

I. Dynasty 231

Chapter 231: An Outrageous Demand

“An envoy from Prince Zhao?”

Pang Yukun nodded. “Yes. He claims to be Prince Zhao’s eldest son, Zhao Yuanliang.”

“Him?” Xiao Ming pondered for a moment.

He then turned to Yue Yun. “Continue learning about the galleon’s structure and operation from Zhang Liang. Accommodations will be arranged for you. Later, you’ll study navigation at Bowen Academy.”

“Your Highness, that won’t be necessary. We’re already experts,” Yue Yun said confidently.

“Don’t be so sure,” Xiao Ming replied with a smirk. “Once I teach you what real navigation is, you’ll understand its challenges.”

Leaving Yue Yun and the others behind, Xiao Ming instructed that those who chose to leave be given travel funds. He then rode back to the Prince of Qi’s residence.

In the main hall of the residence, a young man slightly older than Xiao Ming was waiting.

Outside, the maple leaves in the courtyard blazed like sunset. As Zhao Yuanliang watched the servants moving about, a faint worry crossed his eyes.

“Your Highness, this residence is far humbler than our Liangzhou palace. Qingzhou itself is unremarkable. The people here seem worse off than those in Liangzhou,” remarked a scholar in a gray robe and square hat standing beside Zhao Yuanliang. He was Zhao Kuan, a strategist serving Prince Zhao.

“Qingzhou was ravaged by barbarians three years ago. Recovery takes time. In just three years, he’s stabilized the six prefectures and crushed the local aristocrats. This Xiao Ming is no simple man. Father specifically warned us not to slight him—we’re here to ask for his help,” Zhao Yuanliang said.

“Understood,” Zhao Kuan replied.

As they spoke, movement at the door caught their attention. Xiao Ming entered with an official in tow.

“Yuanliang, it’s been too long,” Xiao Ming called out before reaching them.

Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan hurried forward. “Zhao Yuanliang pays his respects to Your Highness.”

“No need for formalities.” Xiao Ming helped Zhao Yuanliang up and strode into the hall, followed by Zhan Xingchang.

After gesturing for them to sit, Xiao Ming asked with interest, “Yuanliang, it’s been about five years since we last met. I believe it was when you accompanied Prince Zhao to the capital.”

“Indeed. I was young and foolish then, offending Your Highness in the palace. I beg your forgiveness,” Zhao Yuanliang said.

Five years ago, during a visit to the palace with his father, he had accidentally bumped into Xiao Ming, who was leaving after being scolded by Emperor Wenxuan. Xiao Ming had lashed out, and the two hot-headed youths had come to blows. Xiao Ming had later been caned by the Emperor.

If not for the cannons, his father wouldn’t have sent him to Qingzhou, given their history. Yet Xiao Ming seemed unbothered now.

“No matter. I was immature back then. You must have found me ridiculous,” Xiao Ming said. Knowing Zhao Yuanliang’s purpose, he cut to the chase. “What brings you to Qingzhou?”

Zhao Yuanliang replied, “Your Highness, it’s about the cannons. At court, His Majesty permitted northern princes to purchase cannons from you to defend against the barbarians. Like you, Zhao faces their threat. As the northern shield of the Great Yu, we implore you to consider the kingdom’s safety and sell us cannons.”

Selling cannons was part of Xiao Ming’s plan. But with the Imperial Army’s order still unfilled, supplying Prince Zhao now was impossible.

“His Majesty mentioned this. Naturally, I’ll comply. However, I’m currently producing cannons for the Imperial Army and have no surplus to sell,” Xiao Ming said.

Zhao Yuanliang smiled. “Your Highness, that’s easily solved. If you lack manpower, why not sell us the cannon technology? We’ll produce them ourselves in Zhao.”

Zhao Yuanliang had come prepared with negotiation strategies.

“You jest. At court, His Majesty made it clear the cannon technology must remain with me. This isn’t about trust—barbarian spies are everywhere. If they obtain the technology, Zhao will lose even its defensive advantage.”

Zhao Yuanliang’s eyes flickered. Though he knew it was unlikely, he had to try. “Your Highness, if you sell us the technology, we’ll guard it fiercely. My father offers five thousand fine horses and five million taels of silver in exchange.”

The offer was tempting, but Xiao Ming couldn’t part with the technology. Inferior steel would limit their production quality, but sheer numbers could compensate.

“Yuanliang, it’s not that I refuse. But if the technology leaks, His Majesty will have my head,” Xiao Ming said, shaking his head. “Let’s discuss alternatives.”

Seeing the approach fail, Zhao Yuanliang pressed on. “Then could you produce cannons for both the Imperial Army and Zhao? Since your victory over the barbarians, they’ve grown aggressive in Zhao, testing our defenses. My father and I are deeply concerned.”

Xiao Ming feigned hesitation.

With iron mold casting now mastered and skilled craftsmen trained, scaling up production depended only on materials.

He also wanted to expand the military workshop's capacity through these sales. Profit would sustain larger operations, allowing rapid mass production if war erupted.

But Emperor Wenxuan's decree took precedence. After a pause, Xiao Ming said, "I can supply Zhao one month after delivering the Imperial Army's first batch. However, you must prepay the production costs."

"One month?" Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan exchanged glances.

"That's the soonest possible. The Imperial Army's order comes first," Xiao Ming said firmly.

Recognizing his resolve, Zhao Yuanliang shifted focus. "Then, Your Highness, how much per cannon?"

"Not too expensive. Twenty thousand taels each," Xiao Ming said, making an outrageous demand.