

I. Dynasty 851

Chapter 851

Xiao Ming sat on the dragon throne, watching his officials.

In the grand hall, civil and military officials stood in two rows. At this moment, Pang Yukun was elaborating, with a pained expression, on the seven disadvantages of the feudal lords to the Great Yu Empire.

After Pang Yukun, Fei Ji also led a group of officials to present a memorial, explicitly stating that feudal lords were a cancer to the nation.

“Your Majesty, how long has it been since the northern war ended? Now, the south is once again engulfed in war. If this continues, when will the Great Yu Empire ever become wealthy and powerful? I believe the time has come when we can no longer tolerate the feudal lords continuing to wreak havoc,” Fei Ji said passionately.

Niu Ben and Luo Quan exchanged glances. Both were old foxes and immediately understood the play unfolding in the court today.

Pang Yukun and Fei Ji were both using the current chaos in the State of Chu as a pretext for reducing the power of the feudal lords.

After a moment of contemplation, Niu Ben said, “Your Majesty, I believe what Senior Grand Secretary Pang and Elder Fei say is absolutely correct. The tragedy of the feudal lords’ rebellion cannot be

repeated. Moreover, to counter the threat of Western powers, the Great Yu Empire must be united from top to bottom; there can no longer be a state within a state.”

“I second that,” Luo Quan said at the opportune moment.

First the Grand Secretaries, then the chief generals of the Grand Council and the General Staff Department. Now, even the most foolish official in the court understood what was happening.

After driving out the barbarians, the Emperor now intended to unify the Great Yu Empire and thoroughly resolve the problem of the feudal lords.

After a brief silence, officials stepped forward one by one, denouncing the harms of the feudal lords. The entire court was fervent.

In the southwestern corner of the Zhengda Guangming Hall, a reporter from the “Qingzhou Daily” was furiously writing. The content of today’s court assembly would appear in tomorrow’s newspaper.

Facing the agitated officials and generals, Xiao Ming smiled. This was the effect he wanted.

Although it was somewhat shameless to incite officials to step forward and denounce the harms of the feudal lords, as an emperor, how could he not be cunning?

“All you beloved ministers, even so, the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Huainan both rendered great service to the nation in the northern war. Would such an action not make me break my promise?” Xiao Ming appeared somewhat hesitant.

Pang Yukun said, "Since ancient times, rewards and punishments must be clear. After the northern war, Your Majesty already gave them appropriate rewards. Now, reducing their power is for the eternal foundation of the Great Yu Empire. Why should Your Majesty worry?"

"That's right, Your Majesty. If the Prince of Yong and the Prince of Huainan truly harbor great righteousness, they should consider the future of the Great Yu Empire, not their own selfish interests," Fei Ji said.

Xiao Ming sighed. He said, "This matter is truly difficult for me. Let's discuss it another day."

With that, he waved his hand, announcing the adjournment of court. Today's objective had been achieved. He now wanted to send a signal to the feudal lords, making them ponder what they should do now.

After all, before formally issuing an imperial decree, the initiative was entirely in his hands.

After court adjourned, Xiao Ming headed to the imperial study. At this point, a newspaper reporter returned to the newspaper office with his manuscript. After printing the first copy, he immediately sent it to the palace.

"Your Majesty, once this newspaper is released tomorrow, the whole world will know and rejoice," Qian Dafu said, handing the newspaper to Xiao Ming. "I, your old servant, am not worried about this matter of reducing feudal lords' power, but Imperial Consort is now pregnant..."

Xiao Ming frowned. Reducing the power of feudal lords would inevitably affect Cui Xue'er. However, how could he disregard the Great Yu Empire's current situation for the sake of familial affection?

“The Imperial Consort will understand my painstaking efforts. She is a sensible person,” Xiao Ming said. He had made up his mind on this matter and would not change it because of Cui Xue’er.

Qian Dafu nodded. He said no more.

After reviewing the newspaper, Xiao Ming was satisfied with its content. The front-page report meticulously documented the court’s discussion on reducing feudal lords’ power. At the same time, the journalist who wrote the article offered some of his own opinions, analyzing the disadvantages of feudal lords, which met his requirements.

Handing the newspaper to Qian Dafu, Xiao Ming said, “Send it to the newspaper office. Have them publish it tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Qian Dafu responded and left.

After seeing Qian Dafu off, Xiao Ming turned and headed to the imperial harem. For these past few years, he had rarely had time to spend with his family due to state affairs.

Many times, he would come and go in a hurry.

Today’s reminder from Qian Dafu made him suddenly feel that he should have spoken to Cui Xue’er about some matters beforehand, lest she be caught off guard. At the same time, he also hoped Cui Xue’er could play some role in this matter, after all, she was also the Prince of Huainan’s daughter.

Pacing to the bedchamber, a small figure suddenly rushed towards him. At the same time, a childish voice chirped, "Imperial Father!"

"Come, Imperial Father will hold you." Xiao Ming smiled gently, embracing Xiao Yi, who was now over three years old.

Time passed quickly. Xiao Yi had now reached the age for kindergarten in modern times. To prevent Xiao Yi from being influenced by the Great Yu Empire's backward culture, he and Fei Yuer were preparing to personally teach him.

Fei Yuer, Cui Xue'er, Lu Luo, and Ziyuan sat in the pavilion, looking tenderly at the father and son. Although Xiao Ming spent little time with Xiao Yi, Xiao Yi loved clinging to his imperial father the most.

"Your Majesty is busy with countless duties. Why do you have time to come to the garden at this hour today?" Fei Yuer asked with a smile.

Xiao Ming looked at Xiao Yi. The little fellow's eyebrows and mouth were very much like Fei Yuer's, while his eyes and mouth resembled his own. Overall, he looked more like Fei Yuer, which proved the saying that sons resemble their mothers.

He walked over and sat beside the four. Glancing at Cui Xue'er's seven-month pregnant belly, he said, "I have something to say to Imperial Consort today."

Fei Yuer's eyes darted around. She was very intelligent and vaguely guessed what Xiao Ming was going to say. She smiled at Xiao Yi and said, "Yi'er, don't cling to your imperial father anymore. Let's go to the lake and watch the fish together."

As she spoke, Fei Yuer winked at Lu Luo and Ziyuan.

The two understood and rose, following Fei Yuer.

Xiao Yi was a bit unwilling. He grabbed Xiao Ming's hand and said, "Imperial Father, Imperial Father, play with me for a while, just for a while."

Xiao Ming stroked Xiao Yi's small head. The little fellow, with wide eyes, looked at him pitifully. He said helplessly, "You go first. How about Imperial Father plays with you all morning today?"

"Imperial Father's word is bond!" Xiao Yi immediately bounced and ran towards the lake.

After three years of interacting, Cui Xue'er and Xiao Ming were no longer strangers. Because of the child in her belly, she felt an added layer of intimacy with Xiao Ming. Precisely because of this, she could sometimes guess Xiao Ming's thoughts.

Now that only the two of them remained, she suddenly sighed, "Is Your Majesty finally going to reduce the power of the feudal lords?"

"I presume you guessed that. You've been worried about this ever since you entered the palace, haven't you?"

Cui Xue'er nodded, lamenting, "Although that is true, how can I, your humble concubine, bear to see my husband and my father at odds?"

"Therefore, I want you to write a letter to the Prince of Huainan. Tell him that as long as he surrenders his military power, I will not touch him, and the State of Huainan will remain his feudal state."

Chapter 852

A gust of north wind stirred Cui Xue'er's inky hair, and a hint of coolness made her shiver.

Xiao Ming wrapped his cloak around Cui Xue'er. Then he rose and looked at Xiao Yi, who was playing.

For him, this question was indeed somewhat cruel to Cui Xue'er. So he said, "Of course, I will not force you."

"Your Majesty misunderstands me. If Your Majesty has made up your mind, I, your concubine, am willing to write a letter to admonish my imperial father. After all, as the Imperial Consort of the Great Yu Empire, I too wish to see the Great Yu Empire grow stronger and richer, just like the common people of the realm. I believe my imperial father will also understand," Cui Xue'er said clearly.

Xiao Ming looked at Cui Xue'er. After a long moment, he said, "This puts you in a difficult position. My promise to you will not change. Your imperial father and elder brother have rendered service to me, and I am unwilling to meet them on the battlefield."

Cui Xue'er nodded heavily upon hearing this.

The next day, the Qingzhou Daily was published as usual. The content on the front page immediately caused a huge uproar in Qingzhou City. People in the streets and alleys discussed animatedly.

Living in Qingzhou Province, the political center of the Great Yu Empire, they were all extremely sensitive to politics. The information revealed in this report was too much.

In their opinion, the Great Yu Empire was about to become turbulent again.

"If you ask me, these feudal lords should have been dealt with long ago. Otherwise, once they become too powerful, they'll just be trouble in the future."

At a breakfast stall, Zhu Wuliu was eating fried dough sticks and tofu pudding. With the development of industry, the Great Yu Empire's products were becoming increasingly abundant. Especially with the rise of stir-fried dishes, soybeans and rapeseed were widely planted among the common people. The oil for stir-frying subsequently became more abundant and cheaper, even allowing roadside breakfast stalls to deep-fry dough sticks.

Opposite Zhu Wuliu was Zhu Sansi. Hearing this, he said, "You should interfere less in government affairs. Just focus on your business."

"Brother, you're making too much of a fuss. It's published in the newspaper. Can't I discuss it?" Zhu Wuliu pursed his lips.

Zhu Sansi frowned. He said, "In short, it's for your own good. I don't want to meet you on the battlefield one day."

Zhu Wuliu looked puzzled by what he said and could only helplessly shake his head. "Brother, what you said is quite alarming."

Zhu Sansi glanced at his younger brother and sighed. In truth, there were some things he couldn't say directly. He was going south in a few days after returning this time.

He and the other generals already understood the matter of the merchants' council and the State of Chu. It was precisely because of this that he was worried, fearing that his younger brother might also go astray.

This worry was not without reason, because with the development of Qingzhou Province, the common people and merchants were increasingly keen to discuss national politics.

Originally, this was fine, but this would inevitably lead to different voices, some even extreme. He was very worried that Zhu Wuliu might go astray.

In recent years, their Zhu family had become increasingly prosperous. Not only did they own hundreds of mu of fertile land in Zhu Family Village, but Zhu Wuliu's business had also opened up markets in Goryeo. Now, he could earn eight hundred Golden Dragons each month.

Such substantial profits allowed Zhu Wuliu to purchase a large mansion in Qingzhou City. This time, he was staying at his brother's residence upon his return.

"I'm not trying to scare you. You can talk about these things all you want, but remember not to harbor any other intentions," Zhu Sansi reminded him again.

Zhu Wuliu nodded, said nothing more, and instead pricked up his ears to listen to other merchants' discussions. Zhu Sansi, seeing this, sighed slightly.

Just then, he suddenly felt a pat on his shoulder. Turning around, he was startled and immediately stood up to salute, "Division Commander Cui."

The person Zhu Sansi called Division Commander Cui was none other than Cui Shang'an. At this moment, he had a look of indignation, appearing quite displeased.

"You've read the newspaper," Cui Shang'an said seemingly casually.

In Zhu Sansi's hand was a copy of the Qingzhou Daily, which Zhu Wuliu had bought. He couldn't help but smile wryly, "I have."

Cui Shang-an's face showed a self-mocking expression. "Don't worry. This matter is now known throughout Qingzhou Province. It's nothing."

With that, he sat down and ordered a serving of tofu pudding and fried dough sticks.

Zhu Wuliu looked at Cui Shang'an in confusion. He was about to ask something but was interrupted by Zhu Sansi.

"Wuliu, isn't your business very busy? You should go back now," Zhu Sansi ordered.

Zhu Wuliu was startled. Whenever his brother spoke in this tone, it always meant something very important. He responded and walked towards his workshop, worriedly.

Cui Shang-an glanced at the departing Zhu Wuliu. He said, "You are quite concerned about your younger brother."

Zhu Sansi said seriously, "He's been rather thoughtless since he was little. I have no choice but to watch over him."

Cui Shang-an chuckled, "I love my younger sister the same way. It's just that she's become the Imperial Consort now, and I have to bow to her when I see her."

Zhu Sansi was somewhat confused by what Cui Shang-an was thinking. Unfortunately, at this critical juncture, this Cui Shang-an was his direct superior.

He was a division commander, and he was a brigade commander.

Seemingly discerning Zhu Sansi's thoughts, he suddenly laughed, "You needn't worry. I'm not here to persuade you to rebel with me. I've lived in Qingzhou Province for two years, and I know my own capabilities very well, and also the capabilities of the State of Huainan."

After a pause, he continued, "I knew this day would come. With His Majesty's personality, it's impossible for him to tolerate the continued existence of feudal lords. However, even so, it's still uncomfortable when the axe falls on your own head."

"Actually, I don't understand too much, but I understand that there is gain only through sacrifice, don't I?" Zhu Sansi said ambiguously.

The situation of the realm was clear to any discerning eye. Unification was the overwhelming trend. The popularization of the concepts of nation and ethnicity made the common people eager to have a complete nation.

Moreover, they understood that there were still many nations in this world, and some of them were a threat to them.

Cui Shang-an nodded. He said, "You are an honest man, and you speak honestly. Father King cannot defeat His Majesty; I know that much better than he does."

After speaking, he hastily ate his meal and left, leaving a bewildered Zhu Sansi. In the army, he had a good relationship with this Prince of Huainan's son. He truly did not want this Prince's son to do anything foolish, otherwise, he would have no choice but to displease him.

While the matter of reducing feudal lords' power fermented in Qingzhou Province, news also quickly reached the Prince of Yong's residence in Jizhou. Two days had already passed by this time.

When the Prince of Yong finished reading the contents of the newspaper, he was not angry; instead, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The Prince of Yong's consort beside him said, "The previous matter already showed signs. Now, it seems that the reduction of feudal lords' power will indeed happen. Your Highness, His Majesty has not yet explicitly stated his position. This is giving us a way out. I think we should set off for Qingzhou Province tomorrow. The days of anxiety should also come to an end."

The Prince of Yong sighed deeply, "You're right. It's time for this to end."

Chapter 853

Jingzhou.

After reading his daughter's handwritten letter, the Prince of Huainan sighed slightly. Then he picked up his eldest son Cui Shang'an's letter.

To his surprise, Cui Shang'an, as the future Prince of Huainan, not only showed no dissatisfaction in the letter but instead advised him to personally travel to the capital and discuss the matter of reducing feudal lords' power with the Emperor in detail.

One was his daughter, and the other was his legitimate eldest son. The two would surely not harm him. Moreover, in their letters, they both meticulously informed him of the current imperial family's strength.

The Prince of Huainan was no fool. The victory of the Northern Expedition had already made him clearly aware of the disparity between himself and the imperial family. The barbarians, who could have utterly

destroyed the Great Yu Empire in an instant, were crushed in just a few months. What power did he possess to contend with the imperial family?

“Pack up. I will go to the capital,” the Prince of Huainan said to his residence steward. He had made up his mind.

The next day, a cavalry unit of a thousand men departed from Jingzhou and headed towards Qingzhou Province.

Ten days later, this unit arrived outside Qingzhou City.

“Father King.”

Cui Shang’an, having received the news beforehand, was already waiting at the gate. The moment he saw his imperial father, his eyes welled up slightly.

The Prince of Huainan looked at Cui Shang’an, who was clad in military attire. Compared to his time in the State of Huainan, he now possessed more of a general’s demeanor.

Dismounting from his horse, the Prince of Huainan walked before Cui Shang’an and heavily patted his shoulder. He said, “They say the imperial army trains people best. It seems those words are true.”

Cui Shang’an smiled. “Father King, those words are absolutely correct. In the army, not a single general treats your son as the Prince of Huainan. They treat ordinary soldiers and nobles equally.”

“That’s why the Emperor was able to easily defeat the barbarians,” the Prince of Huainan said sincerely.

If he had harbored any dissatisfaction when he was in the State of Huainan, now he had none whatsoever.

To gauge the imperial family’s strength, he had deliberately observed the changes happening in the imperial family’s territories.

It could be said that he was constantly in shock throughout his journey.

Astonishing changes were occurring in the former Yan and Wei territories, which were recovered two years after the northern war ended.

Unbeknownst to him, the production teams that were originally promoted in Qingzhou Province had now covered these areas. Under the management of the production teams, the land that had been abandoned due to war was now regaining vitality.

The influence of powerful families, both in the countryside and in prefectures and counties, was rapidly declining. Many powerful families had even become indistinguishable from wealthy commoner households.

But this was not the most astonishing thing he saw. With the rise of production teams, many public schools were established in these areas.

From the formerly powerful families and nobles down to the common people, all children had to receive the Great Yu Empire's new education policy education in public schools. And to encourage impoverished common people to enter public schools, the cost of public schools was entirely borne by the imperial court. Studying in public schools was completely free, and even the printed textbooks were free.

This policy put the Great Yu Empire's nobles and common people on the same starting line. The selection of talents would be entirely determined by examinations.

As a feudal lord, he immediately recognized the power of this policy. From then on, commoners would have more opportunities to rise.

However, these were just the basic things in villages and counties. After entering Jinling Province, he discovered even more important things: various machines he had never seen before.

When he was in Jinling Province, he specifically stayed for a day. That day, accompanied by officials from Jinling Province, he visited the industrial zone under construction in Jinling City.

There, he witnessed steam-powered textile workshops, cotton ginning workshops, white sugar workshops, distilleries, and the large shipyard under construction in Jinling City.

After leaving Jinling Province, he traveled northward. In Laiwu, he saw a railway about to be opened.

Following the railway, he headed towards Qingzhou Province. Along the way, he saw a steam locomotive undergoing trial runs. This enormous steel monster roared past, frightening him considerably.

And upon arriving in Qingzhou Province, its prosperity and wonders made him abandon his last shred of illusion.

Because he realized that the gap between Huainan and the current imperial court was like the difference between a wealthy metropolis and a poor village.

He also finally understood that the current Emperor was not wary of their military might but simply did not wish to engage in another internecine conflict.

“Father King, you...” Cui Shang’an looked at his imperial father with surprise and a hint of relief in his eyes.

Just as the father and son were reuniting, a carriage suddenly approached from within the city. The carriage stopped, revealing the Prince of Yong’s face.

“Prince of Huainan, no more dawdling! I’ve been waiting for you to meet the Emperor with me these past few days. It gives us a bit of confidence, after all.” The Prince of Yong shouted loudly.

The Prince of Huainan smiled helplessly, “After this journey, I have less and less confidence. Let’s go. Better today than tomorrow. Today, we will go meet His Majesty.”

With that, the two headed towards the imperial palace together.

At this time, Xiao Ming had already learned of the Prince of Huainan's arrival in Qingzhou Province. He said to Qian Dafu, "Prepare lunch. This noon, I might have to use the tactic of 'releasing military power with a cup of wine.'"

Qian Dafu smiled, "The three princes personally coming to the capital already shows their sincerity. This time, Your Majesty's wishes will come true."

A broad smile appeared on Xiao Ming's face. "The Prince of Ruyang, who has been silent all this time, has also arrived. With these three princes resolved, this reduction of feudal lords' power will be successful."

Qian Dafu chuckled for a moment, then turned and left.

Half an hour later, Xiao Ming received the news that the three princes requested an audience. He went to the Hall of Supreme Harmony, where he would receive the three this time.

Seating himself in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, soon after, the Prince of Huainan, the Prince of Yong, and the Prince of Ruyang arrived, led by eunuchs.

Seeing Xiao Ming, the three said in unison, "Long live, long live, long live our Emperor!"

"Dispense with the formalities." Xiao Ming now exuded an imperial majesty. He had the three take their seats, then said, "Prince of Huainan, Prince of Yong, Prince of Ruyang, your coming to the capital this

time is truly a surprise to me. To reward the three of you, I have specially prepared Qingzhou's delicacies for you to feast upon."

The Prince of Yong was not unfamiliar with Qingzhou Province. He naturally knew the taste of Qingzhou Province's delicacies and couldn't help but swallow. "Your Majesty is too kind. But speaking of it, Qingzhou Province's delicacies are indeed unparalleled. I, your humble servant, used to want to linger here every time I came, but unfortunately, as a feudal lord, I couldn't stay too long in the capital. However, soon I will be able to freely enjoy myself in this Qingzhou Province."

"Imperial Uncle, there's no need to be so polite. Since Imperial Uncle likes Qingzhou Province, I naturally welcome it. Perhaps in the future, I'll even have a companion for conversation." Xiao Ming and the Prince of Yong's gazes met, and their words basically reached a consensus.

The Prince of Yong's words just now had clearly conveyed his intention: he wanted to abandon his feudal state and live a carefree life as a prince in Qingzhou Province.

Xiao Ming naturally welcomed this, after all, the Prince of Yong's feudal state was too close to Qingzhou Province and was rich in resources. By taking control of this area, the north would henceforth be completely open.

Chapter 854

Palace maids shuttled back and forth in the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Dishes were continuously laid on the tables, and the aroma grew richer.

The Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang watched the Emperor and the Prince of Yong, who were in perfect sync, their hearts filled with complex emotions.

They were not of the same imperial clan after all. The Prince of Yong could calmly relinquish his feudal state, but they could not, for to them, this was their ancestors' legacy. How could they easily hand it over? At the very least, the imperial court should give them satisfactory arrangements.

Xiao Ming's peripheral vision swept over the Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang. He had a plan in mind.

After a moment of contemplation, he did not rush to mention the reduction of feudal lords' power. Instead, he greeted them, "Gentlemen, the food and wine are ready. You have traveled thousands of li to get here. Today, I will drink freely with you all."

With that, Xiao Ming raised his wine cup.

Seeing this, the Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang immediately picked up their wine cups and drank the white wine in one gulp.

Xiao Ming nodded, also finishing the white wine in his cup. Then, without mentioning anything about reducing feudal lords' power, he spoke of interesting anecdotes from Qingzhou Province.

After three rounds of drinks, the atmosphere in the Hall of Supreme Harmony gradually relaxed. At this point, Xiao Ming smiled. The time for negotiation had arrived. "The three of you coming to the palace to see me today must surely be for the matter of reducing feudal lords' power, right?" He finally brought the conversation to the main topic.

The Prince of Yong's face was flushed from drink. The Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang also drank heartily.

“Yes, Your Majesty. We came to the capital precisely for this matter,” the Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang exchanged glances. The alcohol had emboldened them considerably.

The Prince of Yong, meanwhile, directly said, “Isn’t it just reducing feudal lords’ power? Who in the world can’t see it now? Today is different from the past. Your Majesty is a man of grand ambition. This Great Yu Empire can no longer continue in chaos. For the sake of the Great Yu Empire, I will be the first to support Your Majesty.”

After a pause, he continued, “However, as for reducing feudal lords’ power, I hope Your Majesty can preserve our wealth and glory.”

The Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang nodded. The Prince of Ruyang said, “The Prince of Yong is absolutely right. Now, all the civil and military officials in the court are clamoring for the reduction of feudal lords’ power. This shows that it is the general trend. I, your humble prince, dare not go against the current and willingly accept the decree to reduce feudal lords’ power. However, we have guarded the Great Yu Empire’s borders and expanded its territory for so many years. Even if we have no achievements, we have toiled. I hope Your Majesty will consider this.”

The Prince of Huainan also said, “The matter of reducing feudal lords’ power is already a foregone conclusion. Our request now is not much. We hope Your Majesty will show mercy.”

With the topic now openly discussed, Xiao Ming felt relieved. In truth, he understood that the three had already guessed that reducing the feudal lords’ power was something he supported.

Because articles from the newspaper would not be published without his review, and this was something everyone knew.

After a moment of thought, he said, “My dear ministers, you worry unnecessarily. I have no intention of depriving you of your feudal states, nor do the ministers wish to put you to death. Your feudal states are still yours. However, from now on, military power will be reclaimed. In government affairs, you will obey the imperial court’s orders. From then on, the feudal states will have to pay a portion of their taxes to the imperial court. In other words, you will still be the Prince of Huainan and the Prince of Ruyang in your feudal states.”

This time, Xiao Ming did not wish to carry out the reduction of feudal lords’ power too aggressively, as it would only be counterproductive.

So he decided to adopt a gentler approach: to turn the feudal states into their private domains, merely taking back their military power and making them lose independence in government affairs.

This way, they would become feudal lords in name only, no longer posing a threat to the Great Yu Empire, but merely ordinary officials.

The Prince of Huainan was silent for a moment. For him, this was already acceptable. Everything except military power was retained. In Jingzhou, he would still be a noble prince.

“Thank you, Your Majesty, for your grace.” The Prince of Huainan bowed.

The Prince of Ruyang also decided to accept this proposal and stood up, saying, “Thank you, Your Majesty, for your grace.”

The Prince of Yong had originally planned to give up his feudal state. Hearing this, he couldn't help but be overjoyed. He said gratefully, "Your Majesty is wise! Your Majesty is wise!"

Xiao Ming coughed. He said, "However, let me make one thing clear beforehand. You must not be vague about any imperial court decrees. Otherwise, I'm afraid I won't be able to protect you."

The three's expressions turned serious. They bowed and said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

The matter of reducing feudal lords' power was easily resolved. Xiao Ming was in a very good mood. In his opinion, the success of this reduction of feudal lords' power was entirely due to the current strength of Qingzhou Province. Otherwise, this reduction of feudal lords' power could very likely have led to rebellion.

But now that they understood his strength, the three dared not harbor any adventurous thoughts, because if they did, they would completely lose everything, and even drag down their relatives.

With the emotional burden lifted, the atmosphere in the Hall of Supreme Harmony became even more relaxed. The four resumed drinking and enjoying the delicacies.

The banquet ended at three in the afternoon.

Having Qian Dafu see the three feudal lords off, he himself went to the imperial study to draft an imperial edict. To avoid prolonged delays, he decided to finalize the matter of reducing feudal lords' power quickly.

Once the imperial edict was issued, this reduction of feudal lords' power would become a foregone conclusion.

After half an hour spent preparing three imperial edicts, Xiao Ming intended to promulgate them to the three at the court assembly. This way, the matter of reducing feudal lords' power could be considered concluded.

The next day, at the court assembly, Xiao Ming formally announced the decision to reduce feudal lords' power. The Prince of Huainan, the Prince of Ruyang, and the Prince of Yong all awaited the imperial edict in the Zhengda Guangming Hall.

At this point, Qian Dafu took out Xiao Ming's imperial edicts. He read each one and then handed it to the corresponding feudal prince.

In the imperial edict, Xiao Ming clearly stipulated the content of the reduction of feudal lords' power, ordering the three to formally hand over their military power to the accompanying Imperial Guard generals upon returning to their feudal states.

The Imperial Guard generals would select elites from their armies, retrain them, and integrate them into the Great Yu Empire's military system. They would no longer have the right to interfere with the military.

Besides the imperial edict, to appease the three, he also bestowed upon them iron certificates exempting them from death, to show his sincerity.

With the grand plan of reducing feudal lords' power settled, Xiao Ming felt completely relieved. From then on, the Great Yu Empire took another step towards unification. Next, he would focus on dealing with the State of Chu.

At the same time, he also turned his attention overseas. In recent years, the turmoil around the Great Yu Empire often involved Westerners.

This greatly displeased him, but he had endured it for the sake of national unity. Now, with unification in sight, his desire for revenge was once again stirred.

After all, if not for their interference, the Great Yu Empire would not have lost so many people.

As he was thinking, Pang Yukun stepped forward and said, "Your Majesty, the first batch of firearms has already been shipped to Lin'an. It includes twenty thousand matchlock guns and eight thousand flintlock guns. Li Chuyuan is willing to pay three million taels of silver for these firearms."

"Three million taels of silver?" Xiao Ming frowned. "Tell Li Chuyuan's people that the imperial court does not accept silver. Have him exchange it for Golden Dragons at the bank before trading with us. And all his transactions with the imperial court must use the new currency."

Pang Yukun understood. He showed a mischievous smile and said, "Yes, Your Majesty, I understand."

Chapter 855

Cui Xue'er looked at her father standing before her, a bit surprised.

Coming to her senses, tears suddenly welled up in her eyes. She hadn't seen her father since entering the palace, and now, seeing each other again, she felt a pang of sadness.

Xiao Ming stood behind the Prince of Huainan. After court adjourned, he brought the Prince of Huainan to the palace. This visit to Qingzhou Province was just the beginning. After these feudal lords returned, their specific actions would be observed. Therefore, Xiao Ming dared not be careless. He still needed to play the emotional card with the strongest among the three princes.

This was not because Xiao Ming feared the Prince of Huainan, but because he was unwilling to casually ignite a war and needlessly deplete national strength.

When he was just an ordinary person, he also used to enjoy casually shouting about fighting and killing, but ever since he became Emperor, he became increasingly reluctant to easily declare war.

For him, unless a matter absolutely required war to solve, he would not easily initiate it. After all, the saying "Though a country is vast, if it is warlike, it will perish" was not something the ancients said lightly.

"I, your humble servant, greet Imperial Consort." The Prince of Huainan was also somewhat emotional, but he strenuously suppressed his feelings and bowed to Cui Xue'er.

Cui Xue'er was startled for a moment. Only then did she realize that they were no longer simply father and daughter. Now, her father had to address her as Imperial Consort.

Sighing faintly in her heart, Cui Xue'er said, "Prince of Huainan, dispense with the formalities."

Hearing this, the Prince of Huainan then dared to rise.

Xiao Ming, seeing this, said, "Prince of Huainan, there's no need for formalities. Although Xue'er is now Imperial Consort, she is still your daughter. You may speak as father and daughter."

Realizing that his presence made the Prince of Huainan somewhat constrained, he said, "Qian Dafu, you are to accompany the Imperial Consort out of the palace today. Let the Prince of Huainan and the Imperial Consort gather with Cui Shang'an at his residence for a few days. It's rare for the Prince of Huainan to visit Qingzhou Province; we can't let him leave disappointed."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Qian Dafu responded. Cui Xue'er and the Prince of Huainan also smiled. Now, their family could finally be reunited.

Having settled this matter, Xiao Ming headed towards the imperial study. His earlier statement that he had matters to attend to was not an excuse; he had seen Princess Pingyang walking towards the imperial study.

Turning and leaving, Xiao Ming arrived at the imperial study. At this time, Princess Pingyang had also just arrived.

Seeing Xiao Ming, Princess Pingyang said, "Congratulations, Your Majesty, on this double blessing today."

"Double blessing? What double blessing?"

Xiao Ming smiled. He was growing more and more appreciative of Princess Pingyang, for both from the secret guards' reports and his own observations, Princess Pingyang had been diligently building railways.

He naturally approved of such a diligent aunt.

After becoming familiar with Xiao Ming, Princess Pingyang learned the art of interacting with him while still maintaining reverence for imperial authority. She said teasingly, "The first blessing is the successful reduction of feudal lords' power, leaving the Great Yu Empire with three fewer feudal lords. The second is that the railways connecting Qingzhou Province to Laiwu, Dengzhou, and Kaiping are about to open. Isn't this a double blessing?"

"Open for traffic?" Xiao Ming asked in surprise, "Really?"

"I wouldn't dare jest with Your Majesty about this. According to Your Majesty's plan, we are to complete the opening of these three railways by the end of this year. We are just a little ahead of schedule," Princess Pingyang said. "However, all this is due to the slaves provided by Your Majesty and the ample parts from the steel workshops."

Xiao Ming nodded slightly. It was already winter. Another year was passing imperceptibly.

Although the main event this year was the expulsion of the barbarians, the Great Yu Empire's industry and construction had been ongoing. This railway was just one part of it. In addition, to solve the problem of ore, the Mining Department had dispatched a large number of personnel to various parts of the country to find various large mines.

Once these mines marked on the blueprints were discovered, the Mining Department would then establish mining sites in cooperation with the local provincial offices.

Furthermore, steel workshops, steam engine workshops, and machinery workshops were all increasing their production lines. Along the coast, three large shipyards were also added.

These shipyards were different from the previous backward manual workshops. They extensively adopted steam engine power, and some specialized mechanical equipment for shipyards also began to be installed.

Ever since the steam warship appeared, the idea of an ironclad warship had been circling in his mind. These mechanized shipyards were precisely being prepared to build steam-powered ironclad warships.

“Good! Good! Good!” Xiao Ming repeatedly said “good” three times. He rose and walked to the map in the imperial study. Three railway lines were marked on the map.

These three lines were not straight, but winding like earthworms. In the construction plan, the railway focused on passing through mining areas, which was why they had such a shape.

“Once opened, the three places will be connected, and from then on, cities along the railway will no longer have to worry about coal and iron. This way, the industrial zone of Qingzhou Province can be expanded,” Xiao Ming said, his hands trembling slightly with excitement.

A tragic truth was that since the industrialization of Qingzhou Province, the Great Yu Empire’s development had been limited to a few cities.

The reason was none other than the bottleneck in resource transportation.

The Great Yu Empire was not Britain. The distance from south to north, even within Qingzhou Province, was vast. Transporting resources in this sprawling country was extremely difficult. Relying on traditional river transport and horse-drawn carriages was far from enough.

Therefore, Xiao Ming could only rely on resource-rich areas to build an industrial base, and then, with an industrial base, build railways nationwide to connect the national resource transportation network.

To get rich, build roads first. This was not an empty talk. Even in the 21st century, regions lacking transportation were still very poor, because they simply lacked transportation conditions.

Princess Pingyang's face broke into a smile. This was the first time she had seen Xiao Ming so happy. She said, "However, the three railways have indeed consumed a lot of silver from the national treasury."

"Even if we are poor, we must build them," Xiao Ming said decisively. He said, "Your Railway Department's task has just begun. After these three railways, you are to build the Qingliao railway along the line of Youzhou, Jinzhou, and Raoyou. On the south side, starting from Laizhou, build the Qingjin railway, passing through Xuzhou, Huaizhou, Bozhou, and Jinling. Then, build a railway from Qingzhou Province westward to Chang'an, and from Chang'an southward to Bashu."

Princess Pingyang was dumbfounded upon hearing this. This project seemed simply incredible to her. She said, "Your Majesty, this is not a task that can be completed in a few years."

"I know that, of course. Therefore, this is a long-term plan. I have meticulously planned the specific railway routes for you. Whether it takes ten or twenty years, the Great Yu Empire's railway network must be built," Xiao Ming's tone was firm.

Sensing Xiao Ming's determination, Princess Pingyang nodded heavily. She said, "With Your Majesty's words, the Railway Department will surely go all out."

Xiao Ming nodded. The railway network on the map consisted of routes chosen after thorough deliberation in modern times. This saved the Railway Department a great deal of time.

Now, their task was to act as the Great Yu Empire's tentacles. Wherever the railway extended, their army could quickly be deployed.

This way, he could truly control unstable areas.

Chapter 856

A wisp of cold wind blew, and Ye Qingyun instinctively tightened his clothes.

Days ago, a cold current swept in from the north, and Goryeo seemed to enter winter overnight.

"Army Commander Ye, Li Cheng-jae's progress is smooth. They have now controlled twenty-seven cities in southern Goryeo. Only Busan City remains."

“Busan City?” Ye Qingyun looked at the sand table on the desk. It had just been created by someone dispatched from the General Staff Department.

From this sand table, he could survey the entire island of Goryeo.

Qu Dong nodded, “Behind Busan City is a basin-shaped mountain. The city is named after it. In addition, according to the General Staff Department’s order, we are to build a dual-use military and civilian port in Busan. This way, the navy can directly go to Japan from Busan City, thereby controlling Japan’s maritime borders.”

Ye Qingyun nodded, “His Majesty once said this place is very suitable for building a deep-water port. So, is Li Cheng-jae encountering any difficulties in taking Busan now?”

“Like Suwon City, Japan attaches great importance to Busan City. And compared to Suwon City, Japan has managed Busan City for a longer time. There are a large number of Japanese soldiers in the city, and it can be said to be a city with strong defenses and powerful artillery,” Qu Dong said.

Winter was fast approaching. For Ye Qingyun, he did not want to continue fighting in winter. He said, “Busan City is now Japan’s only stronghold in Goryeo. Once we eliminate this place, Japan will be completely driven out of Goryeo. To protect this place, Japan will surely exert its full strength.”

After a pause, he continued, “It will probably be difficult for Li Cheng-jae to take this city alone. Since His Majesty wants this city, we will directly dispatch troops to Busan City. This way, we can end the war before winter arrives, and also naturally occupy this city.”

“Yes, Army Commander Ye.” Qu Dong agreed with Ye Qingyun’s approach. The cold winter was a test for both soldiers and equipment.

Moreover, due to the extreme cold, the winter port would sometimes freeze, which would definitely be a disaster for soldiers far away in Goryeo, as it would mean difficulties in resupply.

Having issued the order, Ye Qingyun continued to look at the sand table. He then planted a dragon flag on Busan City.

On November 27th, after eight days of marching, Ye Qingyun led eight thousand soldiers to Busan City and rendezvoused with Li Cheng-jae's army.

"Army Commander Ye, the number of Japanese soldiers in Busan City is no less than... and there is also a mercenary army composed of Westerners. They fight fiercely, and their firearms are more advanced than Japan's."

Upon seeing Ye Qingyun, Li Cheng-jae scurried to him, pouring out his grievances.

"Mercenaries!" Ye Qingyun frowned. He understood that Li Cheng-jae was very worried. The defeat in battle made him lose face.

However, this excuse still annoyed him somewhat. "Japan has never had any Western mercenaries."

"Not before, but now they do," a voice suddenly came.

Ye Qingyun looked in the direction the voice came from and saw Wang Xuan walking towards him.

“You, the head of the secret guards, have appeared here. It seems Li Cheng-jae didn’t lie.” Ye Qingyun’s frown deepened. “Didn’t the navy blockade Goryeo’s coast? How could there still be ships coming?”

Wang Xuan glanced at Busan City not far away. This city was built against a mountain, facing the sea. Only two sides were suitable for siege warfare.

He said, “A warship is merely a seed falling into a river in the vast ocean. Such a large sea area cannot be without flaws. Moreover, Japan is mobilizing its navy to counterattack. Yue Yun can only concentrate his forces on eliminating them first.”

Ye Qingyun spread his hands. “Then let’s talk about these mercenaries. What exactly is going on with them?”

“Edo Ichiaki’s body has already returned to Japan. This incident greatly shook all the Japanese daimyo, especially Yamada. He must be on the verge of going mad now, because the daimyo themselves already have many conflicts,” Wang Xuan said. “In fact, Yamada is not a daimyo from a long-standing lineage in Japan. He comes from humble origins; he was a farmer before. Later, he followed the Fujiwara family of Japan on campaigns south and north. He gradually gained the Fujiwara family’s favor, and finally, relying on the Fujiwara family’s power, he achieved his current status. However, the Japanese daimyo still look down on him from the bottom of their hearts. Precisely because of this, Yamada’s actions are so extreme.”

Ye Qingyun said lazily, “I don’t care about his past. Now he is our enemy. Whether he is a daimyo or a farmer, he must pay the price now.”

Wang Xuan shook his head. "As the saying goes, 'know yourself and your enemy, and you will win a hundred battles.' You are still a brute. Defeating Japan in Goryeo is one thing, but attacking the Japanese mainland is another. Utilizing the conflicts among the daimyo is the fundamental way to dismember Japan. Once Yamada Nobunaga loses prestige, then the Japanese daimyo will probably continue to fight among themselves. At that time, opening up the Japanese market will be much easier."

Ye Qingyun rubbed his head painfully. He was very familiar with Wang Xuan now. This secret guard commander was becoming increasingly narcissistic, always lecturing others.

He immediately changed the subject, "Let's talk about the situation in Busan City. What exactly is going on with this mercenary army?"

"They were recommended to Yamada by the British man who was with him. Edo Ichiaki's death greatly damaged his reputation. If Busan were also lost, it would mean the complete failure of his plan to send troops to Goryeo. So now, he wants to defend Busan City at all costs. This mercenary force, numbering only two thousand men, entered Japan at this time. From what we understand, Western countries extensively use mercenaries during colonization; it's much more cost-effective than sacrificing their own soldiers."

"Two thousand men?" Ye Qingyun's expression relaxed. "I might worry if it were twenty thousand, but two thousand is truly insignificant."

As Ye Qingyun and his group were speaking, a tall, red-haired Swede on the Busan city wall was observing the army outside the city through his telescope.

After learning about the Great Yu Empire soldiers' equipment, he cursed, "This is not a simple army."

Beside him was a shorter, golden-haired British man. A short-barreled firearm hung at his waist, and a longsword was on his right side.

Taking the telescope from the tall man, he carefully observed and said, "Our purpose this time is not to help Japan defend the city, but to test the strength of the Great Yu Empire army. Now, to deal with the threat of this country, all of Europe is very nervous."

"Those damned nobles should be nervous! Never has a yellow-skinned nation possessed such aggression! Goryeo has already been taken by them. Japan is probably their next target to devour, and after that, it will probably be Europe's colonies."

Chapter 857

A chilling atmosphere permeated the battlefield. The confrontation between the Busan City garrison and the Great Yu Empire army seemed to freeze the very air.

As the Swede and the British man were speaking, a robust middle-aged man wearing a black tricorn hat, a red tailcoat military uniform, white breeches, and black leather boots ascended the city wall.

The middle-aged man had brown hair, blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion indicating his fondness for wine.

"Robert, how are you feeling now?" Philip yelled rudely. He was Portuguese, and this mercenary army was under his command.

“Terrible. You’ve sent us to hell this time. God grant that we can still leave here alive,” the Swede, called Robert, complained.

Philip looked at the Great Yu Empire army that had appeared outside the city, and his face gradually turned grim. This army stood five hundred meters from Busan City. Each soldier wore a green high-collared tunic, and their gleaming black leather boots were even prettier than his favorite boots.

Most importantly, there were thirty-six field cannons positioned in front of the army. They had never seen such cannons in any Asian country.

“This is indeed a bit difficult. However, Japan is paying us a high price. As long as we complete this mission, we can go home and enjoy ourselves,” Philip encouraged his companion. “Guys, hold on! Guys, we’ll bombard them fiercely with our cannons later. Japan’s cannons are simply too terrible.”

Having said this, Philip revealed the wild glint of a gambler.

Outside the city, Ye Qingyun and Wang Xuan’s conversation had ended. After informing Ye Qingyun about the mercenaries inside the city, Wang Xuan departed for Haigucheng.

There, he would continue to be responsible for gathering intelligence on Japan and the West.

After seeing off the secret guard personnel, Ye Qingyun and Qu Dong exchanged glances. He said, “These mercenaries have their own firearms. Their firearms are probably much better than Japan’s. This time, we need to be careful and try to avoid casualties. Also, we need to let these Westerners taste our might.”

Qu Dong nodded confidently. Although Busan City was considered a large city in Goryeo, the difference between a large city here and a large city in the Great Yu Empire was immense. Busan City's walls were only five meters high. Moreover, they currently didn't care about the city walls or the city gate.

Ye Qingyun spoke, and the authority for battlefield deployment was given to him. At this point, he ordered the artillery to switch to fuzed shells. As was customary, they would first eliminate the cannons on the city wall.

At the same time, he ordered Li Cheng-jae to prepare ladders for scaling the city. This time, he decided to adopt a completely new tactic: Li Cheng-jae's Goryeo troops would be the main attackers, while his soldiers would serve as a skirmish line to assist Li Cheng-jae in battle.

He knew very well that these mercenaries were all battle-hardened veterans. If they used their old methods, the casualties would undoubtedly be considerable.

All preparations complete, Qu Dong pointed at the main city wall and shouted, "Fire!"

"Boom, boom, boom..."

Thirty-six field cannons roared. Cannonballs shot straight towards the top of Busan City's walls.

The moment the cannons fired, the mercenaries instinctively hid behind the battlements. They had expected solid shot to impact the wall, but the shells exploded immediately after hitting the city wall.

Under the immense power, the battlements shattered like tofu. Some soldiers, who hadn't managed to dodge in time, were struck by flying shell fragments. Their bodies were sent soaring through the air, falling into pools of blood.

"Damn it! Damn it! How are they using explosive shells?" Robert shouted, his ears ringing, almost deaf.

Philip was also in a terrible state. Now he finally understood why the Japanese had hired them at such an absurdly high price.

"Stop complaining! Return fire immediately! I don't want to die here!" Philip shouted, continuously pulling artillerymen up from the ground. "Take out their artillery position!"

Seizing the gap while the Great Yu Empire army was reloading, the artillerymen immediately rushed to their cannons. These twelve cannons were brought to Busan City with their ships. They were British-made cast iron cannons with a range of three li.

Loading their shells, they aimed at the Great Yu Empire artillery position below the city. The shells from the twelve cannons whizzed away.

At this moment, Qu Dong was in front of the artillery position. He had been observing the situation on the city wall. Seeing a group of Westerners returning fire with cannons, he immediately shouted, "Attention!"

No sooner had his voice fallen than black solid shot, like lightning, rushed towards them. The shells left twelve impact points in front of the artillery position, with two of them almost hitting their field cannons.

At the same time, Japan's cannons also began to roar, but their shells' range was too short, posing almost no threat as they rolled in front of them.

"Cunning Westerners!" Qu Dong frowned deeply. The Western mercenaries did not concentrate their twelve cannons together but dispersed them among the Japanese cannons. This made it difficult for their artillery to return fire.

"Sharpshooters!" Qu Dong shouted loudly. For him, there was now a cheaper way to counterattack.

Under his command, ten sharpshooters moved beyond the artillery position, forming a skirmish line and approaching the city wall. At three hundred meters from the city wall, they used the terrain as cover to fire.

A mercenary soldier, who was reloading a cannon, was completely unaware. As they continued to aim, a bullet suddenly struck his chest.

At the same time, several other artillerymen were also wounded.

Philip grew even more terrified. He saw what the enemy had just done. "That's three hundred meters! Damn it, how did they do that?"

Robert was also stunned at this moment. He said, "Even our rifled firearms only have a range of over two hundred meters, Philip, you're going to get us killed this time."

Despite saying that, Robert still commanded his soldiers to counterattack, because they understood the cost of failure. Now, they could only fight desperately.

Artillery continued to roar on the battlefield. The Great Yu Empire's artillery grew fiercer and fiercer. Every bombardment of the city wall took the lives of mercenaries.

Some battlements on the city wall collapsed with a roar amidst the explosions, leaving that section of the wall bare. However, the exchange of fire between the two sides did not stop.

"Watch out!"

Under another round of mercenary artillery fire, Qu Dong suddenly pushed the artilleryman in front of him aside. Just then, a solid shot squarely hit the wheel of a field cannon.

With a "boom," the field cannon's wheel deformed under the impact of the shell.

Looking at the unbalanced field cannon, Qu Dong angrily said, "Switch to lime bombs! Have Li Cheng-jae attack the city!"

After more than a dozen rounds of bombardment, Busan City's walls were already riddled with holes. The mercenaries lost seven or eight cannons, and many personnel died, while Japanese soldiers suffered even heavier casualties.

For him, now was the time to attack the city.

On the city wall, the mercenaries cheered for hitting a Great Yu Empire cannon. Just then, they saw another flash of cannon fire.

Instinctively, they scrambled to hide, only hearing the dull thud of the cannonball. This sound was clearly different from previous times.

Raising his head in surprise, he saw the city wall covered in white powder. Philip, being an veteran soldier, instantly realized what it was: a lime bomb.

Chapter 858

“My eyes!”

“Water, water!”

“...”

Painful screams from mercenary soldiers and Japanese soldiers continuously rang out from the city wall covered in lime powder.

“This is lime powder!” Philip’s warning came too late. Now, a large number of soldiers, tormented by this lime powder, had lost their combat effectiveness.

Just then, a melodious bugle call suddenly sounded on the battlefield, followed by loud shouts of “kill” that echoed throughout the battlefield.

After using lime bombs to harass the soldiers on the city wall, Qu Dong seized the opportunity to have Li Cheng-jae launch a charge, while eight thousand Great Yu Empire soldiers advanced towards Busan City in a skirmish line.

They walked and fired, providing cover for Li Cheng-jae’s soldiers assaulting the city.

The arrival of the Great Yu Empire soldiers seemed to boost the Goryeo soldiers’ morale. They carried ladders and frantically charged towards the Japanese.

In Goryeo’s official propaganda, the Great Yu Empire came to help Goryeo drive away Japan. Therefore, the Goryeo common people’s attitude towards the Great Yu Empire soldiers gradually shifted from initial hostility to friendliness.

Li Cheng-jae’s face was excited. Now, only Busan City remained in Goryeo. Once Busan City was captured, according to the agreement, southern Goryeo would be his.

So, after the siege began, he became exceptionally fanatical, continuously urging his generals to desperately attack the city.

The Japanese soldiers and mercenaries on the Busan City wall had already been stunned. They had not yet recovered from the chaos caused by the lime bombs.

Dense masses of Goryeo soldiers, carrying ladders, had already reached the foot of the city wall, and most critically, Great Yu Empire soldiers were scattered across the long battlefield, continuously firing at the city wall. Their soldiers constantly suffered casualties.

“Philip, this city cannot be held. Too many of our brothers have died. We cannot continue like this. Let’s retreat,” Robert bitterly advised.

His arm had been struck by a bullet, and blood was now continuously gushing out. The other soldiers were in no better condition.

The intensity of this war was no less than any battle in Europe. Relying on their two thousand mercenaries alone could not change the tide of battle.

Other core mercenaries also looked expectantly at Philip. Mercenaries exchanged their lives for money, but they did not want to die in this accursed place.

Philip no longer insisted. At least they had completed another mission. Now, they had a full understanding of the Great Yu Empire’s military strength.

Upon returning to Manila, their intelligence would be enough to earn them a considerable sum of money.

While the two were discussing, the Japanese flag-leader defending Busan City walked up to them and demanded, “Why are you not returning fire? Return fire immediately! Otherwise, I will kill you!”

Philip looked up. They were all men who lived by licking blood from the blade. How could they fear the intimidation of this Japanese flag-leader?

Staying here meant certain death. Fleeing still offered a chance of survival. Now, the Great Yu Empire’s siege tied down most of Japan’s forces, making it a good opportunity to escape through the city’s waterways.

“Go to hell!” Philip cursed in Portuguese. Then he punched the Japanese flag-leader, knocking him unconscious.

“Brothers, retreat!” Philip shouted loudly.

Upon receiving the order, the over nine hundred surviving mercenaries quickly ran down the city wall.

At this time, Goryeo soldiers’ ladders had already reached the city wall, and large numbers of Goryeo soldiers were climbing the city wall via the ladders.

At the same time, Great Yu Empire soldiers also entered the hundred-meter range of the city wall. At this distance, they accurately shot down the Japanese soldiers defending the city.

For a time, the entire city wall fell into chaos. The Japanese soldiers simply had no time to worry about what was happening there.

Philip led his men into the city. They immediately headed east. There was a hidden river in this city, and from this river, one could directly reach the sea.

They had entered Busan City from there in the first place.

After killing the Japanese soldiers guarding the hidden river, over nine hundred mercenaries boarded small boats and fled from the hidden river towards the sea. At this point, the city wall had fallen.

After the baptism of gunfire and artillery, Japan's morale had plummeted to rock bottom, and they had already learned that this was their last city.

Looking at Busan City, which was barely surviving amidst the artillery fire, Philip said fiercely, "Great Yu Empire, we will meet again! Then, I will surely make you experience the humiliation I suffered today!"

Robert numbly watched the battlefield. This was their first time deserting. He knew how great a blow this was to Philip.

And their reputation would also be ruined in the colonies and in Europe.

“Only regular armies can contend with the Great Yu Empire army. This time, when we return, we must warn others to build fortresses in advance. And there’s this!” As he spoke, Robert picked something up.

“Is this a Great Yu Empire cannonball?” Philip asked, surprised.

Robert nodded, “It’s strange. This cannonball didn’t explode. But look, this cannonball seems somewhat different from our explosive shells.”

“Clever Robert! I finally understand why you wanted us to retreat! I think every European country would be very happy to spend a lot of money to buy it. This is the Great Yu Empire’s treasure!” Philip said excitedly.

Robert smiled happily, “Japan’s fate is none of our business. This is our purpose for coming here.”

With that, the two carefully wrapped the cannonball. It seemed to be their only hope.

Meanwhile, outside Busan City, Ye Qingyun and Qu Dong began to move towards Busan City. The struggle for the city wall was already clear. The Japanese army was now unable to hold out and was continuously retreating.

Goryeo soldiers and Great Yu Empire soldiers had already charged into the city to begin the final hunt.

“Army Commander Ye, that group of mercenaries has fled!” At this point, a scout came galloping from the coast.

Ye Qingyun frowned deeply upon hearing this. He grumbled, “This Yue Yun truly fails to appear when he should.”

Qu Dong worriedly said, “The new shells still have duds. What if these mercenaries leave with some dud shells?”

“Does that mean we can’t defeat the enemy even with equal weapons? The Great Yu Empire’s army doesn’t rely solely on weapons. What’s more precious is its spirit of daring to confront the enemy,” Ye Qingyun said with a serious expression.

“You needn’t worry about this. The loss of these Conqueror Muskets and shells began in the Battle of Jinzhou. According to the people in the military machinery department, these items cannot be produced simply by getting their hands on them. Even if they could be produced, they would consume ten to a hundred times the resources. And by the time they painstakingly produce them, we will have already replaced our equipment with new ones. At that time, if they want them, it won’t hurt to sell them.”

Qu Dong nodded, “That puts my mind at ease.”

“Now, go confiscate Japan’s firearms. Qingzhou Province has been pressing for it. It’s said that new rifles are in production, waiting to be updated by selling old firearms for money.” Ye Qingyun laughed.

Qu Dong's eyes immediately lit up. This news had already spread throughout the army. In recent years, the Great Yu Empire army's weapon upgrades had been somewhat frequent, almost once every two years.

Such large-scale re-equipping, even he understood, was a heavy burden on the national treasury.

Chapter 859

"Mercenaries?"

In the imperial study, Xiao Ming slammed the memorial in his hand onto the table.

Five days had passed since the Battle of Busan, and Japan's forces were completely driven back to their homeland by the Great Yu Empire. However, what he had not expected was the appearance of Western mercenaries this time.

"According to the battle report, these mercenaries indeed have stronger combat effectiveness than Japanese soldiers. It's fortunate that their numbers are not large, otherwise, it would have been difficult for Ye Qingyun with his eight thousand men." Niu Ben faced the grim news. "But unfortunately, some mercenaries escaped, and they might have even taken our shells with them."

Xiao Ming frowned. This was a very frustrating situation. In war, it was unavoidable for weapons and equipment to be captured by the enemy, unless these weapons were not used at all.

However, he was not too worried. As long as he was there, the Great Yu Empire's industrial capacity would continuously improve. Soon, they would no longer be able to copy the Great Yu Empire's weapons, because their industries would be unable to manufacture these weapons and equipment.

"Hmph, these Western bandits are beginning to fear. Their conspiracy cannot succeed here," Xiao Ming sneered.

If he hadn't been in this country, the British plan would probably have succeeded long ago. The Great Yu Empire would likely have been ruled by barbarians, thus continuing its technological decline.

But now, he had shattered all their conspiracies.

Niu Ben heard this and said, "Your Majesty, these Western nations are truly excessive. They repeatedly interfere in the Great Yu Empire's wars with other countries. I believe they should be taught a lesson."

"Naturally. Eliminating the merchants' council will be their biggest failure here," Xiao Ming said decisively.

According to intelligence provided by the secret guards, the war in the State of Chu had already begun. The merchants' council, controlling most of the new army, was fiercely attacking cities controlled by Li Chuyuan. Suzhou and its nearby cities had all been lost.

This intelligence surprised him somewhat. What he worried about was not the Cao family's continuous victories, but the astonishing support the merchants' council received from southern merchants, powerful families, and common people.

While the new army's firearms were certainly superior to Li Chuyuan's, the support they received also surpassed Li Chuyuan's. From this, it could be seen that the south, from top to bottom, had accepted the merchants' council.

And because the Great Yu Empire's imperial family had done little in the south over the years, the south also held little identification with the imperial court. This was the real problem at hand.

It could be said that after three hundred years of rule, the Great Yu Empire's old system could no longer sustain the nation. It had reached a point similar to the late Ming Dynasty, where it had to break before it could build.

In these past few years, he had completed a thorough reform in the north, reuniting the common people. The south, meanwhile, had also begun to experiment under the control of the merchants' council.

"Does Your Majesty mean that the merchants' council is not controlled by the Cao family alone?" Niu Ben asked.

"Of course not. Besides France, the British have now also gotten involved. And the secret guards also discovered that Cao Zhengyang seems to be a member of a British secret society. This secret society has also absorbed many powerful families and wealthy merchants from the south. They played a huge role in the establishment of the merchants' council. And some people within Qingzhou Province also seem to have been incited by them." Xiao Ming's eyes narrowed, revealing a dangerous glint.

Niu Ben found it hard to understand. He said, "Your Majesty, that's not possible, is it? How could they possess such capabilities?"

Xiao Ming came from modern times; his experience was naturally far greater than that of people in this era. When the secret guards investigated this secret society, he suddenly recalled a similar society in contemporary times.

It was rumored that this society possessed immense power. The world's top talents and powerful elite were its members, and the world's operation was the result of the confrontation and cooperation among its members.

He only listened to this rumor for amusement, as it was simply too absurd.

However, in this world, it was different, because this secret society was most active between the 17th and 19th centuries. He could not afford to be unprepared.

After all, according to information provided by the Dutch, the French Revolution had the shadow of this secret society.

"That's because you lack understanding of the West," Xiao Ming said. He didn't want to overemphasize this matter yet. He said, "Besides the troops stationed in Guandong and Goryeo, and the unmobilizable garrison troops, how many troops can we mobilize now?"

After a moment of thought, Niu Ben said, "About sixty thousand men."

"Sixty thousand men?" Xiao Ming pondered. He said, "The re-equipment of the army this time will first go to these troops. If Li Chuyuan cannot hold out, we will have no choice but to send troops."

Niu Ben nodded excitedly. After returning from Guandong, he had visited the military machinery department to see the new rifles. These breech-loading rifles fired quickly, were powerful, and could be

fired from any position. Once equipped to the army, the Great Yu Empire army's method of combat would undergo a third transformation.

And this transformation would lay the foundation for the future of the Great Yu Empire army.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Niu Ben nodded excitedly.

After instructing Niu Ben on these matters, Xiao Ming looked at the map on the wall. Now, the Great Yu Empire's territory included Bashu, the area north of the Yangtze River to the Great Wall, and the entire Guandong and Goryeo regions. In almost eight years, he had nearly doubled the Great Yu Empire's territory.

However, this was still far from enough for him. Tibet was still an unstable factor in the southwest. The Yunnan region was still under the control of Annam. North of the Great Wall, barbarians still lurked, raiding the borders intermittently.

And Japan, across the sea, was also not to be trifled with now, let alone Tsarist Russia, which was currently expanding its sphere of influence eastward.

Looking around, Xiao Ming suddenly felt a little dizzy. The Great Yu Empire was indeed in a turbulent era.

Seemingly sensing Xiao Ming's doubts, Niu Ben said, "Your Majesty, no need to rush. These external enemies must be eliminated one by one. In my humble opinion, the most important things now are Japan and Jiangnan. Japan's population and land surpass Goryeo's, making it a good dumping ground for the Great Yu Empire. If we gain the south, the imperial treasury will be full."

“That’s what I was thinking too. So you will be responsible for Jiangnan, and Japan will be handled by me personally,” Xiao Ming mused.

As the two were speaking, Qian Dafu suddenly appeared at the imperial study door, smiling as he said, “Your Majesty, the machinery department has sent over some novelties.”

Xiao Ming seemed to recall something. He said, “Are they things with two wheels?”

“That’s right, two wheels, and a handle too,” Qian Dafu also didn’t understand what it was.

Xiao Ming chuckled. “This is a bicycle. It seems the improvement in lathe types and precision this time has enabled Qingzhou Province to produce many new things.”

“Bicycle!” Qian Dafu and Niu Ben were both surprised. They followed Xiao Ming outside.

The three arrived at the square in front of the Zhengda Guangming Hall. At this time, people from the machinery department were waiting for them. In front of them was something Xiao Ming was familiar with: a bicycle.

“Your Majesty, what is this for?” Niu Ben asked.

Xiao Ming smiled and said nothing. He took the bicycle from the artisan's hand, skillfully mounted it, pedaled, and rode away in a flash.

Niu Ben and Qian Dafu were instantly dumbfounded.

Chapter 860

"Your Majesty, slow down! Don't fall! I, your old servant, can't keep up!"

In the square, Xiao Ming rode the bicycle like the wind. Qian Dafu and Niu Ben ran behind Xiao Ming.

Soon, the two were panting, while Xiao Ming remained at ease.

In this lathe upgrade, Qingzhou Province was now able to produce bicycle chains, and they had long mastered rubber technology. Thus, at this moment, bicycles came into being.

It could be said that the birth of the bicycle was proof of Qingzhou Province's industrial advancement.

Stopping before the two, Xiao Ming said to Niu Ben, "General Niu, how is this bicycle?"

Niu Ben's eyes were filled with awe. He said, "Your Majesty, this thing is amazing! We've been running for so long, and Your Majesty shows no sign of fatigue at all. And it runs so fast!"

“Indeed! My legs are about to break,” Qian Dafu panted.

Xiao Ming chuckled. He had only ridden two li. With this in the future, he could go from south Qingzhou to north Qingzhou in just half an hour.

Patting the bicycle’s sturdy frame, Xiao Ming then examined it carefully. This bicycle was the crossbar bicycle he designed.

It looked just like the bicycles of the 1960s and 70s, with a sense of history.

Nodding in satisfaction, Xiao Ming looked at Niu Ben, “Want to try it?”

“This, this... how can I, your humble general...” Niu Ben demurred, but his hand gripped the bicycle handlebars.

This novelty made his heart itch with impatience.

Xiao Ming did not rush Niu Ben to ride. This old general was also getting on in years; if he fell, he would end up in the medical clinic.

So he demonstrated it in front of Niu Ben, then had Qian Dafu hold the rear seat of the bicycle to prevent Niu Ben from taking a nasty spill.

By this time, Niu Ben could no longer suppress his impulse. As soon as Xiao Ming let go, he immediately pushed the bicycle forward a few steps, then put one foot on the pedal, and swung the other foot around from behind to the other pedal.

However, riding a bicycle for the first time, Niu Ben could not maintain his balance. He wobbled and twisted on the bicycle for a few moments, then plopped to the ground.

Qian Dafu, however, suffered. He couldn't support Niu Ben's weight and also fell to the ground.

The Imperial Guards on both sides, seeing this scene, instantly burst into laughter. Qian Dafu scrambled to his feet, holding his waist with one hand, and complained, "Your Majesty, my waist is broken!"

"Promising." Xiao Ming understood that this Qian Dafu was somewhat overreacting. He pointed at the snickering Imperial Guards and said, "You few, go on."

The Imperial Guards immediately dared not laugh anymore. Niu Ben now got up. With Qian Dafu supporting him, he hadn't fallen too badly.

His interest had not waned because of the fall. "I don't believe it's harder than riding a horse!"

With that, he remounted the bicycle. With the help of three young Imperial Guards supporting him from the front and sides, he slowly rode it around the square.

As he rode, he laughed heartily, “Your Majesty, this is too interesting! This is the first time I’ve seen something so amusing!”

Qian Dafu’s eyes showed envy. He said, “General Niu, let me try it too.”

Niu Ben was on a roll and certainly unwilling. He pretended not to hear, riding the bicycle further away, making Qian Dafu stomp his feet in frustration.

Xiao Ming shook his head. This bicycle was a rare commodity in the early days of contemporary China. At that time, it was part of the “three turns and one ring” in marriage proposals.

From the two’s infatuation with the bicycle, Xiao Ming seemed to see another path to wealth emerging. In his opinion, once bicycles were sold, they would surely trigger a scramble among the wealthy.

Thinking of this, he asked the artisan, “How many bicycles have you manufactured in total now?”

“Reporting to Your Majesty, a total of eight have been manufactured, and another eight are being assembled,” the artisan said respectfully.

Xiao Ming nodded, “You go back and tell Zhang Liu to start building a factory for production. This matter cannot be delayed. Also, send the remaining seven to the palace.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The artisan bowed and left.

For Xiao Ming, he had suddenly found a new item that could be used as a reward. He said to Niu Ben, "General Niu, this bicycle is for you. You can ride it back."

"What!" Niu Ben almost fell off the bicycle.

He stopped in front of Xiao Ming, his face flushed with excitement. This bicycle was perfectly to his liking; he wanted it in his heart too.

"I didn't give you any rewards for the victory in the northern expedition this time. Consider this bicycle as compensation," Xiao Ming said.

On one hand, he wanted to win people's hearts. On the other hand, he wanted Niu Ben to ride the bicycle back to his residence. This way, General Niu would be a living advertisement, and the name of the bicycle would quickly spread throughout Qingzhou Province.

"Thank you, Your Majesty! Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Niu Ben said happily. For him, this was more practical than being rewarded a thousand taels of silver.

After repeatedly expressing his gratitude, Niu Ben bade farewell to Xiao Ming. He could no longer resist showing off to other officials.

After taking his leave, he rode the bicycle in a flash to the outer palace, which was where imperial court officials worked.

If it had been before, Niu Ben would have simply exited through the outer palace gate. But today, he deliberately rode the bicycle back and forth in front of the official offices of the outer palace.

All along the way, the imperial guards, eunuchs, and palace maids looked at him with curiosity and envy, which filled him with an unprecedented sense of satisfaction.

This satisfaction was not the joy of victory in battle.

“General Niu, what is this thing?”

Niu Ben’s appearance quickly attracted the attention of the officials. It was almost noon, time for the officials to eat. Fei Ji, having just finished his government affairs, walked out and saw Niu Ben riding on two wheels like the wind.

“His Majesty just bestowed it upon me. It’s the first one in the Great Yu Empire. His Majesty said it’s called a bicycle.” Niu Ben wore a smug, punchable expression.

Fei Ji didn’t understand what a bicycle was, but the words “bestowed by the Emperor” and “the first one” already made him a bit envious.

Pang Yukun and other officials also gathered around. Unlike other officials, Pang Yukun had accompanied Xiao Ming to see the bicycle before. He couldn't help but exclaim in surprise, "Is this the bicycle His Majesty spoke of, capable of traveling three hundred li a day?"

"Three hundred li!" The officials all gasped in unison. "How is that possible?"

Niu Ben's eyes widened. He said, "Why not? Riding a bicycle is fast! Watch!"

With that, Niu Ben mounted the bicycle and pedaled with all his might, riding hundreds of meters in an instant.

The officials watched dumbfounded, each showing an envious expression. Fei Ji and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, both revealing cunning expressions.

Such a good thing naturally meant "the early bird catches the worm." They wanted a bicycle too.