

I. Dynasty 233

Chapter 233: A Complex Situation

The artillery training grounds reeked of gunpowder, and the field was pockmarked with craters from cannon fire.

Zhao Yuanliang stared at the distant cannons—barely visible at four hundred paces—then at the shattered clay figures littering the ground. His mind reeled at the sheer destructive power on display.

He could now vividly imagine the Battle of Cangzhou, where these monstrous cannons had slaughtered dozens of charging cavalymen with a single shot.

“Yuanliang, you’ve seen the results for yourself. Whether it’s worth twenty thousand taels of silver should be obvious by now. No offense to the Mystic Armored Cavalry, but four hundred horsemen truly can’t compare to a single one of my cannons,” Xiao Ming said, deliberately provoking him.

Zhao Yuanliang fell silent for a long moment before replying, “Your Highness, the cannon’s power is undeniable. But the price... could it not be lowered?”

“Out of the question,” Xiao Ming shook his head firmly. “I can’t afford to sell at a loss. Besides, I wasn’t even willing to provide these to the imperial court, let alone other feudal lords. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how your faction blocked the Emperor from sending reinforcements to Qingzhou. The fact that I’m willing to sell you cannons at all is already an act of generosity.”

In business, it was standard practice to inflate prices before gradually lowering them. As the saying went, the buyer is never as shrewd as the seller—after all, buyers could never know a seller's true profit margins.

Xiao Ming's sudden shift in tone left Zhao Yuanliang visibly uncomfortable. He cleared his throat. "Your Highness misunderstands. We had nothing to do with that incident—it was entirely the scheming of certain court officials."

Bringing up old grievances was merely a bargaining tactic. As much as Xiao Ming despised Zhao Wang and his ilk, he wasn't about to let personal grudges interfere with profit.

"Very well, I'll take your word for it," Xiao Ming said. "I could lower the price... but that depends on how many you intend to purchase."

Zhao Yuanliang glanced at Zhao Kuan, who subtly held up two fingers.

"Twenty cannons," Zhao Yuanliang declared.

"Only twenty?"

Xiao Ming frowned, studying the two men. Their expressions betrayed unease.

So that's their game, he thought coldly. Zhao Wang must be planning to reverse-engineer the cannons. Otherwise, they'd need at least three hundred to secure the Liangzhou front.

“Had the order been larger, I might have offered fifteen thousand taels per cannon. But for just twenty? It’s hardly worth the effort. Twenty thousand each—take it or leave it.”

With that, Xiao Ming turned and walked away.

His cannons were one-of-a-kind. They could either pay his price or go without.

Once Xiao Ming was out of earshot, Zhao Yuanliang muttered to Zhao Kuan, “Are you certain we can replicate these?”

“Your Highness, initially I had doubts. But after seeing the cannons up close, I’m confident. We’ve already mastered the techniques for crafting fire lances—these are simply thicker and longer. Once the first batch arrives, our craftsmen can reproduce them exactly.”

“Good. And the armor?”

Zhao Yuanliang had brought Zhao Kuan precisely because of his photographic memory.

“Already memorized, Your Highness.”

Nodding, Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan followed Xiao Ming back to the palace and agreed to purchase twenty cannons at twenty thousand taels each.

“Return to Qingzhou in two months to collect them,” Xiao Ming said.

Even a small profit was still profit. Forty thousand taels for twenty cannons meant a net gain of over three hundred thousand—equivalent to a month’s revenue from the merchant guild. With this silver, he could fund two more galleons.

Though the shipbuilding project had proceeded quietly, those galleons were true money pits.

“Understood, Your Highness.” Zhao Yuanliang bowed. “We’ll take our leave now.”

As the two departed, Xiao Ming’s gaze darkened. He immediately summoned Li San.

“Li San, have your men monitor Zhao Yuanliang and Zhao Kuan closely. I suspect ulterior motives—especially regarding the Machinery department and military workshops. Report every detail of their movements and contacts in Qingzhou.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Li San’s expression turned grave. “Lately, the influx of merchants into Qingzhou has surged. My Secret Guards have identified several posing as traders while actually gathering intelligence. It seems many are after the cannon technology.”

“Of course they are. Why pay for cannons if they can steal the designs for free?” Xiao Ming scoffed.

Ever since the cannons' fame spread to Chang'an, he'd known Qingzhou would become a nest of spies. Their goals were twofold: to steal artillery secrets and to surveil him. The culprits ranged from rival warlords and princes to his own father, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan.

The Emperor might have celebrated the victory at Cangzhou, but as a ruthless ruler, he'd also view Xiao Ming's growing power with suspicion.

Li San hesitated. "Your Highness, should we arrest all suspicious individuals preemptively?"

"No." Xiao Ming shook his head. "These spies operate under the guise of legitimate trade. Acting rashly would fuel rumors and damage Qingzhou's commerce. Without concrete evidence, you are not to make arrests."

"Understood."