

## I. Dynasty 276

### Chapter 276: The Galleon Ships Are Complete

The royal residence was wrapped in a blanket of snow, looking more beautiful than ever. Ziyuan, bold by nature and knowing her days as a personal maid were numbered now that Xiao Ming's marriage was approaching, joined in the fun without restraint. Soon, she and Lülao would both officially become part of Prince Qi's household.

With a grin, Ziyuan scooped up a handful of snow and tossed it at Xiao Ming, teasing, "If Your Highness wants that kiss, you'll have to catch me first!"

Before he could stand, a snowball smacked him right in the chest. He looked up and saw Lülao still in the act of throwing. "You two are dead!" Xiao Ming shouted playfully and lunged after them.

With shrieks and laughter, the two maids ran through the snowy courtyard, lobbing snowballs back at him as they fled. "You're not getting away that easy!" he called, scooping up more snow.

As the three of them laughed and played, the mood of the entire residence felt light and carefree. Just then, Zhang Liang arrived, led in by a servant. Seeing the Prince tangled up in a snowball fight, he cleared his throat awkwardly.

With an outsider present, Ziyuan and Lülao immediately stopped playing and stepped back, adjusting their manners. Xiao Ming turned around and, spotting Zhang Liang, already guessed his purpose. "The galleon ships are done?"

Indeed, since his last visit to the shipyard, Xiao Ming had instructed Zhang Liang to accelerate construction. Back then, Zhang had said it would be tough to finish even one ship before year's end.

"Yes, Your Highness," Zhang said with pride. "They're all finished. All three galleons are ready to set sail."

Xiao Ming's heart leapt. It was already the late 1690s, and once the new year passed, they would be stepping into the 18th century. This was the golden age of maritime exploration—the era of the Great Voyages.

In his previous life, his homeland had missed out on this age of discovery. But now that he had a second chance in this world, he wasn't about to let that happen again. The seas held infinite riches, and he refused to let the Western powers have them all to themselves.

"Take me to see them," he ordered.

Despite the heavy snow, Xiao Ming couldn't hold back his excitement. He mounted his horse with Zhang Liang and rode straight to the shipyard by the Xiao Qing River.

They weren't the first to arrive. Waiting there were Yue Yun and the sailors who would soon be venturing across the seas aboard these grand vessels.

"Your Highness, can we sail after the New Year?" Yue Yun asked eagerly.

Snow had piled thick on the shoulders of the crew, but their enthusiasm kept them warm. Xiao Ming boarded the ship, looked around, and answered, "Not yet. We still need to install the cannons."

Though the sails were already mounted, the ships were still dry-docked along the riverbank, waiting for their armament. Xiao Ming knew the dangers of the open ocean. He had no illusions. The Ottomans already possessed cannons, and the West might be no less advanced.

This world's history had taken a different turn. In the north, a Gothic Steppe Empire had risen in place of the Mongols and had launched its own invasion of Europe—fifty years earlier than in his original world.

While the west's progress might differ, Xiao Ming believed that divergent development paths alone could explain the growing divide between the East and the rising Western powers.

But all that aside, he wasn't about to take chances. That's why he insisted the ships carry naval cannons. If Yue Yun ran into Western warships or pirates, they'd at least have a way to fight back.

These galleons and their weaponry, he was confident, would be no less powerful than any European ship of the era.

"We still have to wait?" Yue Yun looked visibly disappointed.

Xiao Ming's expression turned serious. "Fix your attitude. This is a long-range expedition, and I'll be assigning you a very important mission. This isn't a game—one mistake and you might never return."

Hearing this, Yue Yun sobered up. He tightened his grip on the helm and asked, "Your Highness... what's the mission?"

“Three things,” Xiao Ming said. “First, bring back new crops like potatoes, chilies, corn, and sweet potatoes. Second, assess the West’s level of civilization. Third, chart sea routes and draw maps for the Qingzhou navy.”

These weren’t new ideas. Yue Yun had heard them during his studies at Bowen Academy, where the crew had been receiving training in navigation. Roles had been assigned for each sailor. Gunners trained under Luo Xin in cannon fire; others trained in hand-to-hand combat with Niu Ben.

Even though ships could now exchange fire from afar, solid cannonballs rarely sank ships outright. Most battles still came down to boarding and melee combat, so physical strength still mattered.

Xiao Ming had also assigned translators and navigators to the ships—essential if they encountered Western colonies. The translators would be key to communication and gathering intelligence.

Yue Yun nodded. He had expected the voyage to be important, but he didn’t know it would carry such weight.

After the briefing, Xiao Ming followed Zhang Liang to inspect each ship. By the standards of sailing warships, these were fifth-rate galleons. First-rate warships were massive, with three gun decks, over 100 cannons, and crews of 900 or more. Second-rates were slightly smaller but still powerful. Third-rates, known as the mainstays of naval warfare, had 64 to 80 guns. Fourth-rates carried 50 or so. But fifth-rate ships, like Xiao Ming’s, were usually used for long-range raids or commercial patrols—not front-line battle.

And that was exactly the point. Xiao Ming had no intention of starting a naval war. Facing the dominant Western navies, his galleons wouldn’t stand a chance in open combat.

Their purpose was clear: to scout, explore, and bring back valuable crops.

Once he confirmed the ships were seaworthy, Xiao Ming returned home, planning to have Chen Qi install the cannons. The military workshops were working hard, but 150 naval guns was a tall order. Production wasn't complete yet.

The voyage couldn't happen until after the New Year.

So, turning to Yue Yun, Xiao Ming said with a firm but reassuring tone, "Just relax and enjoy the New Year. There'll be plenty of time for sailing after that."