

## I. Dynasty 401

### Chapter 401: Wedding Night

With the sound of drums and music, the imperial guards slowly marched forward.

Chang'an wasn't a big city, and the Fei family home was not far from Xiao Ming's mansion. Walking down the straight street, Feiyue'er's group gradually arrived at Prince Qi's mansion.

By now, most of the guests who came to congratulate and drink had already gathered. The sound of drums outside made Xiao Ming realize Feiyue'er was about to arrive.

Officials from the Ministry of Rites immediately got busy. From the engagement banquet to the wedding ceremony, the Ministry handled everything, saving Xiao Ming a lot of trouble.

The bridal sedan chair soon arrived and was set down. The guards and honor guards stopped and withdrew — their job was done.

Following the guidance of Ministry officials, the accompanying female attendants lifted the pearl curtain and helped Feiyue'er out of the sedan. They slowly led her into the prepared bridal chamber.

Ziyuan and Lu Luo were already waiting outside the bridal room and followed inside to serve. Both smiled, knowing their place — just maids, no right to compete with the bride.

They were happy that Xiao Ming married a virtuous and well-bred lady like Feiyue'er. If she had been a fierce woman, their lives might have been difficult.

“The Princess Consort has arrived. Let the banquet begin!”

As soon as Feiyue’er entered the bridal room, a Ministry official shouted. According to palace rules, a prince’s wedding required sixty banquet tables.

At the signal, palace maids brought out delicious dishes. These cooks came from the imperial kitchen.

After all the fuss, with Feiyue’er finally inside the mansion, Xiao Ming finally relaxed.

Though he wanted to enter the bridal room and talk to Feiyue’er, he couldn’t ignore his guests.

He had to move from one table to another, politely toasting with tea instead of wine.

Surprisingly, besides many lords from the regional principalities, several of his brothers were also there — the Second Prince, Third Prince, and all other princes in the capital.

Perhaps the blood oath made the princes cautious and paused their fights.

The banquet lasted two hours before guests gradually left.

The noisy mansion quieted down, and Xiao Ming sighed heavily.

Though weddings were complicated, he was happy. In his past life, he had been alone.

Now, having a family was a kind of compensation — though in a strange new world.

Most importantly, eating and drinking alone was not the same as sharing life with another.

When Feiyue'er stepped in, he suddenly felt a new sense of responsibility.

A responsibility to a family.

"Your Highness, the remaining rituals will be prepared by the two palace matrons left behind. We will take our leave."

The three Ministry officials bowed to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming nodded. Seeing their excitement, he said, "Thank you all. Here's some wedding money — please don't refuse it."

Wedding celebrations were the Ministry of Rites' favorite times, as they were clean government offices that rarely got bribes except on such occasions.

One official accepted the silver note — a thousand taels — and smiled broadly. "Thank you, Your Highness. Whatever you need in future, just say the word."

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded, sending the officials out.

"Your Highness, it's late. You should see your bride now."

After the officials left, the two palace matrons gently spoke.

Because the wedding night rituals were not suitable for men, palace matrons took over.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming chuckled. He looked at the bridal room — this was his rightful wife.

Led by the matrons, he entered the room.

The bridal chamber was bright with red candles. Feiyue'er sat upright on the bed's edge.

Her hands rested on her knees. The red bridal veil and golden crown on her hair gave her a radiant, jewel-like appearance.

“Your Highness, it’s time to lift the veil.”

One matron smiled and handed Xiao Ming a jade ruyi scepter, signaling him to lift the veil.

Taking the ruyi, Xiao Ming felt both anticipation and nervousness. He wondered what Feiyue’er looked like. They didn’t know each other at all — it was awkward.

“Come on, Your Highness,” the matrons giggled, covering their mouths.

Xiao Ming didn’t reply but looked at Feiyue’er.

He noticed she was tense; her hands clenched tightly on her knees.

“Damn old traditions,” Xiao Ming thought with mixed pain and joy. He bravely lifted the veil.

The red veil slowly slid off Feiyue’er’s head, revealing flowing black hair, delicate eyebrows, large lively eyes, a slender nose, and rosy lips — a face like a beautiful ink painting.

“A smile that charms all, leaving palace beauties pale,” Xiao Ming thought to himself.

Having seen many beauties in the palace and in his past life, Feiyue’er was among the finest — and she had a natural gentle temperament.

“Princess Consort is truly a rare beauty. Your Highness is very lucky,” the matrons congratulated.

Xiao Ming and Feiyue’er exchanged glances, studying each other as if to memorize the other’s face.

The matrons shared a look and smiled, “Your Highness, Princess Consort, there are still rituals to complete. Without them, it would be unlucky. After these, we will leave so as not to disturb your happy time.”

These matrons were seasoned palace veterans who could say anything.

Their blunt words made both Xiao Ming and Feiyue’er blush, as if a matchmaker suggested rushing to intimacy on a first meeting.

Clearing his throat, Xiao Ming said, “Thank you, matrons, please proceed.”

The matrons performed the rituals: tying the ceremonial robe, eating dates, sharing wine cups, and more.

After half an hour of these tedious rites, they finished.

Xiao Ming asked Lu Luo to tip the matrons. Then the matrons left.

Ziyuan, Lu Luo, and Feiyue'er's maid Xiao Huan also left, leaving Xiao Ming and Feiyue'er alone on the bed's edge.

The room was awkward. Feiyue'er lowered her head; Xiao Ming stared at the ceiling.

After a while, Xiao Ming cleared his throat to break the silence. Women in the Great Yu Empire were very conservative, so he had to take the initiative.

"Princess Consort, it's late. You should rest now."

Xiao Ming didn't know how he shamelessly said that, and felt very embarrassed.

Chapter 402: Married Couple Together

Outside the bridal chamber, Lu Luo and Ziyuan pressed their heads against the window, wearing mischievous smiles.

Xiao Huan looked at them with displeasure. "Hey, how can you two eavesdrop like that?"

Ziyuan curled her lips. “We’re not eavesdropping. The Princess Consort told us to record everything. How can we not listen?”

Before Xiao Ming’s wedding, Consort Zhen had specially brought Ziyuan and Lu Luo into the palace and told them to keep track of these things — to calculate the time of the Princess Consort’s pregnancy.

After all, palace eunuchs recorded the intimate times between the Emperor and consorts.

“Really?” Xiao Huan timidly glanced inside, seeing flickering candlelight and two shadowy figures. Curious, and hearing Ziyuan and Lu Luo, she pressed her ear to the door.

Ziyuan patted Xiao Huan’s shoulder. “We can listen, but you can’t. That’s disrespectful. If the matrons find out, you’ll be reported to the Princess Consort.”

Xiao Huan turned pale and gasped.

“But don’t worry. We have the Princess Consort’s order. Since we’re sisters, think of it as helping us,” Ziyuan teased. If the maid had been caught, she’d have been punished.

Ziyuan wanted to build a good relationship with Xiao Huan. They would all live in the same courtyard soon and needed to get along.

“Hehe, thanks. I’m Xiao Huan. What about you?” Xiao Huan smiled happily.



Before at the Fei family, she only served Feiyue'er alone and had no friends. Now, with Ziyuan and Lu Luo's kindness, she felt warmly towards them.

"I'm Ziyuan, and she's Lu Luo," Ziyuan said with a smile.

While the three were greeting each other, the candlelight inside suddenly went out. The three were startled and all pressed against the window again.

Soon, sounds came from inside that made their faces flush.

Ziyuan and Lu Luo quietly laughed, while Xiao Huan looked confused. "What are those sounds?"

"You'll understand later," Ziyuan and Lu Luo exchanged a mischievous look.

The next morning, Xiao Ming was the first to leave the bridal chamber.

Looking up, he saw the three maids wrapped in blankets sleeping at the door.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming was a little annoyed — these three must have been eavesdropping all night.

His leaving woke them up. Ziyuan and Lu Luo stood smiling and said, "Your Highness."

Xiao Huan shyly called, "Your Highness."

"The Princess Consort is awake. Go serve her. Later, the Prince and Princess Consort will return to the palace," Xiao Ming said.

The last part of the wedding was to go back to the palace and kneel before the Emperor and Empress. After that, the wedding would be complete.

The three nodded and entered the bridal chamber.

Feiyue'er had already gotten up, dressed in her underwear, looking at herself in the mirror with a smile and a hint of worry.

Ziyuan and Lu Luo immediately went to the bed and noticed the white silk sheets stained with a bit of blood.

They exchanged a glance and smiled.

Feiyue'er noticed their looks and blushed. Before marrying, palace matrons had warned her about these "cloud and rain" matters, fearing that girls might unknowingly struggle and hurt the prince.

She was not ignorant but still found it embarrassing.

Xiao Huan also saw what Ziyuan and Lu Luo held and smiled softly. "Is the Princess Consort going to have a little prince soon?"

"Stop joking! Ten months of pregnancy — how can she have a son so soon?" Feiyue'er rolled her eyes.

Xiao Ming was not ugly and had excellent character. After last night's closeness, she was slowly accepting her new role.

After all, who among Fei family daughters controlled their own fate? Having a good husband was already a blessing.

After tidying the bed, Xiao Huan brought hot water for Feiyue'er to wash and also brought the wedding outfit for the palace visit.

By late morning, both were ready and rode sedan chairs to the palace.

Sitting in the sedan, Xiao Ming looked at Feiyue'er. In the bright light, she looked even more beautiful. He was satisfied with his new Princess Consort — a perfect political marriage.

“What are you looking at, Your Highness?” Feiyue’er asked, unable to hide his gaze.

“I’m looking at you. To have such a beauty, what more could I ask for?” Xiao Ming said casually. Last night’s intimacy had brought them closer.

Feiyue’er smiled, “They say you’re a mighty hero, but you’re quite the smooth talker.”

“You’re wrong, my lady. That’s my sincere praise,” Xiao Ming joked.

Life in the Great Yu Empire was dull. Having someone to share it with, especially a beauty, meant endless topics to talk about.

Feiyue’er was pleased. Being praised by her husband made her happy.

Xiao Ming had none of the usual prince’s airs. She found it easy to be with him, never fearing he’d suddenly explode over a word.

Her sister often cried about being scolded by the Crown Prince over small quarrels. That was why Feiyue’er worried.

After giggling, Feiyue'er relaxed and asked about Qingzhou.

Learning the newspaper reports were true, she looked forward with hope.

They chatted all the way until they reached the palace.

Together they got out and went to the Jade Water Pavilion to see Xiao Wenxuan, Empress Zhao, and Consort Zhen.

"Prince Qi is truly lucky. Feiyue'er is even more beautiful than her sister. Now, you and the Crown Prince are family — you brothers should care for each other," Empress Zhao said shrewdly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Xiao Ming bowed.

Xiao Wenxuan said, "Ming'er, for your wedding, the Empress and I have prepared a grand gift."

He signaled Feng Deshui, who smiled and handed Xiao Ming the gift list.

Looking at it, Xiao Ming smiled broadly. "Thank you, Father and Empress."

Xiao Wenxuan nodded. "The Empress and I won't stay long. Spend more time with your mother consort before we go."

They left together.

After the wedding ceremony, both Xiao Ming and Feiyue'er breathed easier.

Consort Zhen grabbed Feiyue'er's hand and said, "A fine young lady you are. Ming'er, treat her well and soon have a little prince."

Consort Zhen looked at Feiyue'er with affection, making her a little shy.

#### Chapter 403: The Truth Revealed

In the Jade Water Pavilion, Consort Zhen chatted warmly with Feiyue'er, often asking if she was comfortable.

Xiao Ming sat watching them, quietly planning when to return to Qingzhou. Now that he was married, he saw no reason to stay longer in Chang'an.

The recent assassination attempt left him with a shadow over his mind — Chang'an was unsafe.

Just like every regional lord tried to avoid leaving their own territory, Xiao Ming felt the same. Once on another's land, he couldn't guarantee his own safety.

Besides, now that he had Feiyue'er as his wife, he didn't want any accidents in Chang'an.

While the two ladies laughed, Xiao Ming spoke up: "Mother, I plan to return to Qingzhou in five days. I won't stay longer — this place isn't safe."

Consort Zhen nodded. She didn't try to stop him. The assassination also worried her deeply.

"Yes, better to return early. The waters in Chang'an are muddy — every extra day brings danger. Also, your territory needs managing. If left too long unattended, there could be trouble. Prepare and go back soon."

Feiyue'er knew about the assassination and did not oppose but asked, "Has the assassin been found?"

"According to Father, it was either the Second Prince or the Jin merchants colluding with the northern tribes. Both are most likely," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

"The Second Prince?" Consort Zhen was shocked.

Xiao Ming nodded and told her how the Emperor had tested him about it.

"If it is the Second Prince, Father likely wants to smooth things over. As the ruler, he won't want to move against his son and anger the King of Liang. Still, a warning will be given," Consort Zhen said.

"Hmph, I guess Father thinks so too. But if it's the Second Prince, I won't compromise. How else can I face the fallen soldiers?" Xiao Ming's anger rose.

"Even if it was the Second Prince, it's not treason worthy of death. The worst is to strip his title or exile him," Feiyue'er said.

Consort Zhen nodded. "Feiyue'er is right. You must not act rashly. Let Father handle it." She worried Xiao Ming might do something foolish in anger.

Xiao Ming frowned. "Yes, Mother."

After chatting more with Consort Zhen, Xiao Ming and Feiyue'er rose to leave. They couldn't stay long in the palace.

"Mother must be lonely here alone in the deep palace, and you're not with her," Feiyue'er said thoughtfully on the way back.

"Kings are most heartless. But what can be done? The only thing I can do is raise my own status. 'Mother's status depends on her son,' so I'll try to make her life easier in the palace, free from other consorts' bullying."

Feiyue'er often talked with her sister and knew the palace's dark sides. Still, her sister hoped one day to be the perfect Empress.



Sometimes, Feiyue'er couldn't understand — was power really that important?

Back at the mansion, Xiao Ming ordered Ziyuan and Lu Luo to count the wedding gifts and prepare to return to Qingzhou.

Feiyue'er had gotten to know Ziyuan and Lu Luo.

She was gentle and kind. After chatting, the two maids happily called her "Princess Consort."

Watching this, Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction.

For a man, a good wife who can manage the household is priceless.

Though their marriage was political, he hoped for peace at home.

After long days of hardship, who wants chaos returning home?

After talking a while, Feiyue'er quickly took on the role of wife, eagerly helping count the gift list. To her, these things now belonged to them.

This gave Xiao Ming even more peace of mind, and he smiled.

Thinking of the gift list from Emperor Xiao Wenxuan, Xiao Ming pulled it out and scanned it.

He laughed. The Emperor had been very generous — sixty thousand taels of gold, five thousand bolts of cloth, and hundreds of precious jewels. He was well fed.

The final wedding event of the morning ended. That afternoon, Xiao Ming and Feiyue'er counted the gifts.

Sixty tables hosted six hundred guests — nearly all of Chang'an's elites.

They worked until evening, tallying the gifts' value at around three million taels of silver — a great haul.

Though most gifts needed selling to convert, Xiao Ming was pleased with the amount.

As the group was happily busy, someone suddenly entered the mansion.

It was Li San. After the assassination, Xiao Ming had secretly sent Li San to investigate. Li San had been working tirelessly and even contacted Wang Xuan in Qingzhou for help.

Seeing Li San, Xiao Ming led him into the main hall. Feiyue'er wisely excused herself to the bridal room.

"Your Highness, Wang Xuan's men have caught a Jin merchant who supplied tribesmen to the Crown Prince," Li San, tired from travel, said firmly.

"Caught?" Xiao Ming's eyes narrowed.

"Yes. Wang Xuan planted spies in the tribes' territory and soon uncovered the merchant's background. This merchant even dealt with our Chamber of Commerce, breaking rules by smuggling liquor onto the grasslands. Li Kaiyuan has wanted to punish him for some time," Li San explained.

"What about the capture?" Xiao Ming knew of the merchant. Many in the Qingzhou Chamber despised these Jin merchants, calling them traitors for selling contraband to the tribes, indirectly aiding their rise.

Li San said, "Between Liang and Prince Yong's territories lies a lawless village where many Jin merchants gather. Goods pass through there, but rivalries among the merchants exist. We had Li Kaiyuan bribe one Jin merchant for information, and we successfully captured the target. He's now outside Chang'an, awaiting your orders."

"Well done," Xiao Ming praised.

From the Emperor's tone, Xiao Ming knew Xiao Wenxuan intended to downplay the matter — he wanted stability, not chaos.

But for Xiao Ming, this was a grudge he couldn't let go.

#### Chapter 404: Exile

In the imperial study, Yang Zhen was quietly reporting to Emperor Xiao Wenxuan. When he finished, the Emperor frowned deeply.

"Are you sure it was Prince Qi's men who caught the Jin merchant?" Xiao Wenxuan asked.

"Yes. We could have caught the merchant earlier, but Prince Qi's people got there first. Our men have been following closely, and we can take the merchant back anytime the Emperor orders. But until then, we dare not act rashly and risk offending Prince Qi," Yang Zhen replied.

"Hmm, you handled it well. Avoid conflict with Prince Qi's men. I know Xiao Ming's temper — though he's changed a lot in two years, he's not someone who will take a loss quietly," Xiao Wenxuan gave a bitter smile. "Now we wait to see who this Jin merchant really works for."

"If it is the Second Prince, Your Majesty will have a tough time," Yang Zhen said, worried for the Emperor.

Having served Xiao Wenxuan for over twenty years, Yang Zhen knew him well. The Emperor's patience was for the empire's peace; without it, chaos would have erupted long ago.

Xiao Wenxuan frowned again. "It's not too hard. If the Second Prince is behind this, then we must give Xiao Ming an answer. For the Great Yu Empire, Xiao Ming is far more important than the King of Liang now."

Yang Zhen nodded. "Indeed. After all, Prince Qi is of the royal family."

At this time, Xiao Ming already had the Jin merchant's confession.

Li San reported after leaving the city. When he arrived, the secret guards were interrogating the merchant, and they had recorded a statement.

Li San immediately brought the confession to Xiao Ming.

"Your Highness, the Jin merchant has confessed. It was indeed the Second Prince who ordered him to sell tribesmen into the Eastern Palace. The King of Liang knew too. These tribesmen came from his territory," Li San said firmly.

Xiao Ming read the statement and nodded. He was almost certain it was the Second Prince. The tribal leader Beishan had just been defeated — the tribes couldn't have deployed assassins into Chang'an so fast without someone opening the gates.

"It's time to avenge the fallen soldiers," Xiao Ming said, clutching the statement. "Bring the merchant in."

For safety, he asked Li San to keep the merchant outside the city to prevent danger.

Now he could tell Emperor Xiao Wenxuan the truth. How else could he explain to his dead soldiers? How could the Qingzhou army respect him if he could not deliver justice?

They fought bravely for him, but he could not secure fairness. Who would risk their life for him in the future?

This time, he would show his soldiers that he was loyal to them too.

“Yes!” Li San spoke firmly. He was angry about this too.

Li San left, and Xiao Ming came out of the main hall.

Feiyue’er was by the window. Seeing Xiao Ming’s grim face, worry showed in her eyes.

When Xiao Ming looked at her, she quickly looked down, afraid to stir trouble — she had been warned by her sister before marriage that the Crown Prince might take out anger on her.

Looking at the frightened deer-like Feiyue’er, Xiao Ming’s dark expression softened.

He smiled helplessly and headed straight to the palace.

In the palace, Xiao Ming went directly to the imperial study.

Before he could speak, Xiao Wenxuan said, "It seems you already have clues about the assassin."

"You already know, Father?" Xiao Ming was surprised.

"Don't forget, this is Chang'an. But I'm ashamed I didn't notice your Second Brother's moves. When we learned it was the Jin merchants, we already guessed it was him," Xiao Wenxuan sighed.

"Then I hope Your Majesty will judge wisely," Xiao Ming said, handing over the confession.

Xiao Wenxuan glanced at it and sighed deeply. "Your Second Brother is too impatient."

He paced slowly, then said, "Give me the Jin merchant. I will give you a satisfactory answer."

"I have already had the merchant brought into the palace," Xiao Ming said shortly.

Xiao Wenxuan nodded, seeming suddenly very tired. He waved Xiao Ming off. "Your mother told me you'll leave Chang'an soon. You should prepare."

"Yes, Father," Xiao Ming bowed and left.

He was not afraid of Xiao Wenxuan smoothing things over. If the Emperor did so, Xiao Ming would gradually distance himself from court politics.

After Xiao Ming left, Xiao Wenxuan sat and thought deeply, then began writing an imperial edict.

Outside the palace, Xiao Ming returned to his mansion to prepare for his trip back to Qingzhou.

He no longer needed to attend court or engage in Chang'an affairs. As a regional lord, he was basically an independent ruler — interfering in court politics would be a serious taboo.

In the next few days, Chang'an grew livelier than before, stirred by rumors that the Second Prince had tried to assassinate Prince Qi to frame the Crown Prince.

The whole city buzzed with talk of the matter.

Soon after, an imperial decree was announced: the Second Prince was immoral, murdered his brothers, and defied the law.

He was stripped of title and exiled to the barren Bashan region as a commoner.



With the imperial decree, the assassination scandal quieted down. The city became tense and wary.

After years of a weak image, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan finally showed strength — unafraid of angering the King of Liang by punishing his son.

Many officials now saw this as proof the royal power had strengthened and that the emperor no longer feared the regional lords with armies.

More importantly, they understood Xiao Ming's key role.

To appease Xiao Ming's anger, Xiao Wenxuan exiled the Second Prince backed by the King of Liang — showing how highly Xiao Ming was valued.

Other princes stopped looking down on Xiao Ming. They realized the court was different now.

The rising regional powers in the east would influence their lives from now on.

With the answer clear, Xiao Ming chose to return to Qingzhou that very afternoon.

He traveled by merchant ship, carrying many gifts.

Watching the great city of Chang'an fade away, Xiao Ming smiled slightly.

He had brought home his wife — now it was time to build his own legacy and live quietly.

#### Chapter 405: Feiyue'er's Observations

As the merchant ship pierced through the morning mist, a huge and busy dock slowly came into view for Xiao Ming.

This dock was none other than the Tuojiang Dock, north of Qingzhou city.

From Chang'an to Qingzhou, the journey by boat took ten days and went smoothly overall.

In the first half of the trip, Feiyue'er cried often, missing her parents. But in the latter half, as she grew familiar with Xiao Ming, she enjoyed the scenery and people along the way.

After all, Feiyue'er was only eighteen or nineteen — the playful age. Once freed from worries, she became lively.

She no longer dwelled on the troubles in Chang'an, and the Second Prince was now just a stranger to her. His exile was deserved. The only regret was that the King of Liang probably wouldn't honor the trade agreement.

But that didn't matter. Now, with the royal family, Wei's land, Yong's land, and the interest-exchange Chu land, these regions would sustain his trade for a while.

In the future, maybe he could just blast his way with cannons.

After the assassination attempt, his faith in the princes dwindled. The blood oath was just a comfort for Empress Zhao and Xiao Wenxuan.

Though the other princes might tolerate it for now, when conflicts became irreconcilable, the blood oath would be as useless as farting after pulling down one's pants.

"Your Highness has returned!"

Though the ship had not yet docked, officials spotted its flag and began cheering.

Xiao Ming had been gone a month. Officials and generals in his territory were anxious and unsettled, unsure what to do without him.

Standing on the ship, Xiao Ming saw the crowd waiting at the dock — civil and military officials alike.

He said to Feiyue'er, "Princess Consort, let me introduce Qingzhou's officials to you."

Pointing, he said, "That stiff-looking man is Pang Yukun. He's as stiff as he looks and is my chief secretary. To his right is Niu Ben, my grand commander in charge of the armies of six prefectures. To his left is Zhan Xingchang, my strategist — a quiet scholar with a cunning mind. Behind Niu Ben is Lu Fei..."

Feiyue'er followed Xiao Ming's gestures and occasionally covered her mouth to smile. Xiao Ming's introductions were elegant and amusing, making it easy for her to remember their names.

As the ship slowly reached the dock, the sailors lowered the gangplank. Xiao Ming led his group ashore.

Pang Yukun had heard of Xiao Ming's return early and waited with officials, mainly to meet the Princess Consort.

As the ship docked, seeing Xiao Ming with a very beautiful woman at his side, the crowd exchanged looks and called out, "Greetings, Your Highness! Greetings, Princess Consort!"

After disembarking, Xiao Ming felt relieved — here he need not fear assassins around every corner.

The officials bowed deeply. Feiyue'er was somewhat overwhelmed.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, "Don't be nervous. They are my subjects and will be yours too. They mainly came to greet you."

Feiyue'er nodded gently. As Fei Ji's daughter, she had seen how he greeted officials and straightened her posture, trying to look regal. In a clear, melodious voice she said, "Please, no need for ceremony."

Xiao Ming smiled faintly. Feiyue'er was truly a daughter of a great family. She was refined. Her "no need for ceremony" was confident and clear.

"Thank you, Your Highness and Princess Consort," Pang Yukun and the others rose but kept their heads lowered, unwilling to look directly at Feiyue'er.

In Great Yu, staring at a woman was rude — let alone the Princess Consort.

At the dock, a horse carriage was ready. Xiao Ming led Feiyue'er aboard.

Pang Yukun and others lifted their heads and said, "Congratulations, Your Highness, on winning a beauty. Shouldn't you share some wedding money to liven things up?"

Xiao Ming always had good relations with his subordinates. He expected this and said, "The wedding money is with Luo Xin. Go ask him."

Hearing this, the crowd swarmed around Luo Xin. Lu Fei and other generals grabbed Luo Xin and began frisking him.

Watching the officials playfully crowd around Luo Xin, Xiao Ming climbed into the carriage with Feiyue'er and headed for Qingzhou city.

On the carriage, Feiyue'er tapped her chest. She had been nervous earlier but, seeing the officials' jovial behavior, smiled. "Your Highness, you have such good relations with your subjects."

"Yes. This is Qingzhou — no heaviness or stiffness like in Chang'an. It's a vibrant city and will never be like Chang'an."

The first time he visited Chang'an, Xiao Ming was shocked by its splendor. The second time, Chang'an felt less impressive than Qingzhou.

He believed in a few years Qingzhou would surpass Chang'an.

"Really? Then I must take a good look at Qingzhou," Feiyue'er said, pulling back the curtain slightly to peek at the unfamiliar place.

Through the slit, she saw the road from the dock to Qingzhou city was covered not with yellow earth but a silvery surface.

Neither merchants nor horse carriages left any marks on it.

Horse hooves sounded especially loud on the road.

The carriage soon reached the city gates.

Two rows of soldiers in dark green uniforms, each carrying stick-like weapons, saluted the carriage.

Inside Qingzhou city, the same type of roads continued. Suddenly, the streets grew crowded.

People passed by with smiles, wearing clean cotton clothes and carrying baskets filled with goods.

Merchants wore silk and brocade, pulling carts back and forth busily.

What surprised Feiyue'er most were groups of young men in white robes playing in the streets. Their chests bore the characters for "Bowen Academy."

Looking up, Feiyue'er saw a giant object floating overhead, startling her enough to close the curtain.

Xiao Ming laughed, "How do you like my Qingzhou? Amazing, isn't it?"

Still startled, Feiyue'er nodded. "The people here seem wealthier than those we passed. The number of merchants almost equals Chang'an. But Your Highness, what's that thing flying in the sky?"

"That's a hydrogen balloon," Xiao Ming replied with a smile.

Feiyue'er exclaimed, "Not a hot air balloon? What's a hydrogen balloon?"

#### Chapter 406: When the Potatoes Ripen

The carriage rolled along the clean cement road with a soft clatter, heading toward the Qi Prince's mansion.

On the way, Xiao Ming explained to Fei Yue'er the difference between hot air balloons and hydrogen balloons, as well as things unique to Qingzhou like cement. Fei Yue'er was amazed and couldn't stop smiling.

Even though she was known as a talented woman in Chang'an, these new scientific ideas made her feel a little confused.

The carriage traveled quickly on the cement road. After about ten minutes, they arrived at the mansion. Zi Yuan and Lu Luo happily got off and directed the servants to carry the wedding gifts inside.

When they heard Xiao Ming had returned, all the servants gathered. Qian Da Fu also came back from the mine especially to meet the new princess of the Qi Prince's mansion.

After getting off the carriage, Xiao Ming led Fei Yue'er into the main hall.

Once the gifts were moved inside, Qian Da Fu and the servants entered the main hall. Smiling, he bowed and said, "Greetings to Your Highness and the Princess."

Fei Yue'er, having already been through this once at the dock, was more calm this time. She smiled back, saying, "No need to stand on ceremony."



“Thank you, Princess,” Qian Da Fu and the others stood up.

Then Fei Yue’er said, “From now on, I will serve Your Highness together with all of you. I hope everyone can work together to help with the daily chores. I don’t have much valuable things, but I have prepared some silver coins as a small gift.”

After saying this, she signaled to Xiao Huan, who immediately took out a small package full of silver coins.

Before leaving, Fei Ji had given her these coins to distribute among the servants so they would have a good impression of her and serve her faithfully.

“Thank you, Princess,” Xiao Huan said as she handed out the silver coins, making many servants smile.

Xiao Ming whispered to Fei Yue’er, “You really know how to win people over.”

Fei Yue’er smiled quietly, “That’s what Father taught me.”

After Xiao Huan finished giving out the coins, Xiao Ming loudly said, “You all have received the silver. From now on, serve the Princess well. Anyone who harbors ill feelings towards her, do not blame me for being harsh.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the servants bowed deeply.

Xiao Ming nodded and dismissed them, leaving only Qian Da Fu.

He said, “Princess, this is Manager Qian. He used to serve Mother Empress. Remember, he is the most trusted person in Qingzhou. When danger comes, he is the one you can rely on.”

Fei Yue’er softly said, “Mother Empress once told me to rely on Manager Qian more in the future.”

Qian Da Fu was a little emotional and hurried to say, “Princess, rest assured. As long as you command, this old servant will serve loyally and do his best.”

Fei Yue’er smiled gently.

After meeting the servants, Xiao Ming took Fei Yue’er to the bedchamber. This would be their home from now on.

Inside the bedchamber, Fei Yue’er relaxed and wandered around like a child.

Seeing the full-length mirror in front of the dressing table, she stopped and examined herself carefully. This mirror was much bigger than the one Xiao Ming had given her.

After playing around in front of the mirror for a while, she walked over to the bed and her eyes lit up.

“Your Highness, what is this?” Fei Yue’er pointed at the spring mattress on the bed. Compared to the usual wooden bed, this was a big new thing on Xiao Ming’s ship.

“This is a mattress. I think the craftsmen sent it while I was in Chang’an,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

In ancient times, beds were made of solid wood, which was not very soft. After installing spring beds in the Wei family restaurant, he specially asked the craftsmen to make a mattress for him.

This mattress was supported by springs and filled with cotton. Although not as elastic as modern foam, it was a high-end product for this era.

“A mattress?” Fei Yue’er pressed on it with her finger, and it bounced back quickly.

Xiao Ming smiled, “Try sitting on it. It’s very comfortable. I’m planning to produce these mattresses for the merchants.”

Fei Yue’er lightly sat down and felt as if sitting on water. She bounced up a little and was surprised, opening her mouth wide.

“How is it? More comfortable than a wooden bed, right? From now on, we’ll sleep on this,” Xiao Ming teased.

Fei Yue’er blushed slightly.

Xiao Ming was about to tease her again when Zi Yuan came in and said, “Your Highness, Chief Pang is here. He says the potatoes are ready to harvest.”

“Really?”

Xiao Ming thought for a moment. He had returned just in time — it was the potato harvest season.

Laughing loudly three times, Xiao Ming’s mouth watered. His favorite fries would soon be a reality.

After laughing, he said to Fei Yue’er, “Princess, you stay here and get familiar with things. I’ll be back soon.”

Fei Yue’er looked surprised as Xiao Ming and Zi Yuan left for the main hall.

After Xiao Ming left, Fei Yue’er sighed and suddenly smiled mischievously. She lay down on the bed and rolled around happily, hugging the soft quilt.

“What a comfortable bed! Qingzhou really is amazing, so different from Chang’an.”

In the main hall, Pang Yukun waited for Xiao Ming.

Soon Xiao Ming arrived and said at the door, “Let’s go straight to the slave plantation.”

Pang Yu Kun smiled as he followed.

He was also excited. He wondered if this potato crop, which Xiao Ming said could yield 20 shi per mu, would bring a miracle to Qingzhou.

They mounted their horses and headed to the slave plantation outside the city.

This time Xiao Ming returned just before winter, a season when food was scarce. With potatoes, both the army and the academy could have more food options.

At the plantation, Kui Wu was already waiting with the village slaves.

Seeing Xiao Ming and Pang Yu Kun arrive together, he immediately stepped forward and respectfully said, “Kui Wu greets Your Highness and Chief Pang.”

“No need for ceremony,” Xiao Ming said, looking over the fields.

There were raised ridges of earth covered with green, low plants — the stems and leaves of the potatoes.

The actual potatoes grew buried under these ridges.

“Your Highness, over the past few months, the slaves carefully tended the crops. You said the minimum yield would be 20 shi per mu. If well tended, it can reach 40 shi. We followed the handbook you gave without any slack,” Kui Wu said excitedly, his face flushed.

Xiao Ming had promised that if the potato yield exceeded 30 shi, Kui Wu would be freed from slavery and become a true Qingzhou resident.

“Hmm, we have to check what’s really inside,” Xiao Ming said excitedly, looking at the endless potato fields.

On the way here, Pang Yu Kun mentioned they planted a total of 3,000 mu. He was looking forward to the harvest.

Chapter 407: High Yield

“Start!”

With that order, Kui Wu led over a thousand slaves rushing into the potato fields.

Harvesting potatoes was simple—just dig open the raised soil ridges, and inside were the yellow-orange potatoes.

In modern times, potatoes are called mǎlíngshǔ, also known as dìdàn. When he was young, Xiao Ming often mixed up potatoes and sweet potatoes, which are actually a different high-yield crop not yet introduced from overseas.

Modern agriculture was part of his plans too, so he aimed to collect crops from all over the world.

Meanwhile, the three warships Yue Yun took south had nearly finished repairs. The expanded Dengzhou shipyard had been producing galleys all year, and by year-end it could launch at least twelve.

According to Zhang Liang's report, these twelve galleys included one flagship (a first-class sailing warship), three second-class, four third-class, and four fourth-class sailing warships.

If these ships were finished by year-end, his navy would have fifteen galleys. Though this number was far less than Western naval powers with hundreds of ships, for Xiao Ming, this fleet was enough to confront colonizers already reaching into Asia.

From his experience, the West was not united. Their main colonies were in the Americas, and they did not commit many troops to the East.

Plus, the long journey far from home meant even if war broke out, messages and reinforcements would take months to arrive, and supply lines would be difficult.

For him, fighting on home ground was a clear advantage.

After reclaiming Shanhai pass, Xiao Ming planned to take back the Ryukyu Islands from the Dutch. The island's location was crucial.

Controlling Ryukyu would completely block trade routes from Japan and Korea going south. But his real goal was not just Ryukyu—the key resources he needed were sulfur, gold, and silver.

Records showed that in the late 16th century, Japan was booming in mining. Many silver mines were discovered. From 1562 until the Edo period, the Iwami Silver Mine in Oda City was the largest silver mine in Japan and one of the world's largest.

At that time, Japan was one of the world's top silver producers, providing about a third of the world's silver. The Ming dynasty even called Japan the "Silver Archipelago."

Besides silver, Japan held about 5% of the world's gold production, and its most important resource was sulfur, a key ingredient in gunpowder.

During the Ming and Song dynasties, Japan was a major sulfur supplier. Now, Xiao Ming mostly got sulfur shipped from the south.

He found out that these sulfur supplies were mostly brought by sea merchants from Japan.



In the past, when Great Yu Empire needed little gunpowder, sulfur was even more expensive than saltpeter. Now, with Qingzhou producing large amounts of gunpowder, sulfur prices soared.

This only strengthened Xiao Ming's resolve to drive out Western colonizers and monopolize East Asian trade, even colonize Japan if possible. In this era, the key to survival was seizing rare domestic resources from outside.

This was an age where industrial growth depended on resource plunder. Without any one resource, industry could stall.

While he pondered, Pang Yu Kun began inspecting the fields.

He dug out two potatoes the size of fists and excitedly ran over. "Your Highness, these things are really heavy."

Xiao Ming snapped back to attention and looked across the fields. Everywhere the ridges were turned up, slaves were busy harvesting with bright smiles—the joy of a good harvest.

Taking the potatoes from Pang Yu Kun, Xiao Ming smelled them carefully. A familiar scent spread, moving him deeply.

"This is the smell," Xiao Ming said excitedly, ignoring Pang Yu Kun's surprised look.

Pang Yu Kun couldn't help but wonder, "Has Your Highness eaten this before?"

"No, but my Western teacher mentioned it," Xiao Ming quickly made up an excuse. Once a lie was told, he had to keep patching it with more lies.

Pang Yu Kun nodded and sighed, "What a pity. If he were alive, I might have asked him about this."

Ignoring Pang Yu Kun's scholarly sympathy, Xiao Ming found a coal stove and ceramic pot in the village.

He filled the pot with water, washed the potatoes, and put them inside to boil over the stove.

Soon, as the water boiled, a faint fragrance came from the pot.

Pang Yu Kun kept his eyes on the boiling potatoes, waiting for them to cook.

Now that the potatoes were cooked, the question was—could they be eaten?

After boiling for some time, Xiao Ming used chopsticks to fish out a potato.

The hot aroma filled the air. Pressing it lightly, the surface dented easily—proof it was cooked.

Swallowing his saliva, Xiao Ming dipped the potato in cold water, peeled it, and bit into it.

“Delicious!” Xiao Ming exclaimed.

In the Great Yu Empire, vegetables were rare, so even a modern food like potato tasted amazing to him.

Seeing Xiao Ming’s reaction, Pang Yu Kun quickly took out a potato and bit into it.

His eyes widened. This taste was new to him, but boiled potatoes were truly good.

He quickly ate one, then another, and then a third potato, finally burping with satisfaction.

“Your Highness, these potatoes taste great. Three per meal is enough,” Pang Yu Kun laughed. If this spread in the fief, people would never worry about food.

Xiao Ming was full and very pleased. This was only part of his agricultural plan; sweet potatoes would come next.

Rubbing his belly, Xiao Ming squinted and said, "There are many ways to eat potatoes. In a few days, I'll give you something even better."

Pang Yu Kun nodded strongly, holding the potatoes like the whole world.

After tasting the potatoes, Xiao Ming told Kui Wu to start measuring the yield per mu.

That night, Kui Wu announced the results.

"Your Highness, this mu of potatoes yielded thirty-two shi," Kui Wu said excitedly, his face flushed.

Chapter 408: The Taste of French Fries

"Thirty-two shi."

Pang Yu Kun's heart almost jumped out of his chest with excitement.

"That's right, thirty-two shi, absolutely certain," Kui Wu confirmed after double-checking the measurements.

"Thirty-two shi, thirty-two shi!" Pang Yu Kun almost went mad, repeating, "Ordinary people get only about two shi of grain per mu. One mu of potatoes equals sixteen mu of rice. A family of three farming a

hundred mu would harvest two hundred shi. But with potatoes, that's 3,200 shi! Even if they had ten children, they could support them all."

Kui Wu swallowed nervously looking at Pang Yu Kun's wild excitement, then glanced at the calm Xiao Ming and cautiously asked, "Your Highness, what's going on with Chief Pang?"

"He's happily crazy," Xiao Ming laughed heartily.

"Is there really such a thing as crazy from anger and crazy from happiness?" Kui Wu shook his head while holding his ledger.

Xiao Ming patted Kui Wu's shoulder. "You did well. From today, your slave status is lifted. The local office will handle your household registration."

Kui Wu froze for a moment, then joy flooded his heart. Like Pang Yu Kun, he laughed uncontrollably, shouting, "I'm not a slave anymore! I'm not a slave anymore!"

The other slaves were speechless—first one went crazy, now another.

Watching the two excited men, Xiao Ming smiled happily. The next step was to encourage the people to have more children. Population was power in these times.

That evening, Xiao Ming returned to the city listening to Pang Yu Kun's loud laughter all the way. The high potato yield had completely won over the historian.

In Qingzhou city, Xiao Ming carried a small bag of potatoes on horseback back to the mansion, where the kitchen was preparing dinner.

“Your Highness, what’s in this bag?”

Fei Yue’er, getting familiar with the garden with Xiao Huan, walked toward Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming was in an especially good mood. These potatoes were not only food, but also a new commercial growth point for Qingzhou. Selling them all over Great Yu Empire would bring great profits.

“These are potatoes, Princess. Today I want to show you more of Qingzhou’s wonders.”

With that, Xiao Ming ordered the servants to fetch the coal stove and iron pot, also preparing a cutting board and knife. Then he set up in the courtyard to create a modern delicacy.

“Your Highness, what are you doing?” Zi Yuan and Lu Luo came over, curious, while Fei Yue’er couldn’t help asking.

Xiao Ming grinned, “Don’t ask now. You’ll understand once you taste it.”

Under everyone’s watch, Xiao Ming sliced the potatoes into thin strips, briefly boiled them in hot water, then had servants bring saltpeter and a large basin of water.

The saltpeter went into the water, producing white mist as the water gradually froze. Xiao Ming placed the bowl of potato strips into the ice water and covered it with cloth.

This traditional saltpeter ice-making was well known in Great Yu Empire and used by nobles to cool off in summer. So no one was surprised.

After a while chilling in the ice water, Xiao Ming took out the potato strips and fried them in boiling oil with salt. When golden and crisp, he took them out.

The golden fries filled the plate with a tempting aroma. Everyone watching swallowed hard.

“Your Highness, what is this?” Fei Yue’er blinked wide-eyed.

“French fries,” Xiao Ming said, picking up a fry and feeding it to Fei Yue’er. The intimate gesture made her blush deeply.

But since they were among familiar faces, Fei Yue’er still took a bite. The fries were crispy outside and soft inside, fragrant from frying—delicious.

After one bite, Fei Yue’er was conquered by the fries and finished it eagerly, wanting more.

Xiao Ming then explained the origin of potatoes, how to plant and eat them. Everyone finally understood.

“Thirty-two shi per mu, and they taste this good,” Fei Yue’er, well-read in poetry and books, understood the significance. “Your Highness, these potatoes can bring wealth to the people of the six prefectures.”

“Yes, that’s what I think too,” Xiao Ming proudly said. “I discussed with Pang Yu Kun on the way back. We’ll promote potatoes in the next few days, and require each household in the six prefectures to plant at least one mu. Even if they can’t eat them all, they can sell the surplus.”

Fei Yue’er nodded, looking at Xiao Ming with admiration. This man was not only respected, but had amazing skills she could hardly match.

Just like in Chang’an, the more she understood Qingzhou, the more she longed for it.

A smile touched her lips. Being with this man, what else could she ask for?

“Delicious,” Fei Yue’er said, eating another fry. She called Zi Yuan and Lu Luo, “Come try Your Highness’s cooking.”

Lu Luo, the biggest foodie, eagerly took a fry, eyes wide. Zi Yuan wasn’t to be outdone, and even Xiao Huan reached out her small hand.



With the five of them attacking, the plate of fries was quickly gone. Then the four looked at Xiao Ming pleadingly.

Unable to resist, Xiao Ming fried another batch. That evening, they barely ate anything else—just fries till half full.

When night fell and lanterns lit up the mansion, Fei Yue'er wiped the oil from her mouth, satisfied, and returned to the bedchamber with Xiao Ming.

After days of travel and settling affairs, she felt drowsy. Xiao Ming also looked tired and urged her to bathe together before bed.

Fei Yue'er blushed, hesitated, but still went to the bathroom with him. When she saw the bathtub, toilet, and washbasin, she perked up, grabbing Xiao Ming's arm and asking questions.

Xiao Ming smiled and explained everything patiently, even demonstrating. This amazed Fei Yue'er more.

Hot water flowed from the water tower into the bathtub. They undressed and bathed together, sharing tender moments. Fei Yue'er blinked, suddenly feeling like a village girl who had just come to Chang'an.

"Your Highness, are you laughing at me for not knowing anything?" Turning her head, she saw Xiao Ming smiling warmly and pouted in dissatisfaction.

“Of course not! I’m just smiling because I married such a beautiful wife.”

Fei Yue’er smiled shyly. “I am lucky to marry you, Your Highness. I only wish to grow old with you.”

Looking at her pure smile, Xiao Ming felt warmth in his heart. He finally had a home.

#### Chapter 409: The Progress of Subordinates

Early in the morning, a loud rooster crow shattered the silence.

Because of tiredness the night before, the two had gone to bed early. Now Xiao Ming woke up, but Fei Yue’er was still sound asleep. Not wanting to disturb her, he quietly got out of bed alone.

He had many official matters to handle today. It had been a month since he last returned, and he wasn’t sure what had happened in his fief during that time. Most important was the potato situation.

He needed to promote potatoes this year, so the people of the six prefectures would accept this new crop. By next year, they could start planting it.

After dressing, washing, and a simple meal, Xiao Ming headed straight to the governor’s mansion.

Pang Yu Kun was still excited from yesterday’s potato surprise. Seeing Xiao Ming, his face was all smiles—quite rare for such a serious man.

“Don’t just focus on potatoes. There’s government work too. Immediately notify the military, Bowen Academy, the military workshop, and others to come for a meeting,” Xiao Ming said.

Pang Yu Kun nodded and quickly sent messengers to notify everyone.

After waiting half an hour at the mansion, people arrived one by one. They all wore joyful expressions—Xiao Ming’s wedding celebrations still fresh in their minds.

After some greetings and light talk, Xiao Ming asked them to sit and began inquiring about the fief’s condition.

“Commander Niu, how is the Youzhou army formation coming?”

Niu Ben replied, “In the past month, we strictly screened slave soldiers. Now, seven thousand have been assigned to Qingzhou army. After opening granaries and distributing grain, many commoners in Youzhou have enthusiastically joined. The new Youzhou army totals 12,000 soldiers. Along with 8,000 from Guanning Iron Cavalry, the total is now 20,000. Lei Ming pulled core members from the Iron Cavalry to serve as officers at various levels. Bowen Academy has selected excellent staff to assist officers with military affairs.”

He paused, then continued, “With Qingzhou army’s help, Youzhou army has started firearm training, and artillery drills are underway. In about six months, Youzhou troops can rotate with Qingzhou army.”

Xiao Ming nodded, “Shanghai Pass is critical. Cangzhou’s troops can be transferred there. The garrison must maintain 50,000 soldiers and push fortress-building strategies to restrict barbarian raids on Great Yu’s border.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Barbarians have scouts outside Shanhai Pass. Guanning Iron Cavalry patrol often. But the northern weather is getting cold, and soldiers’ uniforms are thin. I worry the cold winter will severely hurt morale and fighting power. Please prepare winter clothes for Shanhai Pass’s troops.”

Xiao Ming frowned. This was a serious issue. In history, German troops failed to invade the Soviet Union due to winter, and the Ming often sent southern troops north when fighting the Qing.

Southern soldiers unaccustomed to the cold suffered low morale. Meanwhile, the Qing and barbarians were adapted, wearing fur coats and ear-covering hats for winter.

After thinking, Xiao Ming said, “It’s perfect timing. Father recently sent over ten thousand bolts of cloth. Have the weaving workshops make cotton-padded winter clothes for Shanhai Pass soldiers.”

Niu Ben was overjoyed. This had troubled him for days, and now Xiao Ming’s return solved it immediately.

Besides clothing, Niu Ben reported, “The military workshop recently delivered 4,000 flintlock rifles. Qingzhou army now has 20,000 flintlocks, one per soldier. The surplus can go to Youzhou and Cangzhou armies. That’s all from me.”

Xiao Ming nodded and looked at Chen Wenlong. “How is the Machinery Department and military workshop? The court wants to purchase 5,000 matchlock rifles. Any problems?”

“None, Your Highness. The Machinery Department has divided the lathes into separate workshops. The drilling lathe workshop alone has expanded to 600 machines, enough to produce 5,000 barrels a month,” Chen Wenlong said.

“Six hundred machines? That many?” Xiao Ming was surprised.

Chen Wenlong nodded, “Since adopting hydrogen purification for tungsten powder, pure tungsten powder production is easier, speeding drill bit manufacturing. We are also trying hydrogen purification for other ores. The metal refinery is under construction. Craftsmen like Zhang Liu are studying precision metal gears to build the clock Your Highness requested.”

Xiao Ming smiled, “Good. Keep it up. The industrial base depends on your Machinery Department .”

“Your Highness, the Tiger Cannon is progressing too. Recently, we successfully test-fired it against a gunpowder barrel. Its range exceeds trebuchets by 300 meters, reaching 500 meters,” Chen Qi said excitedly.

“Five hundred meters,” Xiao Ming laughed. “Not bad. You’re finally able to handle things independently. After this meeting, I’ll go see your Tiger Cannon.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Chen Qi said eagerly. He had been researching various cannon types and made progress on the Tiger Cannon.

Xiao Ming then asked Song Changping about matchlock rifle production. With craftsmen’s skill and assembly line use, production was steadily increasing.

Xiao Ming's first questions about the army showed his serious attention. He knew upcoming wars might be continuous. Even bringing East Asia into his sphere would be difficult.

After army updates, Xiao Ming looked to Yue Yun, who hadn't attended the last meeting due to work at Dengzhou shipyard.

"Yue Yun, how is the navy?"

"Your Highness, this year I recruited 3,000 sailors and trained captains, helmsmen, sailmen, and gunners according to the warship numbers launching. We've been training on three galleys for months. Once the ships launch, the fleet will be ready immediately," Yue Yun's voice was steady and deep. This training made him an excellent naval officer.

Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction, then said to Wang Xuan, "Before the new year, deploy secret guards south to the Chu King's fief to gather intelligence on the Dutch—ships, troops, and defenses on Ryukyu Island. Report all to me."

"Your Highness, will the navy be at war?"

Yue Yun's expression grew intense. He hadn't forgotten the humiliation at sea—British Redcoats and Dutch Greycoats rampaging their waters, killing indiscriminately.

Chapter 410: The Time to Brew

The governor's mansion was silent.

Yue Yun's question drew all eyes to Xiao Ming. After the northern campaign, was Qingzhou preparing for another war? And what was the purpose?

"That's right! the navy will fight, for sea power!"

Xiao Ming's words struck hard. He knew the generals had no real concept of maritime rights, which was why China's navy had fallen behind.

For centuries, land power shaped civilization, and enemies came from the north. It was only after Western cannon and huge ships breached the gates centuries later that people woke up but it was too late.

"Sea power?" Pang Yu Kun and Niu Ben looked puzzled. Niu Ben said, "Your Highness, Great Yu Empire's enemy is the barbarians in the north. We should continue the northern campaign until they submit."

"General Niu's words are reasonable. I hope Your Highness will reconsider," Pang Yu Kun agreed.

Xiao Ming expected opposition when planning this, but he was determined. Without maritime trade, Qingzhou couldn't rapidly build wealth.

"War costs money. Without food and bullets, how can we keep fighting north? Don't forget, the barbarians lost few troops last time. Invading their lands now is like breaking eggs against rocks. Plus, two recent wars with them drained troops and hurt Qingzhou's growth. This sea power fight aims to open southern trade routes to ease Qingzhou's development," Xiao Ming said firmly.

In history, Emperor Wu of Han spent all the treasury defeating the Xiongnu.

Similarly, even if Great Yu Empire spent everything fighting barbarians now, it would be a costly stalemate especially with Xiao Ming's current resources.

After recent victory, the army was restless; he wanted to cool that down.

Mentioning money, Pang Yu Kun and Niu Ben grew silent—they knew Qingzhou's army was funded by silver; without it, nothing worked.

Zhan Xingchang thought over Xiao Ming's idea and agreed, "Your Highness is right. The Emperor has no will to campaign north, and other princes won't cooperate. Deep grassland incursions alone are unwise. For now, defense against barbarians is best. After building a strong army and finances, we can campaign north."

Everyone nodded. Pang Yu Kun and Niu Ben finally realized development must take priority.

Yue Yun was displeased with their narrow view. "Do you really think Great Yu Empire is still the world's center? Ridiculous! Foreign ships roam our seas. You only care about land, but we've lost vast maritime territories. Without sea trade, how do we get potatoes, chili peppers, or corn?"

The governor's mansion fell silent. Yue Yun's words made everyone reflect. Before, their eyes only saw northern barbarians, but now they understood many nations spread across the world.



Seeing their thoughtful faces, Xiao Ming nodded inside. He wanted to change old ideas because the future belonged to sea powers. Once he amassed capital and upgraded weapons, the northern barbarians would be easy to beat.

Having set the tone for naval strengthening and development, Xiao Ming asked about Bowen Academy's progress.

According to Lin Wentao, the academy recently recruited more students, expanding departments. He and Lu Tong created a list of technologies to research next.

"Your Highness, here is the list of planned experiments," Lin Wentao handed Xiao Ming a paper.

Scanning the list, Xiao Ming was pleased. It showed future scientific research in order from simple to complex—basic industrial tech all prepared well.

"Excellent. Use the labs fully and boldly research. The governor's office will fund you. Outstanding individuals may even apply for personal research funds."

Lin Wentao and Lu Tong smiled, ready to share the good news with students.

After academy matters, Xiao Ming asked about Qingzhou's governance.

Pang Yu Kun said, "I have selected officials to Youzhou. Its government is now established. The pastures given to Cao Zhengyang, Ding Wu, and Dai Zixing have been handed over. They're buying colts for grazing. The merchants' guild sent representatives to co-manage the pastures."

He paused and took out an account book. "Though this year's two grain harvests declined, many households still have surplus. The government bought two million shi of wheat this year. Because of plenty of grain, prices in Qingzhou have dropped."

"Good. That means people sell their leftover grain," Xiao Ming said.

Pang Yu Kun sighed. "But low grain prices hurt farmers. Many want to sell to the government, but warehouses can't keep up. The two million shi storage is maxed out."

Xiao Ming chuckled, "Don't worry, that's good for me. Before, grain shortages meant no brewing. Now with excess grain, we'll buy it to brew wine, then sell it domestically, to Korea, Japan, even Southeast Asia."

"That's a brilliant idea," Pang Yu Kun laughed heartily.

Yue Yun rolled his eyes, "Pirates plague the seas. This business won't be easy."

"Then you navy must clear those sea bandits," Pang Yu Kun replied, suddenly feeling tricked. He realized Yue Yun had baited him after opposing overseas naval wars.

Yue Yun laughed loudly seeing Pang Yu Kun's expression.

Xiao Ming smiled wryly and continued, "Also, barbarians love alcohol. When I was in Chang'an, I heard Shanxi merchants bought guild wine at high prices to sell to barbarians. We won't let them have that bargain. We'll trade wine for furs and maybe make leather boots for every Qingzhou soldier."