no longer a concern.

“Your Majesty, the army outside has consumed a great deal. Now that the war is progressing smoothly, only Luo Hong’s troops need to remain to attack the Zhao territory. The remaining armies should return to their respective garrisons as soon as possible,” Pang Yukun said loudly in the political deliberation hall.

Xiao Ming nodded. The army fighting in the west during this period had almost emptied the imperial treasury. Now, Xiao Ming truly understood that so-called war was indeed about spending money.

In addition, in this war, he had conscripted three hundred and ninety thousand strong men to transport grain, fodder, and ammunition, and these strong men also needed food and supplies.

Because of their involvement in the war, the grain production in various prefectures this year was also somewhat affected.

Without strong men at home, many common people could only reduce the land they cultivated, and some common people’s families even had to abandon their land.

However, this was only one of the negative effects brought by this northern war. What gave Xiao Ming the biggest headache were the former Yan territories, Liang territories, and the royal lands west of Yunzhou.

These conquered cities not only failed to bring him any taxes, but the looting and warfare by the three princes caused the common people in these areas to become displaced. The prefectural governors serving in various prefectures and counties, on the contrary, submitted memorials to him, requesting funds and provisions to relieve the disaster victims.

Previously, the Qingzhou imperial treasury was relatively rich, but now that the scope of rule had expanded to the entire north, it was indeed like water flowing into the sea.

“Approved!” Xiao Ming uttered two words. “Besides Niu Ben, let the armies of the Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Yong also return to their respective feudal states, otherwise my imperial treasury will be drained by them.”

All the officials showed helpless smiles upon hearing this. This time, the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Huainan had been very active in the war, which greatly satisfied the imperial court.

However, the imperial court bore the cost of the grain and fodder for these two armies on this distant expedition. The Prince of Yong, needless to say, his territory was now dirt poor, and without money and provisions, his soldiers would probably have mutinied long ago.

The Prince of Huainan did pay for his own grain and fodder when attacking Yingzhou, but after advancing towards Chang’an, he requested the imperial court to provide grain and fodder.

The Prince of Huainan was not extorting them on purpose. The Huainan state was originally a second-class feudal state with limited talent and financial resources. Yingzhou was very close to the Prince of Huainan, so grain and fodder could be supplied, but he could not continuously maintain the supply of grain and fodder for the distant expedition to Chang’an.

Overall, he was self-sufficient in the first half of the war, but after the Battle of Juyong Pass, he started relying on the imperial court.

Suddenly having nearly two hundred thousand more troops to feed naturally put heavy pressure on the Qingzhou imperial treasury. After all, he had also spent a lot of silver to purchase various mineral resources to manufacture firearms and ammunition.

At the same time, the north was devastated, and the business chain in the north was broken, which greatly reduced the profits of the Chamber of Commerce.

Currently, the maintenance of the Chamber of Commerce's profits largely relied on trade with the Prince of Chu and the Dutch.

After discussing the withdrawal of the army, Pang Yukun continued, "Your Majesty, General Niu's army has been unstoppable this time. They have captured seven superior prefectures, fifteen medium prefectures, thirty-six inferior prefectures, and a total of one hundred and sixty-three counties under those prefectures. The number of large and small officials needed for so many prefectures and counties is enormous, and Qingzhou currently does not have enough officials to send to these places."

As the saying goes, it is easier to conquer a country than to govern it. Xiao Ming's army had conquered so much land, and then faced the problem of governance.

He said, "As Senior Grand Secretary Pang said, Qingzhou indeed does not have so many officials right now. There is an urgent need for a group of experienced officials to manage these places for me and restore the people's livelihoods. Moreover, I have received news that the barbarians have withdrawn their troops from Goryeo. Next, the barbarians will definitely launch attacks on the passes along the Great Wall. If the border defense army cannot receive supplies in time due to a lack of officials, it will be a disaster for the Great Yu Empire. Currently, the Great Yu Empire has sufficient defense but insufficient offense, and needs a period of recuperation."

“Your Majesty, it’s actually very simple to solve this problem. There are quite a few officials in Chang’an City, and when General Niu attacked various prefectures and counties, there were also many local powerful families assisting him. Among these powerful families, there were often clan members who held positions in the prefectures and counties. As long as Your Majesty can appoint them, the management of these prefectures and counties will not be a problem.”

“I have naturally thought about this issue, but can these officials and powerful families be trusted?” He had been pondering this question when he received the battle report and realized that appointing the old officials from various prefectures and counties was the only way.

Now he finally understood why, during the Three Kingdoms period, when Cao Cao attacked Eastern Wu, those strategists all shouted for surrender.

Because they knew very well that if they changed masters, this master would still need their help to manage the conquered lands.

However, even so, these officials must be selected and chosen, trying to keep the excellent officials and send the corrupt ones home.

“Your Majesty, when I was in Chang’an, I had some understanding of the officials in various parts of the Great Yu Empire. I am willing to take on this responsibility to select capable officials for Your Majesty,” Fei Ji said actively.

Pang Yukun saw this and suddenly smiled, “Elder Fei has always been uninvolved, so why are you so concerned about the appointment of officials now?”

“Senior Grand Secretary Pang, you are mistaken. It is a minister’s duty to share the Emperor’s worries,” Fei Ji said with a smile.

Pang Yukun was wary in his heart. The appointment of officials was an extremely sensitive matter. If Fei Ji were given sole power, he feared that Fei Ji would once again gather a large number of officials for himself.

Now that the conservatives’ influence in the imperial court was visibly growing, he became increasingly uneasy, so he said to Xiao Ming, “Your Majesty, Elder Fei is old, and some matters might be beyond his capabilities. I am willing to share this burden with Elder Fei.”

Xiao Ming’s eyes swept back and forth between the two of them. He said, “Since that is the case, the matter of selecting and appointing officials will be jointly drafted by you both, and then submitted to me for review after it is finalized.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” they both said in unison.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, “Feeling the impact of this rebellion by the feudal lords, I have decided to learn from the reforms of the powerful Qin to strengthen the country, and officials are the most crucial part of implementing new policies. I thought about it all night yesterday and am preparing to split Bowen Academy.”

Chapter 686

“Split Bowen Academy?”

Pang Yukun and the assembled officials were greatly surprised.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Since conquering the States of Wei, Yan, and Liang, the number of scholars from these three regions who flocked here, attempting to enter the academy to study, has increased several times over. The original purpose of Bowen Academy was to provide talent for the former feudal state. Now, with scholars from across the Great Yu Empire, this academy is no longer sufficient."

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming continued, "Specialization has its own merits. Bowen Academy gathers the strengths of various schools, making it broad yet unfocused, and at the same time, it is not conducive to the confidentiality of secret technologies."

Pang Yukun nodded and said, "Your Majesty, overall, the Great Yu Empire currently lacks effective governance over Bowen Academy and various other schools."

When it came to this, Fei Ji and others had no input; compared to Pang Yukun, they were not very familiar with these matters.

"Senior Grand Secretary Pang is right. When I was King Qi, my feudal state was small, and fewer talents were needed, so Bowen Academy being a bit casual didn't matter. Now that the world is unified, and more talents are needed, this matter should be put on the agenda. This is the second item of the reform: the establishment of the Ministry of Education."

"Ministry of Education?"

The officials discussed animatedly. They were familiar with the Secretariat, which was the government office responsible for handling confidential matters and issuing imperial edicts.



However, despite the discussion, no official strongly objected this time. Since Xiao Ming dismissed Yu Ming last time, the officials in the imperial court clearly understood that the Emperor was determined to implement reforms.

The abolition of the four classes of society was the first item, and now the second item had appeared.

Fei Ji did not object, but he needed to ask some questions for clarification. So he said, “Does Your Majesty intend to abolish the imperial examination?”

“There’s no need to abolish the imperial examination, but it does need to change,” Xiao Ming said. “After the Ministry of Education is established, it will oversee all schools in the Great Yu Empire, and the reform of the imperial examination will also be carried out by the Ministry of Education.”

After studying at Bowen Academy for some time, the officials were actually mentally prepared for this. In the future, the imperial examination would no longer test the Four Books and Five Classics; instead, it would focus on various unique knowledge.

Clearing his throat, Xiao Ming continued, “The principal official of this Ministry of Education will be called the ‘Academic Commissioner.’ The Qingzhou Ministry of Education will be responsible for overseeing the Ministries of Education in other provinces.”

“Provinces?” This not only shocked Fei Ji, but even Pang Yukun was surprised. This was something they had never heard of.

“Your Majesty, what is this ‘province’?” Pang Yukun asked.

Xiao Ming smiled lightly and said, “This is the third item of the reform: abolishing the feudal states and establishing provinces, strengthening the imperial court’s governance over various prefectures and counties.”

Although Xiao Ming had now conquered areas such as the Wei territories, Yan territories, and Liang territories, just like Emperor Qin Shi Huang’s conquest of the six states, the common people in these places still retained their habits from the feudal state period.

This was naturally intolerable to Xiao Ming. His purpose in killing these feudal lords was to establish centralized power. How could he tolerate the common people in these regions still calling themselves people of Wei or Yan?

Therefore, after careful consideration, he decided to abolish the feudal states and establish provinces. The former State of Wei was to be set up as Jinling Province, with Jinling Province governing the thirteen former prefectures of the Wei territory, and then prefectures governing counties.

The former Yan territory would establish Bozhou Province, with Bozhou as its center governing the ten prefectures of Yan. Then came Kaifeng Province, Chang’an Province, Liang Province, Youzhou Province, and finally his Qingzhou Province.

In this way, he divided the occupied territories into seven provinces, thereby greatly strengthening local governance.

After expressing his thoughts, Xiao Ming looked at the officials, awaiting their opinions.

At this point, Pang Yukun and Fei Ji both fell silent. This time, Xiao Ming's reform steps were simply too grand.

Pang Yukun said, "I know Your Majesty is eager for reform, but the north is not yet stable. If we push it rashly, I'm afraid it will not only be ineffective but will also cause chaos."

"I have already considered this point, so this reform will not be implemented in all parts of the Great Yu Empire. I also know that you, my beloved ministers, harbor doubts about the reform. As the saying goes, a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat. For you, seeing is believing to prove that the reform is correct. Therefore, I have decided to implement the reform first in Qingzhou Province. The success or failure will depend solely on the rise and fall of Qingzhou Province."

To put it plainly, because the Great Yu Empire had not been crushed by advanced civilizations, the officials currently lacked enthusiasm for reform. The lack of external impetus made it difficult for a country to spontaneously reform.

In Europe, if it weren't for the invasion of the Scourge of God opening a door for Europe, Europe would not have sought reform and emerged from the Middle Ages.

Similarly, if it weren't for the invasion of the West bringing advanced civilization, the feudal dynasty would have continued in its cycle.

"The Great Yu Empire needs enemies." Sometimes, Xiao Ming suddenly thought this.

He gradually understood why contemporary nations constantly create international conflicts and choose imaginary enemies, because all of this is the reason for a nation to continue to strengthen itself.

However, the Great Yu Empire did have an enemy, an enemy that all recognized: the Golden Tent Khanate.

However, the Golden Tent Khanate was a country with a lower level of civilization than the Great Yu Empire. If the Golden Tent Khanate were replaced by a country with a higher level of civilization than the Great Yu Empire, the current Great Yu Empire would definitely reform and imitate it with all its might.

Of course, invaders with a higher level of civilization than the Great Yu Empire had already arrived, and this was something Xiao Ming planned to seize. He planned to invite the Dutch army stationed in Ryukyu to visit Qingzhou.

He believed this would give those officials who opposed reform a clear understanding.

While he was deep in thought, Pang Yukun loudly said, "Your Majesty is wise. I believe that implementing the reform in the six prefecture of qingzhou is most suitable."

Fei Ji and others also breathed a sigh of relief. They were just afraid that Xiao Ming would implement drastic changes. They said in unison, "Your Majesty is wise."

Looking at the officials, Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction. This time, his plan was successfully implemented.

In fact, his purpose this time was to set up a pilot area, which was similar to the steps of contemporary reform and opening up: first, delineate a portion of the region for a pilot project.

If it succeeded, implementing reforms in other places would be simpler, and at the same time, the areas that underwent reform first and became prosperous could also drive the development of other places.

Moreover, because the reform area was small, it was conducive to focused supervision, and at the same time, this place had to have the foundation for reform.

After much deliberation, his former feudal state was the most suitable. If the reform succeeded, he would then implement it in coastal areas such as Youzhou Province and Jinling Province.

“The matter of reform involves many policies, so we will not discuss it further in court.” Xiao Ming then motioned to Qian Dafu.

Stepping forward, Qian Dafu shouted, “Report any matters early, otherwise, roll up the screen and adjourn the court.”

The officials cheered, “Long live!” They dared not say much now. At today’s court session, the Emperor had thrown out too many unbelievable things, and they needed to go back and discuss them carefully.

After the court adjourned, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu left through the side door of the council hall. They did not return to the imperial residence but instead prepared to inspect the production of railway tracks.

## Chapter 687

Rolling heatwaves roared through the steel workshop. Despite the colder weather, the artisans were still working with bared arms.

Sweat mixed with rust made them look dirty, but each of them seemed full of energy.

Ever since the steam locomotive was invented, Xiao Ming had ordered the production of railway tracks to be prioritized. There were two reasons for this: to accelerate the transportation of mineral resources and to improve the efficiency of the mining industry.

Because in addition to steam locomotives needing railway tracks, mines also needed mine cart tracks to provide a running path for the mine carts.

Now that Prince Zhao was defeated, conquering the State of Zhao was only a matter of time. In a month or a few months, the Great Yu Empire would basically achieve unification.

Although the Prince of Chu in the south was actually playing a double game, he had no reason to wage war at this time. After all, the Prince of Chu had his own son held hostage in Qingzhou and had also pledged allegiance to him, appearing quite obedient.

The most helpless thing was that he was willing but powerless now. The northern war had almost exhausted seventy to eighty percent of the capital he had accumulated over five years. Now, facing the

threat of the barbarians again, after weighing his options, he decided to maintain the status quo and plunder the Prince of Chu's wealth through commercial trade.

So, the most important thing for him now was to establish an industrial system. Only with a complete industrial system could powerful industrial capabilities produce more powerful war machines to help him conquer cities and seize resources from the Western powers.

In this reform, he proposed promoting reforms based on the six prefectures. The purpose was to quickly establish a commercial and industrial system. After all, over the past five years, the people of the six prefectures, under the daily propaganda of newspapers, were already ideologically incomparable to the common people in other places.

Moreover, these six prefectures were under his direct supervision, and once they developed, it would not be too late for him to promote them to other places.

"I greet Your Majesty."

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, a middle-aged man in a blue robe walked over. On his blue robe, the words "machinery department" were embroidered. This was the artisan who came from the machinery department to guide the production of railway tracks.

Xiao Ming was also very familiar with this artisan. He was a veteran in the machinery department and later, after entering Bowen Academy, he and Lin Wentao specialized in mechanical production.

"Disperse with the formalities."

Xiao Ming waved his hand. Now, every time he went out, he was accompanied by a large number of guards, making it impossible not to be noticed.

Looking at the busy artisans, Xiao Ming asked, “Lan Li, how is the construction of the railway track production line progressing?”

Lan Li said, “Your Majesty, the production line for mine tracks has already been established. The production line for steam locomotive tracks has been placed behind, as per Your Majesty’s instructions.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Although he now greatly wanted to lay railway tracks across the Great Yu Empire, iron ore was still a major problem.

Therefore, in order to enable mass production of steam locomotive tracks, the problem he must solve now was the mining and metallurgical industries.

Only when the output of these two industries increased could he stop worrying about raw materials.

“Let me go and see.”

Xiao Ming said. Now that he had proposed reforms, he had to participate; otherwise, if he let these guys figure it out themselves, they would probably take many detours.

These five years of self-reliance had given Lin Wentao and others a certain level of knowledge and practical ability. Under his guidance, he believed that establishing an industrial system step by step would not be a problem.



Following Lan Li into the workshop, Lan Li directly led Xiao Ming to the adjacent building of the original production workshop. After expanding production, the steel workshop added a converter, and the steel produced by this converter was specifically used for producing railway tracks.

Upon reaching the railway track production workshop, Xiao Ming saw the converter that was producing steel. Beneath the converter were grooves for molten steel, and the molten steel flowed through these grooves directly into "I"-shaped iron molds.

In fact, the essence of railway tracks was I-beams, supplemented by the iron mold forging technology used for producing cannons, which formed the current railway track production line.

"Your Majesty, we have now produced six thousand meters of railway track, and one mine cart has also been produced," Lan Li truthfully reported to Xiao Ming.

Qian Dafu used to be responsible for prospecting and establishing mines. Now, even the eunuch by Xiao Ming's side had not completely abandoned matters related to mines.

He said excitedly, "Your Majesty, this batch of railway tracks and mine carts can be sent to Laiwu County. The prospecting team discovered a large open-pit iron mine about one hundred and thirty li southwest of Qingzhou. If a mine is established there, Qingzhou will not lack iron ore."

Xiao Ming nodded. The prospecting team had never stopped exploring the mineral resources of the six prefectures, and his long-awaited iron mine in Laiwu County had finally been discovered.

Laiwu, in contemporary times, was known as a “Steel City” and was definitely a treasure trove. According to the records in the technology crystal, the Laiwu area possesses 55 types of minerals, primarily including iron, coal, copper, gold, granite, limestone, dolomite, rare earths, diabase, basalt, construction stone, natural quartz sand, and mineral water.

Among these, the proven reserves of coal are 431.136 million tons, making it an important coal base in contemporary Shandong Province. The proven reserves of iron ore are 463.9319 million tons, ranking first among iron mines in East China.

Laiwu County was an inconspicuous place in the Great Yu Empire, sparsely populated. Qian Dafu had visited this place many times but found nothing. Now, this treasure trove had finally been unearthed.

For Xiao Ming, this area had both coal and iron mines, and their reserves were large, which could fully support him in establishing a modern mine.

This mine would have railway tracks laid, use mine carts for transporting ore, and use steam engines to pump groundwater and pull the mine carts.

“I think so too. Your nephew, Qian Gui, is indeed outdoing his elders,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Qian Dafu laughed and said, “Your Majesty, Qian Gui is bold and can endure hardship. He’s never afraid to go to places that I, your old servant, dare not go. In this regard, I, your old servant, also admit defeat.”

For Qian Dafu, Qian Gui was now his only hope, as he only had Qian Gui as a relative.

Xiao Ming said, "This Qian Gui is good. He's a promising talent worth promoting. Tell him to keep working hard, and in a few years, I will give your position to him."

Qian Dafu beamed with joy. Xiao Ming was naturally not talking about the position of eunuch, but rather making Qian Gui the main official in charge of mines and prospecting.

Lan Li chuckled, "If Laiwu County truly has so much coal and iron, why not build a railway line there?"

"Hmm, not just Laiwu. This railway should extend from Qingzhou to Dengzhou and Youzhou, connecting the mines and businesses of the six prefectures into one continuous area."

In Xiao Ming's mind, a blueprint had already formed. As the saying goes, "To get rich, build roads first." As long as this got off the ground, the overall surpassing of Western countries would be greatly accelerated.

After inspecting the railway track production process, Xiao Ming felt a little more at ease. The presence of the French in the Great Yu Empire made him subtly uneasy, as it meant that the West was beginning to interfere in the affairs of the Great Yu Empire. This was not good news and was the reason for his continuously increasing sense of crisis.

There were many external enemies, and his industry and commerce were just stumbling along.

In the dense fog, a third-rate sailing warship belonging to the Great Yu Empire Navy was patrolling the sea.

Ever since the agreement with the Dutch was reached and the Great Yu Empire's coastal shipping lanes were reclaimed, the navy's warships had been responsible for ensuring the safety of maritime routes and combating pirate plunder of merchant ships.

However, the ocean was vast and boundless. Even so, it was sometimes unavoidable for merchant ships to be plundered, but for merchants, this was already a rare occurrence.

"This sudden dense fog is truly rare."

The third-rate warship named "Dreadnought" was commanded by Captain Xie Yuan. Two days ago, after resupplying in Zeelandia, he commanded the warship to head towards the Sanmyo Kingdom, which was their patrol route.

First Mate Ding Chang said, "Indeed, it's basically impossible to see anything beyond fifty meters."

Xie Yuan frowned and said, "Tell the soldiers to stay alert and vigilant. If we are attacked by pirates at this time, it will be very unfavorable for us."

"Yes, Captain," Ding Chang said, then shouted to the soldiers on board, "Stay alert! Gunners, all to your positions in the gun deck, ready for battle at any time!"

Upon receiving the order, the soldiers orderly moved to their respective positions.

Having patrolled the sea for a year, they deeply understood that the ocean was like a child whose mood could change instantly. One moment it could be a clear sky, and the next, a storm could arrive.

This dense fog was the same. The sea was originally calm, but then the dense fog suddenly covered the warship like a wall of clouds.

After arranging their defenses, Xie Yuan looked at the nautical chart on the ship. They were still a hundred li from the Sanmyo Kingdom's pier.

After confirming their position, Xie Yuan inverted the hourglass. At sea, they used this to keep track of time.

As he was performing his routine duties according to regulations, a sudden ringing of a bell, like music, came from the sea.

Upon hearing this sound, Xie Yuan immediately went from the gun deck to the main deck. He asked Ding Chang, "Did you hear that?"

"I heard it. It's a rapid ringing of a bell." Ding Chang's face was solemn, and various terrifying legends immediately flooded his mind, making him uneasy.

In his year of patrolling the sea, he had never encountered such a strange situation. Who would be ringing a bell in the vast ocean?

Like Ding Chang, the soldiers on the ship were also uneasy. The theories of ghosts and gods were not so easily eradicated, and in this eerie dense fog, the more they thought about it, the more afraid they became.

Just as everyone was concentrating, a soldier on the mast's lookout suddenly shouted, "Something unusual ahead!"

Upon hearing this, Xie Yuan immediately picked up his telescope and looked into the dense fog ahead.

At this moment, the seawater was no longer blue; under the dense fog, it appeared murky and dark. Just as Xie Yuan looked into the dense fog, a huge dark shadow suddenly appeared in the thick fog.

Before Xie Yuan could react, a yellow flash of light suddenly erupted from this dark shadow. Xie Yuan was greatly alarmed and shouted, "Enemy attack! Enemy attack!"

As his voice fell, the roar of cannons came from the dark shadow, and black cannonballs flew towards the Dreadnought like lightning.

"Thump, thump..." The sound of cannonballs piercing the hull rang out, and the warship instantly became a mess.

Xie Yuan was somewhat indecisive at this moment. In this sea area, only their navy was equipped with cannons. From the dark shadow, the enemy warship's appearance was very similar to theirs.

He strongly suspected that another naval warship had mistakenly identified them as enemies, but he couldn't confirm it since he couldn't see the other side clearly.

"Captain, what should we do?" Ding Chang asked. This round of firing had left the warship in a very sorry state, with sawdust flying everywhere. He shouted, "Fire a warning shot first."

Ding Chang responded and immediately relayed the order to fire.

At this moment, a round of cannon fire rang out from the bottom of the gun deck.

After the cannon fire, the increasingly close dark shadow seemed to fall silent. A glimmer of hope rose in Xie Yuan's heart. Just as he was about to furiously scold whichever short-sighted captain had mistakenly attacked them, a flash of fire suddenly lit up from the dark shadow again.

"Get down!" Xie Yuan directly pushed Ding Chang onto the deck. At this moment, his face was grim. This time, no matter who it was, he would fight back.

"Thump, thump..." Cannonballs slammed into the warship again. Xie Yuan endured the pain of sawdust hitting him and said, "Counterattack immediately!"

"Counterattack! Counterattack!"

After this volley, he was also somewhat infuriated. If they didn't counterattack, the Dreadnought would be sunk.

Water began to seep into the areas of the gun deck hit by cannonballs. Carpenters immediately took planks and nails to repair the hull pierced by the cannonballs.

And the artillerymen, having received the order, reloaded and began to return fire at the dark shadow in the sea.

"Boom, boom, boom..." The cannons roared, and cannonballs flew towards the dark shadow.

On the deck, Xie Yuan watched nervously. As both sides got closer, when they were fifty meters apart, he finally saw the enemy warship clearly.

It was a warship somewhat similar to the Dreadnought, but the flag hanging on the warship had a Union Jack pattern.

On the warship, there was also a group of soldiers wearing red swallow-tailed coats, black leather shoes, white gaiters wrapped around their calves, and black hats.

This scene somewhat stunned Xie Yuan. He had seen some information introducing various countries in the world at Bowen Academy. If the information was correct, they were now encountering a British warship.



Xie Yuan's heart sank. He knew very well how powerful the navy of that country was, and Yue Yun would sometimes talk about his experience during his southern expedition when he drank.

Although he spoke with laughter, they could sense the seriousness in his words.

Just as he was momentarily dazed, the red-coated soldiers on the opposite side suddenly raised their flintlock guns and aimed them at their side.

Having confirmed that the other party came with hostility, Xie Yuan immediately calmed down. He once again ordered the soldiers to lie down and take cover.

After they lay down, a flash of fire erupted from the opposite warship, and flintlock bullets struck the warship, making crackling sounds.

"Damn it, they're bullying your father!" Xie Yuan's anger surged. He said to Ding Chang, "Hit them hard!"

Ding Chang was almost hit by a bullet and was also enraged. He cursed, "Why are you still standing there? Don't you counterattack? These are not Japanese pirates, they are westerners!"

The soldiers lying on the deck immediately got up. They picked up their flintlock guns and fired at the other side.

Just then, the other side fired another volley of cannonballs, and the Dreadnought returned fire in kind.

As the two warships exchanged fire, they passed each other. At this point, the British warship once again entered the dense fog and disappeared.

Xie Yuan intently stared at the surrounding sea, but after waiting for a while, the British warship was still nowhere to be seen.

“Captain, what should we do now?” Ding Chang asked.

Xie Yuan’s brows furrowed deeply. The presence of the British in this sea area was very strange. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “Immediately return to Dengzhou. We need to report this situation to General Yue Yun.”

Ding Chang nodded upon hearing this and immediately ordered to return to port.

Meanwhile, at this time, the British third-rate warship, the Duke, was sailing towards Japan. On the deck, Captain Wilson was deep in thought as he looked at the dense fog behind him...

Chapter 689

“Captain Wilson, it seems the news we got from the Dutch merchants was correct.”

In the dense fog, the Duke sailed towards Japan. On the deck, a middle-aged man in a black tailcoat and white wig stood beside Wilson.

Wilson's attitude towards the middle-aged man was somewhat humble. He said, "Earl Carey, indeed. A few years ago, our warships in India once pursued three unidentified warships. It was said that these three warships were very similar to ours. Now it seems these three warships also came from this Great Yu Empire."

Earl Carey frowned, "This Great Yu Empire is truly strange. According to what we know, this place should have been as ignorant as other indigenous people on other continents. Why, in just a few short years, would there be warships here that can contend with our Britain? It seems we didn't gain an advantage in the exchange of fire just now."

This was also Wilson's concern. He said, "My Lord Earl, the Dutch merchants said that the Great Yu Empire possesses a fleet, and its scale is not small. Our attack on their warship at sea this time will only put us in a disadvantageous position, after all, this place is too far from mainland Britain and too close to the Great Yu Empire."

"Encountering each other in dense fog, with misidentification leading to accidental injury, is a very normal occurrence. This matter only needs to be explained to the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. Then we will send a gift, and the vain emperor will not pursue it further."

"My Lord Earl is right. These natives are very arrogant and fond of saving face, and they are quite indifferent to their generals," Wilson said with a smile, "At least the monarchs of India, Annam, and Burma are all like this."

Carey nodded, "In short, there's no need to worry. The most important thing now is to establish diplomatic relations with Japan. The Dutch and French have already taken a step ahead. The cake of East Asia is huge, and we cannot fall behind."

This time, Carey went to Japan precisely at the behest of British Prime Minister Robert. The news of the Dutch losing the East Asian shipping routes and establishing foreign trade relations with the Great Yu Empire had already spread in Europe.

The goods transported by Dutch merchants from the Great Yu Empire made European countries very envious. This was because the porcelain, tea, and silk from the Great Yu Empire had always been favored by European aristocrats. No matter how many goods the merchant fleet transported from the Great Yu Empire, they would quickly sell out in Europe.

The booming sales of goods brought abundant profits to the Dutch in the past two years, and the gradually declining maritime trade of the Netherlands also showed signs of resurgence. However, the British Empire, suffering from red-eye disease, would not allow its former maritime rival to become strong again.

Therefore, the Dutch chose King Qi in the north of the Great Yu Empire, while they chose Japan. For them, a strong Great Yu Empire did not conform to their interests, because once the Great Yu Empire became strong, their interests in East Asia would be harmed, and this was something no European country could accept.

Even if the Dutch, under the pressure of this King Qi, severed diplomatic ties with Japan, they inwardly hoped that there would be a country in East Asia that could counterbalance the Great Yu Empire.

A turbulent region could bring them more benefits; this was the common value of European countries.

As for this maritime encounter, Carey did it on purpose. His goal was to make the Great Yu Empire understand their strength as a maritime overlord.

Their diplomacy was merely a strategy of carrot and stick. Afterwards, they would give the Great Yu Empire a little something sweet to resolve this crisis.

After all, in his opinion, a mature monarch would not become hostile to a country over an accidental friction.

Thinking of this, Carey showed a smile. He believed that the next market for Europe was here.

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After sailing for two days, Xie Yuan brought the battered Dreadnought warship to anchor at Dengzhou military port. Not long after engaging with the British warship, they encountered the Youzhou, which was also patrolling this sea area. This time, being overly sensitive, he almost ordered a bombardment.

Fortunately, by then, the dense fog had mostly dissipated, and the lookout timely saw clearly that it was their own warship.

The Dreadnought's miserable appearance quickly attracted the attention of naval soldiers on the dock, and several generals ran over to inquire about the situation.

"Go, go, go." Xie Yuan looked dejected. Being caught off guard by the enemy this time meant that Yue Yun, who never liked to suffer losses, would surely be furious.

Thinking of Yue Yun's stern face, he felt a bit scared. However, since there was no escaping the inevitable, he could only take his first mate directly to the naval office in the military port.

“British!”

Xie Yuan’s account almost made Yue Yun’s hair stand on end. He slammed the table and cursed, “Xie Yuan, Xie Yuan, you really embarrassed me! If the Emperor knew about this, where would I put my face?”

Xie Yuan hung his head and said, “General, I thought it was the Youzhou, and I didn’t dare to fire indiscriminately, otherwise it would have been our own men fighting each other. But luckily, none of us were injured this time.”

Yue Yun had been chased by British warships in his early years, and the memory was still fresh, so he instinctively harbored hostility towards the British.

This hostility stemmed partly from hatred for the British, and partly from the fact that British warships were indeed difficult to deal with.

In a one-on-one naval battle, any warship of their navy would probably not be a match for a British warship, after all, the British Navy was rich in combat experience.

In naval warfare, weaponry and equipment were one thing, but experience and command were also very important. However, he was not afraid of British warships, because this sea area was right in front of the Great Yu Empire’s gates. They could recover from a few defeats, while a British defeat in this area would mean withdrawing from this region.

“Hmph, that doesn’t excuse your mistake in this naval battle! You go and find that British warship, otherwise I’ll make you scrub the deck of the warship!”

Xie Yuan’s head retracted. He said, “Yes, General. When I find them, I will definitely give them a good beating and throw all those red-haired devils into the mines as laborers.”

Yue Yun glared at Xie Yuan again, “Then hurry up! I need to report this matter to the Emperor immediately. The British didn’t appear in this sea area for fishing.”

Xie Yuan nodded and turned to leave.

At this time, Yue Yun picked up a pen and wrote a memorial, which he sent with a personal guard to the courier station to be delivered to Qingzhou.

Three days later, this memorial arrived in the imperial study of the Qingzhou temporary palace.

Reading Yue Yun’s memorial, Xiao Ming frowned, and a fire ignited in his heart.

Coming from modern times, he naturally knew that Britain had always played the role of a troublemaker in history; wherever there was war, there would be Britons.

Moreover, these Britons were not only good at dismantling a country from within but also adept at fostering proxies who believed they were their own thugs.

In contemporary Britain, Japan was once heavily supported to counter Russia, and British figures were not absent from the later Russo-Japanese War.

At the same time, the British always referred to themselves as Anglo-Saxons, and during this period, they were extreme white supremacists.

Chapter 690

Lying askew in his seat, Xiao Ming slightly squinted his eyes at the sunlight streaming through the window.

Out of intuition, he instinctively believed that the British would inevitably play a disgraceful role again, and the most likely beneficiary country would be Japan.

After all, a troublemaker is a troublemaker. Creating national conflicts has always been Britain's forte. In contemporary times, as the former British Empire, before the collapse of its worldwide colonies, Britain deliberately left behind a heap of regional conflict hidden dangers around the world.

For example, contemporary India: the plan for India and Pakistan to govern separately was originally good, but Britain insisted on leaving behind the Kashmir region, thus leading to several conflicts between India and Pakistan.

At the same time, Britain unilaterally drew the McMahon Line in South Tibet, China, and also ceded large tracts of Chinese territory to India. This is the origin of the current Sino-Indian border dispute.



In the Middle East, Britain transformed Kuwait from a province of Iraq into a British protectorate. Later, the two countries gained independence separately, but this still gave Iraq an excuse to launch the Gulf War.

And most importantly, as an island nation outside mainland Europe, Britain has long pursued a policy of “splendid isolation.” To prevent the rise of a powerful great power on the European continent that could contend with it, today it would cause trouble for France, tomorrow it would strike at Germany, making Europe restless.

Although the inherent contradictions between European mainland countries were the main factor, Britain’s instigation was also inseparable from the situation.

Xiao Ming naturally abhorred such a country with an innate “troublemaker” aura. Of course, other European mainland countries were not good either, always looking at other races with discriminatory eyes.

Putting down the memorial, Xiao Ming fell into deep thought. The British warship’s bombardment of the Dreadnought this time was nothing less than an act of war. He was not Empress Dowager Cixi, who would rather appease foreign friends than her own servants, nor would he disregard China’s resources to please other nations.

From the moment he came to this world, he was destined to end the rampant bullying of the West in the world. However, the Great Yu Empire’s border troubles had not yet been resolved, and Goryeo and Japan were watching covetously. He did not have the energy to deal with these foreign visitors.

However, it was impossible for him to swallow his anger. So he picked up his pen and wrote a reply on the memorial: “Once the said British warship is discovered, it shall be immediately sunk.”

After writing, Xiao Ming handed the memorial to Qian Dafu, asking him to deliver it to the courier station to be sent back to Qingzhou.

No sooner had Qian Dafu left than Pang Yukun arrived in a hurry. Upon reaching the imperial study, he said to Xiao Ming, "Your Majesty, General Niu Ben has returned."

Xiao Ming was overjoyed upon hearing this. Most of the army had been drawn away for this war, leaving Qingzhou basically like an empty city. This had caused Xiao Ming some unease.

Now that the army had returned, he felt relieved.

After a pause, Pang Yukun continued, "Your Majesty, this time General Niu Ben has brought back Prince Zhao and his son, and Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince, all to Qingzhou."

As he spoke, Pang Yukun watched Xiao Ming intently, as this matter was somewhat sensitive.

"Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince?" Xiao Ming suddenly sighed, "You really know how to leave me with difficult problems."

With that, Xiao Ming left the imperial study and headed towards the council hall. Since Niu Ben had brought the people back, he naturally had to deal with them.

Upon reaching the council hall, Niu Ben and others were already waiting.

Xiao Ming sat down on the dragon throne and said, "General Niu Ben has toiled. Holding Juyong Pass and conquering Chang'an are both great merits. This time, I will surely reward you heavily."

Lu Fei, Qi Guangyi, Bai Mu, and the other generals all smiled upon hearing this, while Niu Ben's expression remained calm. He said, "Your Majesty, this time my merits and demerits are fifty-fifty. I am ashamed before Your Majesty and dare not accept the reward."

Xiao Ming was momentarily stunned. He had once criticized Niu Ben for delaying the war and not breaking through Qingzhou earlier, and Niu Ben's words now were undoubtedly because of this matter.

However, to Xiao Ming, there was another meaning in Niu Ben's words: that he was worried about his merits overshadowing his lord.

The current Niu Ben was no longer the Niu Ben of the past. After laboring in the mines, the current Niu Ben had lost his sharp edge. What he most desired now was probably to live out the rest of his life in peace.

Therefore, in Xiao Ming's view, Niu Ben deliberately made some minor mistakes this time to achieve the purpose of not continuing to be officially enfeoffed.

After all, the current Niu Ben was almost beyond further enfeoffment.

At this time, Xiao Ming looked at Pang Yukun, who nodded to Xiao Ming. Clearly, his meaning was for Xiao Ming to balance the merits and demerits this time and not to further enfeoff Niu Ben.

He nodded and said, "Even so, General Niu Ben's merits outweigh his demerits. However, to silence the idle talk of officials, I will not bestow any additional titles this time. I will instead reward you with three thousand taels of silver."

Niu Ben breathed a sigh of relief in his heart. He hurriedly said, "Thank Your Majesty for your immense grace."

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming asked, "Where are Prince Zhao and his son now? And where are Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince?"

"Reporting to Your Majesty, Prince Zhao and his son have been sent to the Qingzhou prison. Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince, also being rebels, have also been sent to the Qingzhou prison."

Fei Ji was also in the hall. He immediately became anxious and said, "Nonsense! How can Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince be imprisoned? Empress Zhao is nominally the Emperor's mother. Aren't you making the people of the world point fingers at the Emperor?"

Pang Yukun frowned. Filial piety and integrity were the foundation for ministers and monarchs throughout history. Niu Ben's handling of this matter was indeed somewhat inappropriate. He said, "Your Majesty, Empress Zhao cannot be punished with the same crime as Prince Zhao."

As he arrived, he had been thinking about Empress Zhao's problem. Having been in this world for five years, he naturally understood the importance of filial piety and integrity. It was precisely because of this that he said Niu Ben had left him a big problem.

After a pause, he said, "Elder Fei, you immediately go to the Qingzhou prison and bring out Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince. Find a residence for her to temporarily settle."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Fei Ji nodded and turned to leave.

Seeing Fei Ji leave, Pang Yukun spoke frankly, "Is Your Majesty preparing to deal with Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince?"

"Even if Empress Zhao did not make the Thirteenth Prince ascend the throne, she indirectly caused the death of the late Emperor. I can only demote her and the Thirteenth Prince to commoners. What do you think?"

"I think so too, Your Majesty. However, even so, Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince cannot be allowed to leave Qingzhou, lest unscrupulous individuals exploit them in the future," Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming understood Pang Yukun's meaning. In the future, someone might use the names of Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince to revolt, after all, the Great Yu Empire currently only had the north under his control.

"I understand your thoughts. Therefore, I plan to execute Prince Zhao and his son in the East Market as a warning to others, to show those with malicious intentions the consequences of rebellion."

Pang Yukun smiled. He seemingly casually said, “Your Majesty probably intends to show this to the Crown Prince of Chu, right? Also, Your Majesty, are you really not going to reclaim military power from the Prince of Yong?”