

I. Dynasty 398

Chapter 398: Profitable Hot Air Balloon

“Five thousand muskets?”

Xiao Ming was a bit disappointed by the number, but seeing the expressions on Emperor Xiao Wenxuan and the ministers, he understood why.

After all, they still doubted the effectiveness of muskets in the army — or maybe they just hated spending so much silver.

In Qingzhou, Xiao Ming had often heard ministers complain about the cannon prices. Some even wanted the court to fund their own clan workshops to copy Qingzhou’s cannons.

Those ministers weren’t patriotic; they just wanted their share of the cannon trade profits. Naturally, they hated seeing silver flow out without their cut.

To Xiao Ming, the Great Yu Empire was heading toward corruption, just like every dying dynasty.

Party fights, extreme corruption, traitorous merchants selling out the country, and citizens loyal only to clans instead of the nation — all signs of a declining dynasty were present.

What troubled Xiao Ming most was the Jinwu Guard, the Empire’s elite army. They were often unpaid and hadn’t updated their equipment in years.

These were facts Luo Quan personally told him.

Because of this, the Great Yu Empire's failure against the tribes wasn't just about horses — it was also because civil officials oppressed the military.

And since Xiao Wenxuan took the throne through a coup, he was wary of the army, focusing more on civil governance than defending against enemies.

Thinking all this, Xiao Ming smirked silently. He sold weapons not just to make money but for the Empire's future.

If he really handed over cannon and musket tech, he knew the silver would be skimmed off layer by layer. The army would end up with faulty weapons — dud barrels or misfires — while other princes got the good stuff.

After all, those princes were sharpening their knives at all times.

Knowing this, Xiao Ming didn't care about the weapon numbers. The trade agreement was the real prize. As for how many muskets sold, sell as many as possible.

After his wedding, he'd return to Qingzhou and ignore the storms in Chang'an. He just needed to manage his land and stay safe.

Setting the musket issue aside, Xiao Ming said, "Father, now let's see the hot air balloon. This one will surely surprise you."

“Yes, yes, this is exciting,” Xiao Wenxuan said eagerly. He was truly interested in this flying machine.

Liang Yubin and He Cheng had already unloaded the balloon from the carriage. They spread it out and began inflating it with bellows.

It was a long process. Half an hour later, the balloon stood upright.

Then they heated the air inside.

As the air grew hotter, the balloon slowly lifted off the ground.

“It’s flying! It’s flying!” the ministers cheered excitedly.

Fei Ji remained calm, but even he was surprised to see such a huge object rise.

Xiao Wenxuan tried to keep his dignity but everyone saw how shocked he was.

Then an even more shocking moment: Liang Yubin and He Cheng climbed into the balloon. When soldiers released the ropes, the balloon began to rise.

“Ming’er, this balloon is amazing! Can I ride it too?” Xiao Wenxuan asked excitedly.

“No, Father. The balloon might fall. Without safety measures, I can’t risk your life,” Xiao Ming quickly said.

Liang Yubin and He Cheng’s courage was remarkable. Others didn’t know the risks, but Xiao Ming and his Bowen Academy classmates did.

“Fall?!” Before Xiao Wenxuan could answer, Luo Quan suddenly shouted. He had ridden a hot air balloon before and the warning made everyone sweat.

Xiao Wenxuan’s face was a mix of awe and worry. Today’s demonstration was impressive — one weapon was inaccurate, the other risky.

Though amazing, their practical battlefield use remained uncertain.

Seeing Luo Quan’s shocked face, Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Father, want to buy a hot air balloon for fun? If handled well, it won’t explode. It’s also good for scouting before battle.”

“Right. Your Majesty, we placed lots of grass under the balloon. Even if it falls from thirty steps high, it should be fine,” Luo Quan said. Despite being scared, he was tempted by the balloon’s battlefield reconnaissance use.

Xiao Wenxuan hesitated, then looked at Xiao Ming's sly face and asked, "How much silver for one balloon?"

"Father, it's not expensive — one hundred thousand taels. I can also train balloon operators for you," Xiao Ming said.

The balloon's design was simple and cost less than three thousand taels to make. Xiao Ming was charging a high price.

He realized it was better to put the court's silver into his own pocket than let corrupt officials pocket it.

"One hundred thousand?" Xiao Wenxuan hesitated.

Xiao Ming continued, "Father, after I prepare safety gear, you can try riding the balloon yourself and decide if it's worth it."

He then told Luo Xin, "Get the spring mats ready."

"Yes, Your Highness," Luo Xin replied and brought out several small spring mats stacked together.

Qingzhou could produce spring steel, so making springs was easy. For safety, they made spring mats like sofas — wood blocks pressing springs, with cushions on top.

When Luo Xin set it up, Xiao Ming jumped onto the mats. When he landed, the mats bounced him up again.

“What... what magic is this?!” the ministers exploded in surprise.

To them, Xiao Ming had jumped and then magically bounced up, like a ghost.

Xiao Wenxuan’s face turned serious.

Seeing their shock, Xiao Ming said, “Don’t be surprised. This is just springs.”

He lifted part of the mats to show the ministers.

At that moment, Liang Yubin and He Cheng controlled the hot air balloon down. Xiao Ming stopped explaining springs and invited Xiao Wenxuan to climb the balloon.

Together they rose higher, Chang’an’s scenery gradually coming into view.

Xiao Wenxuan felt scared but excited. Seeing the city calm and wide, he began to relax.

Xiao Ming took the chance to ask, "Father, how is it? Is the balloon worth buying?"

"Yes! Buy it!" Xiao Wenxuan laughed heartily.