

## I. Dynasty 291

### Chapter 291: The Glass Scam

Jin Ping Mei ended with Ziwan running out of the main hall, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Of course, Xiao Ming hadn't told Jin Ping Mei for the sake of lecturing about feudal moral codes—he was simply using it as an excuse to tell some risqué jokes and take a bit of playful advantage of Ziwan.

In truth, Xiao Ming wasn't in a hurry to overturn feudal traditions. Such deep-rooted things could only be changed slowly, like boiling a frog in warm water.

Besides, in his mind, the cultural renaissance he envisioned wasn't simply about building a theater. Forced artistry would never achieve the results he wanted.

His sudden interest in building a theater was mainly to add entertainment options in Qingzhou and boost the government's revenue. It was part of his broader urban development plan.

Naturally, he couldn't say that publicly. Those who pretended to be refined would sneer at him behind his back.

To Xiao Ming, theater could help spread certain ideas among the populace, but the true foundation of the renaissance lay with Bowen Academy—in education.

As long as the students at Bowen Academy absorbed his teachings, the cultural renaissance would already be half complete. After all, even in the West, the Renaissance first took hold among the educated elite and then spread downward.

Thus, for Xiao Ming, theater was only a small card in his hand. His real priorities were three things: building up commerce, spreading education, and strengthening the military.

After leaving the theater project entirely to Ziwan, Xiao Ming threw himself fully into another weapon project following the cannons: the flintlock musket.

According to the knowledge he possessed, in modern history, the first tubular metal firearms appeared in Europe during the 1330s. These early firearms were called “hand cannons,” evolving later into matchlock smoothbore guns, which remained in use in Europe until the 16th century.

Around the same time, during the 16th century, Portuguese traders introduced matchlocks to Japan, during the 22nd year of the Ming Emperor Jiajing’s reign.

Thus, the origin of the Ming Dynasty’s niaochong (bird gun) was always debated: some said it was invented independently, some said it was brought from Japan, and others believed it came directly from the West.

But regardless, from the 16th century onward, the world had entered the era of firearms. By the mid-17th century, flintlock muskets had become mainstream.

As for why the Great Yu Empire hadn’t yet come into contact with firearms, Xiao Ming remained puzzled. By historical patterns, the Great Yu should at least have encountered guns and cannons.

But apparently, the Great Yu Empire hadn't. The only plausible reason Xiao Ming could find was that the Great Yu Empire had long neglected maritime activities. With coastal areas now overrun by wokou pirates, exchanges with the outside world had been severely cut off.

Moreover, the capital Chang'an was inland. Even if foreigners had made contact, it would have been with the Wei King or the Chu King first.

Thinking of all this, Xiao Ming frowned.

Regardless, he couldn't afford to wait any longer. Now that cannon production had stabilized, producing flintlocks had to become a top priority. He was running out of time.

Partly, he needed them to defend against Japan's potential invasion three years later. But more importantly, he planned to drive the barbarians out of Youzhou and push them beyond Shanhai Pass before the Japanese even attacked.

That way, he could avoid fighting a two-front war—and his musketeers could gain real battlefield experience.

Just as he was deep in thought, Ziwan—who had earlier fled blushing—returned. "Your Highness, Liang Dahai has returned."

"He's back? Quick, let him in!" Xiao Ming said excitedly.

Last winter, he had sent Liang Dahai to the steppe to purchase slaves. He was curious to see the results.

A moment later, Liang Dahai, dressed in a purple round-collar robe, entered the hall and bowed. “Your Highness, this official has returned.”

“How was the harvest this time?” Xiao Ming asked with a smile.

Liang Dahai answered, “Just as Your Highness predicted, this year many cattle and sheep froze to death on the steppe. To avoid starvation, many barbarian tribes secretly traded slaves with us. Over the past few months, I purchased twelve thousand strong slaves. I await Your Highness’s inspection.”

“No need. Very good. I’m severely short on manpower right now,” Xiao Ming said thoughtfully. “Hand these slaves over to Qian Dafu immediately.”

He added, “Liang Dahai, you know Qingzhou’s census results. We desperately lack laborers. You must continue purchasing slaves from the steppe. Also, open a new channel: buy slaves from the pirates at Dengzhou.”

“Buying slaves from pirates!” Liang Dahai’s eyes gleamed. He chuckled. “Your Highness, that could work. But pirates demand real silver and gold—not like the barbarians, who are happy with old grain.”

“Well, I have no spare silver for you. Qingzhou is spending money everywhere,” Xiao Ming said with a grin.

Liang Dahai pulled a long face. “Your Highness, you’re putting me in a tough spot! I’ve dealt with pirates before—they’re ruthless. Not so easy to fool.”

“Don’t worry,” Xiao Ming said. “I’m not sending you empty-handed. It’s getting late today. Go rest. Tomorrow, I’ll give you what you need.”

Liang Dahai hesitated but nodded.

The next day, Xiao Ming summoned him to the glass workshop.

Inside, Xiao Ming pointed at a large wooden crate and said, “There’s your capital.”

Liang Dahai walked over and opened the crate. His eyes went wide. “Your Highness... this... this is too precious!”

Inside the crate were heaps of glass marbles—simple green-tinted marbles, the kind Xiao Ming had once played with as a child.

Grabbing a handful, the marbles made a pleasant clinking sound in his hand.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Exactly because they’re precious, you can use them to trade for slaves. No problem, right?”

Of course, Xiao Ming knew the real value of these marbles. Now that he controlled glass production, this entire crate wasn't even worth a hundred taels of silver.

But in the Great Yu Empire, glass was considered a luxury. He was certain that even wokou pirates hadn't seen such craftsmanship. They would treasure these marbles as priceless gems.

"N-no... no problem!" Liang Dahai stammered. To him, this crate was a treasure trove.

Xiao Ming continued, "Be clever. These marbles can be used not just to buy slaves. If you can also trade them for gold and silver, all the better. Bring it all back."

Liang Dahai, who had plenty of experience dealing with pirates, knew the impact these marbles would have. He took a deep breath and said, "Your Highness, rest assured. I'll make sure to exchange this box for its full worth."

Xiao Ming nodded slightly. Once, the West had used a few glass beads to trick Native Americans out of vast lands. He couldn't fall behind. As long as he held this technological advantage, he would fully exploit it.