

## **I. Dynasty 421**

### Chapter 421: Steam Explosion

Standing in the courtyard, Xiao Ming looked towards Bowen Academy and waited for a while, but no smoke appeared.

He thought to himself, this must not be an explosion in the chemistry academy, because after a chemical explosion there would usually be a plume of smoke.

But whatever it was, he had to go check it out—if there were casualties, it would be a big problem. With that in mind, he immediately had someone prepare horses to rush to Bowen Academy.

“What happened?”

As soon as he arrived at Bowen Academy, Xiao Ming ran straight towards the crowded area.

“Your Highness!” Seeing Xiao Ming, the gathered students immediately started talking all at once.

“The physics academy’s laboratory exploded. Lin Wentao and five students were scalded by hot water.”

“The physics students said they were doing a steam experiment, but the boiler exploded unexpectedly.”

“ ... ”

On the way here, Xiao Ming had already guessed the cause, because at the last meeting, Lin Wentao had given him a report listing the steam engine as the top priority. The students' words confirmed his guess.

“Where are they?” Xiao Ming asked anxiously. These were all key technical members.

One participant in the experiment said, “Your Highness, rest assured. Their injuries are not severe, they were only splashed by hot water. Right now, they are all at Medic Sun's clinic.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming breathed a sigh of relief.

Passing through the crowd, he went into the physics laboratory. Water was everywhere. In the center lay a deformed boiler on the ground, its exhaust port blown apart.

He sighed. He had warned Lin Wentao that steam could explode, but accidents still happened. Fortunately, this was only a small steam boiler experiment, so the power was limited.

After inspecting the scene, Xiao Ming headed towards the inner part of the academy, where the medical school was located.

At the medical school, inside Medic Sun's clinic, he saw Lin Wentao and five others.

“Your Highness, ouch.” Lin Wentao tried to stand up when he saw Xiao Ming, but immediately grimaced in pain, clutching his lower leg.

Xiao Ming quickly told him to sit down. He looked at Lin Wentao's leg and saw a patch of skin on his calf had been scalded by hot water, with some blisters forming.

He looked at the other students, who also showed some signs of hot water burns.

"Why weren't you more careful? Didn't I tell you to make the pressure gauge first? Without it, it's no wonder the boiler exploded since you couldn't monitor the pressure," Xiao Ming scolded.

Lin Wentao smiled bitterly. "Your Highness, this time I was a bit impatient. I have already given the mechanical department the pressure gauge design drawings, but I couldn't wait and led them to start the steam experiment early. I didn't expect the pressure estimate to be off and cause the explosion."

Xiao Ming shook his head.

The pressure gauge structure is not complicated, and Qingzhou can supply all the materials needed. The current machine tools can manufacture it easily.

Or rather, Qingzhou isn't incapable of producing pressure gauges; it's just that no one has invented one yet.

Now that Xiao Ming had given Lin Wentao the design, clockmaking craftsmen can manufacture pressure gauges without much difficulty.

The reason he insisted on having the pressure gauge ready first was to reduce accidents during the steam engine experiments.

After all, he had a complete set of knowledge. There was no need for this research to start from scratch. In fact, Lin Wentao and the others had already skipped the simplest steam engine designs.

“That’s nothing. What matters is that you are all safe. To me, you are more important than the steam engine itself. If something happened to you, there would be no one left to help me produce the things from the textbooks,” Xiao Ming smiled.

Lin Wentao and the others laughed softly. They were moved by Xiao Ming’s concern.

At this moment, Medic Sun said, “Your Highness, don’t worry. Their injuries are minor. They will recover in a few days.”

“That makes me feel better. Remember, cooperate with the mechanical department and produce the pressure gauge before continuing the experiments,” Xiao Ming reminded.

Lin Wentao nodded. “Yes, Your Highness.”

After calming the six students, Xiao Ming asked, “Since you are already developing the steam engine, what progress have you made?”

“The students have basically understood the principle of the steam engine. It is actually like a ceramic pot for boiling water. Steam continuously generates inside the pot, and the pressure inside gradually increases. When it reaches a certain level, the steam will push the lid off. If you try to hold the lid down hard, the pot will explode from the steam pressure. That was the cause of this explosion,” Lin Wentao explained.

After a pause, Lin Wentao continued, “So, if you add a piston inside the pot, the steam will push the piston outward, releasing some steam. Then the piston will fall back, and when the steam pressure is high enough, it will push the piston out again. This repeats continuously. If you add various mechanisms on the piston rod, the steam engine can produce linear motion, rotary motion, and so on.”

Lin Wentao spoke seriously and clearly. Xiao Ming nodded. “Good. It shows you have a deep understanding of the steam engine principle. But principles are one thing. Making a qualified steam engine is another. I’m looking forward to the day you succeed. Then I will reward you with titles and promotions.”

Lin Wentao and the others chuckled happily.

Xiao Ming smiled too. According to news from Yue Yun, the concept of the steam engine had already appeared in the West. Now Lin Wentao and the physics academy students were working hard to catch up.

With a solid knowledge foundation, Xiao Ming was confident that while there would be some setbacks in manufacturing a Watt steam engine, success was only a matter of time.

However, he would not underestimate the West. After all, the current world is very different from the modern era, and even in modern times, Watt's steam engine was developed only this century. So the road ahead was still long.

After saying some encouraging words to Lin Wentao, Xiao Ming left Bowen Academy.

Although this experiment was thrilling, accidents in experiments were inevitable. He could not stop progress because of one accident.

Now, with the students' grasp of textbook knowledge improving, Xiao Ming believed that an era of technological explosion was about to arrive in Qingzhou—a technological explosion even fiercer than in the West.

With technology as an advantage, his fiefdom could catch up with Western countries. Otherwise, the history of falling behind and being bullied would repeat.

After leaving Bowen Academy, Xiao Ming returned directly to the manor.

Lin Wentao and the others had no shortage of steam engine knowledge, only lacking practical application experience. There was nothing Xiao Ming could do but let them move forward step by step.

What he could do was provide these students with a complete environment to work in.

Chapter 422: Unfair Treaty

Chang'an, Chengqing Hall.

Facing the court officials and generals, Xiao Wenxuan angrily threw the memorial scroll at the feet of the Third Prince.

"Look at this. This is the memorial just submitted by the Wei King. This is the Chu King you've been so desperately defending. Your uncle has embarrassed me like this," Xiao Wenxuan said furiously.

The Third Prince's face paled. He crouched down to pick up the memorial, but just one glance at its contents made his expression change drastically.

The Fourth Prince glanced at the Third Prince with a mocking smile. Now that the Second Prince was gone from court, the Crown Prince's position was stable, and the Fourth Prince could only compete against the Third Prince.

Even if he could never become emperor, he still hoped to perform well enough so that Xiao Wenxuan would grant him a prosperous fief.

"Father, although Uncle lost to the Dutch, he did so for the dignity of the Great Yu Empire. He fought against the Dutch, and though defeated, his honor remains intact," the Third Prince said urgently.

He knew very well that his current smooth sailing in court was entirely because the Chu King backed him up. Now that the Chu King was defeated by the Dutch, his standing among the ministers had certainly diminished.

Especially since the memorial reported that hundreds of warships lost to a mere ten Dutch warships—this was particularly embarrassing.

“The Third Prince is so silver-tongued. The Chu King has betrayed the nation and lost the country’s honor, yet Your Highness praises him like a national hero. Shameful!” an official in a red robe shouted angrily.

After this official spoke, the Fourth Prince smiled. The northern and southern vassal kings had always been at odds because they understood the Chu King’s shady dealings over the years and secretly wished for unrest in the north.

Now that the Chu King was defeated by the Dutch, they were naturally delighted and took the opportunity to mock him.

The Third Prince’s face darkened like pig liver upon hearing this, but he also knew he was in the wrong this time. However, he was not one to be bullied and retorted angrily, “Zheng Hongwen, don’t spout your cold remarks. At least the Chu King dared to fight the Dutch. You all just hide behind and watch the show. If you have the ability, which one of you dares to face the Dutch in battle?”

At these words, the court fell into silence. Seeing this, the Third Prince sneered, “What? No one dares?”

Xiao Wenxuan frowned. The Great Yu Empire had never really had a formal navy. If there was a navy at all, it was only those of the Chu King, the Wei King, and the Yan King.

Among them, the Wei King and Chu King were the strongest coastal lords. Now that the Chu King had been defeated, only the Wei King remained with a fleet of considerable scale, as far as he knew.



But he also understood that what the Chu King couldn't accomplish, the Wei King could not either. The Third Prince's accusations left all the ministers speechless, and Xiao Wenxuan himself was embarrassed.

"Is there really no one in the entire Great Yu Empire who can fight the Dutch?" Xiao Wenxuan also asked.

The Third Prince then said, "Father, the Qi King's fief is also by the sea. Since the Qi King has been able to drive away barbarians, he may be able to drive away the Dutch as well. Why not let the Qi King try?"

"How ridiculous. The Qi King's fief has only been stable for two years. Where would he get warships to fight the Dutch?" Fei Ji said.

"Third Prince, the issue now is the unfair treaty proposed by the Dutch after the Chu King's defeat," Fei Ji continued.

"Exactly. The Dutch are using the Chu King to demand from the emperor that the Great Yu Empire exempt Dutch ships from taxes, open six coastal cities as trade ports, and forbid any taxation on Dutch goods. This unfair treaty is all the Chu King's fault."

"Exactly. Third Prince, what do you propose we do?"

"..."

The court immediately descended into chaos.

The Third Prince's face grew increasingly grim. Now that the Dutch had defeated the Chu King and demanded that the entire Great Yu Empire be treated as the Dutch's most favored nation—just like Chu—this was no longer a matter concerning only Chu but the whole empire.

The court had just shaken off the barbarians' annual tributes. Now it had to face such a humiliating treaty. Naturally, the blame centered on the Chu King.

"Father, for now, the only option is to temporarily accept the Dutch demands. The Great Yu Empire has no navy capable of defeating the Dutch. If we refuse, the Dutch will continue to harass our coastal regions," the Third Prince hesitated.

Hearing this, Luo Quan immediately shouted angrily, "Your Majesty, absolutely not! The Great Yu Empire has just defeated the barbarians and avenged past humiliations. How can we suffer such disgrace again? The Chu King lost only one-tenth of his ships and still has the strength to continue fighting. We should let the Chu King keep battling the Dutch and have the Wei King cooperate to attack the Dutch together."

Xiao Wenxuan frowned. Looking at the Third Prince and then the ministers who were all enraged, he said, "Enough arguing. I will think over this matter before making a decision. Any other business? If not, court is adjourned."

At this moment, Fei Ji stepped forward and said, "Your Majesty, I have some good news."

"What good news? Speak," Xiao Wenxuan's expression softened a little.

Fei Ji said, "Your Majesty, recently something called 'potatoes' has been brought from the Qi King's fief. This thing tastes quite good. Now many merchants in Chang'an are selling it. I wonder if Your Majesty has tried it."

"Hahaha, I've been eating it these past couple of days. The Qi King sent me some and even instructed how to prepare it. I had never tried this before, but these potato fries suit my taste quite well," Xiao Wenxuan said, his mood lightening. Among the princes, only the Qi King could bring him some joy.

Fei Ji smiled, "I have also tasted some. The flavor is indeed extraordinary. However, it is said these potatoes come from overseas and that the Qi King took them from barbarians."

"Took them by force?" Xiao Wenxuan was surprised.

"Yes, Your Majesty. It is said the Qi King dispatched three warships to the Southern Seas, sank the foreign barbarians' warships, and seized the potatoes. It is said these barbarians and the Dutch come from the same place," Fei Ji said.

"Oh? I didn't know about this," Xiao Wenxuan said.

Fei Ji nodded. "This was a curious story my daughter told me in her letter. I didn't expect the Qi King to be so brave and fierce at sea."

"So you mean the Qi King can defeat the Dutch?" the Third Prince scoffed.

“Not necessarily impossible. But Your Majesty, Qi has always lacked shipyards. If the court can help the Qi King build more shipyards, who knows, the Qi King might be able to make a name for himself at sea as well,” Fei Ji said.

Indeed, Fei Yue’er had sent this letter, but its content was instructed by Xiao Ming.

When Xiao Ming learned of the Chu King’s defeat, he had Fei Yue’er send this letter to Chang’an, using this opportunity to request court support for shipyards in Qingzhou.

It was for this reason he brought this matter up now.

Xiao Wenxuan’s expression shifted slightly. He no longer trusted the Chu King, and the Wei King was also untrustworthy now. Only Xiao Ming gave him confidence.

So he said, “Fei Zhongshu makes a good point. No matter what, we must never compromise with the Dutch this time.”

Chapter 423: Support

Xiao Wenxuan’s stern voice echoed through Chengqing Hall.

None of the ministers below voiced any opposition. The Great Yu Empire had just shaken off the humiliating tribute to the barbarians. Could a bunch of barbarians who suddenly appeared from nowhere force the Great Yu Empire to sign another humiliating treaty?

Moreover, in the ministers' eyes, the barbarians were the real enemy of the Great Yu Empire. These sea barbarians were insignificant— the ocean was just a strange word to them.

As for the Dutch continuing to harass along the coast, they did not care at all. After all, the one suffering was still the Chu King. Besides, the Dutch only dared to bully on the sea, never setting foot on land.

“Father, but if we don't agree to the Dutch demands, they will completely cut off maritime trade lines, which would be a huge loss for the Great Yu Empire,” the Third Prince persisted.

He didn't care about the empire's dignity; what he wanted was a stable position. The Chu King's power and his own status were intertwined.

Xiao Wenxuan showed a trace of impatience. He had long harbored dissatisfaction with the foreign surname vassal kings but tolerated them for the sake of internal stability.

When the Third Prince took the initiative to bring up the Dutch matter and plead through Xiao Ming, he had already become very displeased with the Chu King.

Although he was uninterested in the Dutch and didn't care about the Chu King's dealings with them, the fact that the Chu King deliberately concealed this matter was an insult to him.

These days, he had been reflecting on the mistakes he made ascending the throne. Excessive tolerance had not made these vassal kings grateful but only let their ambitions grow.

Now he could no longer cover for the foolish mistakes of these foreign surname vassal kings.

He said coldly, "The loss must have been heavy for the Chu King. If I'm not mistaken, because of the coastal pirate trouble, the imperial ships rarely sailed. The coast is mainly the Chu King's business. Even the Wei King has to watch the Chu King's face. Now that this trouble originated from him, he must bear it himself. And remember, you are the Great Yu Empire's Third Prince, not the Chu King's nephew!"

By the time he finished, Xiao Wenxuan's voice was full of warning.

These princes had become completely shameless, acting as pawns for the vassal kings in the capital, sacrificing everything for their own benefit. Before, Xiao Wenxuan turned a blind eye; now, his tolerance had reached its limit.

The Third Prince's face turned pale. Before, he had looked down on his weak father on the throne, but now a fear suddenly welled up from his heart.

Since the Second Prince was demoted to Bazhou, the princes' words and actions had gradually become more cautious. No one could challenge the supreme imperial authority.

Though Xiao Wenxuan's words were aimed at the Third Prince, his eyes swept over the Crown Prince, Fourth Prince, and others.

The Crown Prince and the others immediately lowered their heads in shame.

Snorting coldly, Xiao Wenxuan continued, "Fei Ji, stay. Everyone else, you may leave."

“Long live the emperor!”

The ministers shouted in unison, then gradually retreated. Many of the departing ministers looked on with envy.

The Fei family had four generations of grand ministers. Their disciples and former officials were spread throughout the empire. Now, with a son-in-law guarding the frontier, they had everything they could wish for.

After the ministers left, Xiao Wenxuan smiled, “Since the Qi King asked you to speak, it seems I have no choice but to support him building shipyards.”

“Hehe, Your Majesty can’t be kept in the dark. This matter is indeed serious. Currently, only the Chu King, Wei King, and Qi King have coastal fiefs. Among them, the Chu King and Wei King have the strongest navies. If the Dutch continue provoking, the Chu King and Wei King can still respond, but the Qi King will have a hard time.”

“You make a good point. Before, I could still rely on the Wei King. But after the battle at Jizhou, he really disappointed me. I was fooled by his loyal appearance and didn’t expect him to harbor ill intentions,” Xiao Wenxuan sighed.

“Your Majesty need not be saddened. People can change. As long as the Wei King still supports the royal family, that is fortunate. And with the Qi King by his side, the Wei King certainly dares not act recklessly,” Fei Ji comforted.

Nodding, Xiao Wenxuan said, "It's just a pity that after all these years and all the silver I spent from the treasury, I've only raised a wolf cub. As you said, the only way now is to support the Qi King, starting with the shipyards."

"Your Majesty is wise," Fei Ji smiled. "The Qi King is Your Majesty's son and much more reliable."

"Exactly." Xiao Wenxuan stood up and paced back and forth. "You take my imperial edict to find Qin Chengming. He is the supervisor of the Lesser Treasury. He knows exactly how many shipyards the court owns and how many craftsmen there are."

Hearing this, Fei Ji was relieved. Qin Chengming was Qin Rui's father, and Qin Rui had always been friendly with Xiao Ming. Qin Chengming would surely give his full effort in this matter.

Receiving Xiao Wenxuan's orders, Fei Ji responded and left immediately.

Watching Fei Ji disappear from Chengqing Hall, Xiao Wenxuan sighed and said to Feng Deshui, "I hope I have not misjudged Xiao Ming this time."

"Your Majesty's vision is like a beacon. How could you misjudge him? I also think the Qi King is excellent, at least far more down-to-earth than the other princes. And the Qi King never liked playing political games, unlike Ning—"

At the mention of "Ning," Feng Deshui immediately stopped speaking, knelt down in fear, and said, "Your Majesty, I am guilty."



"Ah, never mind. I forgive you," Xiao Wenxuan said softly.

In the past, he would have been furious, but today he only sighed slightly. Time had passed, and he had gradually forgotten many things.

Hearing this, Feng Deshui cautiously stood and chuckled awkwardly, "Your Majesty, I have already arranged to transport the hot air balloon outside the city. Today is a perfect day for ascending and gazing afar."

"Let's go." Since riding the hot air balloon, Xiao Wenxuan had grown fond of ascending in it to survey the land. He smiled and walked out with Feng Deshui.

Meanwhile, Fei Ji had arrived at the Lesser Treasury and found Qin Chengming, who was going over the accounts.

"Registered shipyards?" Qin Chengming asked in surprise.

"Correct. Your Majesty has issued orders to dispatch elite craftsmen from these shipyards to the Qi King. Check the accounts and see how many craftsmen there are," Fei Ji said.

Qin Chengming smiled, "No need to check the accounts. All of this is in my head. The royal family currently owns twelve shipyards: one large, four medium, and seven small. In total, there are 26,000 craftsmen. If half are dispatched, that would be 13,000."

“The Lesser Treasury Supervisor is indeed diligent in his duties. In that case, please ensure that skilled craftsmen are sent to Qi’s territory,” Fei Ji cupped his hands in respect.

Qin Chengming returned the gesture, “Since this is for the Qi King, I will do my utmost.”

#### Chapter 424: Industrial Refinement

Qingzhou.

After intense disputes, Li Wei angrily signed a trade agreement for one thousand naval cannons.

According to the agreement, each cannon was priced at twenty thousand taels, totaling twenty million taels for all one thousand. This twenty million taels would be paid with three hundred large merchant ships, two hundred medium merchant ships, and twenty thousand slave craftsmen from shipyards. Qingzhou would assign personnel to select these ships and craftsmen.

After meeting with Li Wei last time, Xiao Ming had drafted this agreement. Li Wei immediately sent messengers to Lin’an with urgency, covering eight hundred li.

Then the Chu King sent word, instructing Li Wei to firmly negotiate but ultimately accept Xiao Ming’s terms. Naturally, Li Wei informed Xiao Ming of this bottom line.

Thus, the quarrel between the governor and Li Wei was merely a performance staged by Xiao Ming and Li Wei for the Chu King’s sake. After receiving the agreement, perhaps out of distrust, the Chu King specially sent the manor’s steward to oversee matters.

“Envoy Li, this time we have suffered losses. If not for the fact that we are all subjects of the Great Yu Empire, we wouldn’t have signed this agreement. After all, one thousand cannons will severely impact our own artillery production,” Pang Yukun was still acting the part.

Li Wei snorted coldly, “Large merchant ships cost thirty thousand taels each, medium ones ten thousand taels each. Qingzhou really knows how to bargain. Selling ships at these prices is a loss for us. Humph, we’re leaving.”

Saying this, Li Wei strode out of the governor’s mansion with great momentum.

After Li Wei left, Pang Yukun suddenly smiled and looked at Xiao Ming who had been sitting quietly in the inner chamber. “Your Highness, how did I do with the act?”

“Not bad, not bad. The Chu King shouldn’t be able to see any flaws now,” Xiao Ming said with a smile as he stepped out from the inner room.

Pang Yukun continued, “Now that the agreement is signed, it’s time for Li Kaiyuan to bring the merchant ships back. With so many merchant ships now, the guild has no more reason to complain about a shortage.”

“That may be so, but we cannot be complacent. These five hundred ships are less than a tenth of the Chu King’s fleet. We must keep working hard. Besides, I’m replacing the merchant ships to free up the shipyards to build warships. Without warships, no matter how many merchant ships we have, we won’t sail far.”

The more Xiao Ming thought about it, the more he realized how weak his own strength was. In the modern era, the Dutch at their peak in the 16th century had 15,000 merchant ships, often with 2,000 docked at the ports.

Compared to these maritime powers, his own resources were barely a crumb.

Because of this, Xiao Ming was frantically gathering shipbuilding craftsmen from all over the Great Yu Empire. He intended to turn Dengzhou into a new global shipbuilding center.

Pang Yukun nodded. The Dutch rampaging at sea was not good news for Qingzhou. The guild was planning to transport goods to the south via sea routes, but now that the Dutch had cut off these routes, Qingzhou's trade was also affected.

"Li Wei said the Dutch have twelve warships, all three-deckers. Including those we are building, we now have fifteen warships. Numerically, we should be able to win, right?"

"I wouldn't dare be sure of that," Xiao Ming frowned. The Dutch had rich naval combat experience. He was not certain if Yue Yun could lead the fleet to defeat them.

However, one advantage he had was his knowledge of naval tactics for this era. He would not make the same foolish mistakes as the Chu King.

Moreover, this sea battle was just one part of the war. More importantly, he would send Qingzhou troops to land on Ryukyu Island to expel all the Dutch there.

Once Ryukyu was occupied, the Dutch fleet, cut off from supply, would basically be finished.

After all, the Dutch had traveled thousands of miles from their homeland relying on colonial supply points. Without a supply base, they would starve aboard their ships.

Now the war preparations were underway, only waiting for all the galleons from Dengzhou shipyards to be completed.

After chatting casually with Pang Yukun, Xiao Ming left the manor and headed toward the workshops outside the city.

His current focus was on the development and refinement of foundational industries. Without fine industrial classification, producing even one industrial product would become exponentially harder.

The most practical example was the flintlock musket. If one craftsman made a musket from start to finish, it would take two months. But by subdividing production into barrels, stocks, and firing mechanism parts, the final assembly of a musket took only an hour.

Therefore, as the types of industries increased, Xiao Ming needed to refine industrial categories even more.

He went to the workshop district to settle this matter with Chen Wenlong — separating the machinery department and the steel workshop.

“Your Highness.”

Chen Wenlong had been waiting in the workshop district for some time. He had gathered the supervisors there, awaiting Xiao Ming’s orders.

Xiao Ming nodded and said to Chen Wenlong, “Since you are here, let’s talk about refining our industries. From now on, the steel workshop will focus only on steel production. Springs, coal stoves, iron pots, and so on must be produced by specialized workshops. Your machinery department should assign craftsmen skilled in these technologies to move in. Don’t turn the steel workshop into a mess of everything. Long term, that would harm product quality.”

Chen Wenlong nodded, and with the other supervisors, recorded Xiao Ming’s instructions.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, “You choose the lathes needed by each workshop. For example, the spring workshop will get spring steel directly from the steel workshop, then process it into various springs. The same goes for gears and connecting rods. If you need specific steel types, negotiate directly with the steel workshop.”

“As for the steel workshop itself, it also needs refinement. Each steel type should be produced by specific craftsmen. Don’t have one craftsman handling five or six different tasks; specialize.”

“ ... ”

Xiao Ming spoke carefully, while everyone busily took notes. This was a big transformation. The old workshop district was like a mother body; now it was to be divided into branches.

Besides the important steel workshop division, Xiao Ming spoke about splitting the glass workshop. Products like mirrors that required later-stage processing should be independent. The chemical industry, especially dealing with strong acids and alkalis, was ordered to split up quickly.

These chemicals were very dangerous, and mixing them only increased the danger.

While ordering the division of workshops, Xiao Ming also delineated the workshop district: chemicals, steel, and light industries would be located in different zones. Workshops must hang signs outside stating their product categories, and all workshops would be registered and managed uniformly by the government office.

Within the workshops, management systems must be established. Each workshop must build its own research room to continuously innovate and update products. They must also send personnel regularly to Bowen Academy to study related knowledge.

Chapter 425: Craftsmen Arrive

Half a month of busy activity passed in the blink of an eye.

Taking advantage of this period with fewer political affairs, Xiao Ming focused his energy with Chen Wenlong to basically refine Qingzhou's industrial structure.

For Xiao Ming, his goal was to build a complete industrial system that could provide all the basic materials necessary to continuously turn technological products into reality.

Because of this, considering Qingzhou's currently weak industrial foundation, they began refining and upgrading it, taking the first step toward formalization.

As he and Chen Wenlong completed this task, Li Kaiyuan successfully returned from Chu with three hundred large merchant ships, two hundred medium merchant ships, and twenty thousand craftsmen, arriving at the Tuojiang dock.

In addition, thirteen thousand craftsmen from the court arrived in Qingzhou the next day under the supervision of Qin Chengming.

"Congratulations, Your Highness. Today is truly a double celebration,"

Qin Rui disembarked from the ship and repeatedly cupped his hands toward Xiao Ming. This time he came with Qin Chengming.

Xiao Ming was a little stunned seeing Qin Rui's sly smile. He hadn't expected this guy to show up here, and he said, "Qin Rui, what are you doing here?"

Qin Chengming also got off the ship and said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, this time I brought my son with me, hoping Your Highness can personally teach him."

"Supervisor Qin, you flatter me. Qin Rui and I have known each other since childhood. Teaching him is not something I dare claim," Xiao Ming said.



Qin Chengming continued, “Your Highness is modest. You are renowned far and wide, but my son remains obscure. I know Your Highness values craftsmanship highly, so I sent him to Qingzhou. After all, staying in Chang’an, he’d only be stuck in a low-level official position like me. Better for him to learn from you and help ease your burden.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Qin Chengming, like Luo Quan, clearly intended to entrust his son to him, hoping he would have better prospects in Qingzhou.

Qin Rui was already a sworn brother of his, loyalty was unquestioned, and the secret service’s investigations confirmed this. The Qin family was also dedicated to the shipyards.

Moreover, Qin Chengming was responsible for the Great Yu Empire’s handicrafts—equivalent to a minister of industry in modern terms—with rich experience managing the empire’s crafts.

Qin Rui had naturally picked up some of this knowledge. Now that Xiao Ming was refining industry and organizing the Lesser Treasury’s oversight, nurturing Qin Rui seemed a good choice.

After all, the ministry was responsible for industry planning and standards, daily monitoring, and promoting technological development, covering all trades. Qin Rui had advantages here.

So Xiao Ming said, “Supervisor Qin, you’re too polite. Qin Rui and I have always been close. I welcome this.”

Qin Chengming and Qin Rui exchanged smiles. Qin Rui said, “Father, I told you the prince wouldn’t refuse. I’m sure I’ll be useful in Qingzhou.”

“Don’t get cocky. Once here, devote yourself fully to the prince. No more messing around,” Qin Chengming warned.

Qin Rui nodded heavily.

Xiao Ming smiled silently. Qin Chengming sending Qin Rui to Qingzhou was also binding himself and Qingzhou together. This time it was the shipyards; next time he might ask Qin Chengming to move other crafts here.

He had already received news from Fei Ji that Xiao Wenxuan was supporting him everywhere just like he did for the Wei King back then. So Xiao Ming planned to drag all the royal industrial resources to his fief.

After all, his fief was now a special economic zone of sorts, being carefully nurtured.

After exchanging greetings, Xiao Ming looked toward the dock now packed with ships stretching far outward. Shipyard craftsmen were constantly disembarking.

“Your Highness, besides the craftsmen, I also sent some tools from the shipyards to save you from having to recreate equipment. These craftsmen are the core experts, skilled in independently building merchant ships. Once you hand them the blueprints, they can start work immediately,” Qin Chengming said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Having someone in court made things much easier. Qin Chengming handled matters quite well.

“Thank you, Supervisor Qin. With the Chu King’s twenty thousand men added, I can now establish three large shipyards,” Xiao Ming said.

Zhang Liang already commanded over ten thousand men. With these new arrivals, Qingzhou’s shipbuilding capacity would instantly triple. This meant over sixty warships could be launched yearly. Currently, building first- and second-level sailing warships slowed production.

If they focused only on third-level warships, the shipyards should launch twenty galleons annually.

The three boarded a large merchant ship from Chu. Since so many merchant ships came from Chu, they arrived in batches. The first batch had arrived yesterday; this was the second.

“Your Highness, this ship is really long, at least seventy bu,” Qin Rui marveled once aboard.

Large merchant ships often docked in Chang’an too, but they were generally only fifty bu long.

Xiao Ming explained, “These are sea vessels, so they’re bigger to withstand the ocean’s winds and waves.”

He had specially instructed Li Kaiyuan to select sea vessels from Chu because he needed ships to cross the ocean. Medium ships for inland waterways would suffice otherwise.

“Sea vessels? No wonder Your Highness needs so many shipbuilders. Could it be you want to drive out the Dutch? Hehe, if you defeat them, the Chu King’s face won’t know where to hide,” Qin Rui said with a sly grin.

Xiao Ming did not deny it. Since Qin Rui was to live in Qingzhou, he’d find out sooner or later.

As they chatted, Li Kaiyuan came from the bow and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, the first batch of craftsmen have boarded. Shall we set off for Dengzhou now?”

“Let’s go,” Xiao Ming said.

Many craftsmen disembarked from ships only to board others heading to Dengzhou. This was to mix them up and prevent too many craftsmen from the same place staying in one shipyard, avoiding unnecessary trouble.

Following Xiao Ming’s orders, Li Kaiyuan commanded fifty large merchant ships docked at the shore to depart.

In Dengzhou, Zhang Liang would arrange these craftsmen and lead them to establish the second, third, and fourth shipyards.

Watching the merchant ships slowly sail away from the dock, Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. He said to Qin Chengming and Qin Rui, "Supervisor Qin, since you've traveled so far to Qingzhou, why not enjoy the city for a few days and see its sights?"

Qin Rui settling in Qingzhou was a good start for Xiao Ming. It showed that the empire's elites were willing to settle there, and naturally, he hoped Qingzhou would become increasingly prosperous.

#### Chapter 426: Warship Launch

The weather was gradually turning cold, and the chilling wind sent shivers down one's spine.

Shrugging his neck, Qin Chengming cupped his hands and said, "Thank you for Your Highness's kindness. However, before departing, His Majesty ordered me to return promptly to report. I dare not delay, so I won't stay longer in Qingzhou."

"Is that so? What a pity," Xiao Ming said.

He actually hoped Qin Chengming could bring some of Qingzhou's unique traits back to Chang'an to attract wealthy and carefree people to spend money here. But it seemed there would be no chance this time.

Qin Rui also felt reluctant; after all, he was traveling alone far from home.

The court fleet arrived in the morning and planned to return by afternoon. Xiao Ming took Qin Chengming to Wei Family Restaurant for lunch. By afternoon, he returned to the dock, leaving Qin Rui and Xiao Ming staring at each other.

“Qin Rui, since you will serve as an official in Qingzhou, from now on we are lord and subject. Never again should you be frivolous like before. You must assist me in developing this fief.”

After a moment's thought, Xiao Ming said this to Qin Rui.

He knew Qin Rui well — smart, but previously careless. That was fine when they were just having fun, but to achieve greatness, he had to warn him a little.

“Your Highness worries too much. I now have a family and am no longer reckless like in my youth,” Qin Rui said calmly.

He had to admit his father's timing was right. Bringing him to Qingzhou was a strategic choice. Many wise officials at court were making similar decisions, only more decisively.

Since Xiao Wenxuan demoted the Second Prince to Bazhou for Xiao Ming's sake, many instantly understood Xiao Ming's current standing in court.

Those close to Xiao Ming all wanted to send their children to Qingzhou, both to show loyalty and because once in Qingzhou, they were effectively hostages.

Second, it warned political opponents that even if they died, others would avenge them — a silent threat.

“That's wonderful. Then, you'll first study at Bowen Academy for a while and learn the duties of the Lesser Treasury Supervisor. If you pass, I will arrange for you to work there in Qingzhou,” Xiao Ming said.

Qin Rui nodded. As Xiao Ming said, their relationship was now lord and subject, not just friends drinking and eating. Since it was Xiao Ming's arrangement, he was willing to accept.

But just as Xiao Ming was about to arrange his accommodation, Qin Rui said, "Your Highness, the food and wine at Wei Family Restaurant are excellent. I'd like to stay there for a few days."

Xiao Ming was about to say something but stopped himself. "Are you sure? Even the cheapest room there costs a hundred taels a night."

"A hundred taels!" Qin Rui was shocked. After a brief hesitation, he said, "Your Highness, I have some savings. Since I'm here in Qingzhou, it would be a pity not to enjoy myself a little."

Xiao Ming shook his head and said, "It's up to you. If you pay me, I won't refuse."

"Is Wei Family Restaurant yours, Your Highness?" Qin Rui was stunned.

Unable to resist its attraction, Qin Rui went there like a moth to a flame. Xiao Ming could only laugh and cry at the same time, returning alone to the manor. He had intended to let him stay at the manor a few days, but now it was saved.

This also showed just how attractive Wei Family Restaurant was to the wealthy who were used to luxury.

At the manor gate, Xiao Ming saw someone waiting outside. Upon closer look, it was Zhang Liang's son, Zhang Kun.

Zhang Kun saw Xiao Ming and bowed, "Your Highness, my father asked me to rush to Qingzhou overnight to report that the Dengzhou shipyard's warships have been launched."

"All launched?" Xiao Ming exclaimed.

"Yes, Your Highness. All have launched. This year, we finished your assigned task one month ahead of last year," Zhang Kun said happily.

"Truly a double blessing! The court's shipyard craftsmen just arrived, and now the galleons have launched. You can use the freed-up month to build new shipyards," Xiao Ming said excitedly.

Zhang Kun's expression changed. He asked, "Your Highness, did the court bring craftsmen?"

Zhang Liang and his son had been in Dengzhou, so they lacked information on Qingzhou. Zhang Kun was told about the arrival of thirty thousand craftsmen.

"Thirty thousand?" Zhang Kun was a little stunned, then asked, "Your Highness, may I serve as supervisor of one of the shipyards?"



“You?” Xiao Ming suddenly realized something was wrong. Usually, messengers brought news, but this time it came from Zhang Kun himself.

Zhang Kun scratched his head awkwardly and said, “Yes, Your Highness. My father and I can no longer work in the same shipyard.”

“Why?” Xiao Ming asked.

Zhang Kun sighed, “Your Highness, I proposed adding watertight compartments to the galleons, but my father scolded me harshly, saying I was ignorant and liked to make reckless changes.”

“Watertight compartments?” Xiao Ming laughed.

Watertight compartments were basically bulkheads dividing the ship into separate sealed compartments — usually 13 or 8 in number.

Such compartments greatly enhanced a ship’s resistance to sinking. Ships equipped with watertight compartments were very hard to sink.

Zhang Kun smiled awkwardly, “Your Highness, perhaps I was just dreaming too wildly.”

“Your idea isn’t bad, but the keel structure of galleons differs from ordinary merchant ships. Watertight compartments are not suitable for galleons,” Xiao Ming smiled.

Zhang Kun looked disappointed. "Looks like my father was right. I really am ignorant."

Patting Zhang Kun's shoulder, Xiao Ming said, "Not knowing is nothing shameful. You're still young, this is the time to learn. Would you like to study shipbuilding at Bowen Academy? They have real shipbuilding knowledge there."

Now that galleon building technology was mature, Xiao Ming was preparing talent for the next generation of ships. By then, a single blueprint would not be enough for craftsmen like Zhang Liang to simply copy ships.

"Shipbuilding knowledge?" Zhang Kun wanted to prove himself but realized he was wrong. Hope rose in his heart again. "Your Highness, if I learn it well, can I surpass my father?"

"Of course. If you master the knowledge in the academy, you will definitely be better than your father," Xiao Ming said confidently.

Zhang Kun nodded firmly. "I am willing to learn."

Xiao Ming said, "Then after I return from Dengzhou, you can report to the academy. With the warships launched, I will go to Dengzhou with Yue Yun and the naval academy students."

Chapter 427: The Qi King's Flag

Dengzhou.

After learning that all the galleons built this year had been launched, Xiao Ming informed Yue Yun to head to Dengzhou.

Throughout the year, Yue Yun and the navy soldiers had undergone various training exercises. One month ago, they practiced operating warships in Dengzhou. Afterwards, they returned to Bowen Academy for naval theory training, selecting the best among them to become captains of the upcoming galleons.

After departing Qingzhou and sailing continuously for three days, they arrived at Dengzhou city.

Along the way, Yue Yun was busy conducting simulated naval battles with the fourteen captains he had selected.

They placed small models of galleons on the deck—fifteen representing Qingzhou's warships, twelve representing the Dutch's—constantly changing tactics and formations to counter each other.

These formations were all from the textbook "Sail Warship Naval Tactics", which Xiao Ming wrote to prevent the navy from suffering heavy losses due to tactical ignorance in its early days.

For the past year, Yue Yun had been diligently studying this textbook. It gave him a clear understanding of sail warship encounters at sea. After experiencing setbacks against the British fleet, he became cautious rather than arrogant.

"Your Highness, we have arrived,"

Zhang Kun said as the naval port of Dengzhou came into view.

Xiao Ming nodded and looked at the newly completed naval port. In the bay, fifteen warships were moored, including three smaller ones—clearly the first batch of galleons. Now repaired, these three had regained their former appearance.

Then Xiao Ming's gaze moved to the outermost part of the bay, where a massive four-deck warship was docked. When a merchant ship passed its side, this warship resembled a giant beast, forcing everyone to look up in awe.

"Your Highness, this is a first-class sail warship. It is seventy-five meters long, twenty meters wide, with a nine-meter draft and a displacement of six thousand tons. It can carry 1,200 soldiers and mount 120 cannons,"

Zhang Kun introduced proudly. This proved the level of shipbuilding skill in the Zhang family. If not for building this giant beast, they could have produced even more third-class sail warships this year.

After all, the shipyard's plan was to build mainly third-class sail warships.

The merchant ship continued toward the dock. Next were three second-class warships—three-deckers, slightly smaller than the first-class ship.

Behind them were four third-class and four fourth-class sail warships, all moored in the bay, forming a grand and magnificent scene.

Xiao Ming was deeply moved.

“Your Highness, these are second-class warships, carrying nine hundred and sixty crew...” Zhang Kun babbled on.

Yue Yun excitedly said, “Your Highness, even in terms of scale, these warships surpass the Dutch. Also, the Dutch have many scattered colonies and divided forces. If we defeat them, they simply won’t be able to support each other.”

“Exactly. Once we defeat the Dutch, this East Asian sea will be ours. Yue Yun, you must fight a brilliant battle for me. Whether Qingzhou’s trade routes open depends on you,” Xiao Ming said.

Yue Yun gritted his teeth. “I won’t let Your Highness down. The Dutch and the Wokou have always been close. I’m also waiting to take revenge on the Wokou for my mother.”

“As you wish,” Xiao Ming smiled faintly.

When the merchant ship bearing the Qi King’s flag entered the bay, it immediately caught Zhang Liang’s attention. The shipbuilders led by Zhang Liang were all waiting at the shore for the ship to dock.

Watching the ship approach, Xiao Ming felt a sense of accomplishment. This bay was a deepwater port even by modern standards. That was why he chose the shipyard here—to make this the naval port of Qingzhou.

When the merchant ship docked, Xiao Ming disembarked. Zhang Liang and his group immediately bowed.

“No need for formalities. The warship launchers are all heroes. I have instructed Chief Historian Pang to restore your Qingzhou household registrations. From now on, your status as slaves is lifted. This should fulfill my promise,”

Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness...” Zhang Liang suddenly looked up, and Zhang Kun’s face showed surprise.

Although over the past two years they had eaten and lived well like ordinary people, the label of slave had always shackled them, reminding them they were inferior.

After two years, they finally awaited this day.

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Zhang Liang wept with gratitude. The Zhang family had undergone many hardships. Now they were slowly reclaiming their former glory.

“Your words carry great weight, Your Highness. I deeply respect you,” Zhang Kun said calmly with a sly smile.

Xiao Ming shook his head. "Today is a day to celebrate, not to weep. Let's admire these warships."

Zhang Liang wiped his tears. "This way, Your Highness."

The dock stretched three hundred meters from shore into the sea, with warships moored on both sides.

Accompanied by Xiao Ming, Zhang Liang first went to the first-class sail warship, excitedly saying, "Your Highness, this warship is ready to sail anytime, but the naming requires Your Highness's decree."

In the age of sail warships, first-class sails were typically reserved for decisive battles. These ships were too clumsy to accompany fleets on long cruises, unlike the agile third-class sail warships.

However, in terms of firepower, the first-class sail warship was truly formidable.

After a moment's thought, Xiao Ming said, "Then this warship shall be named the Qi King."

"Qi King!" Yue Yun laughed. "What a good name! Under Your Highness's name, this warship will be invincible!"

Yue Yun's words were exactly what Xiao Ming hoped to hear, and he smiled softly.

Fourteen warships remained unnamed. Suddenly inspired, Xiao Ming said, "Name the rest after the cities of the fief. The six prefectures, plus the sixteen Yan and Yun prefectures."

"Yes, Your Highness," Zhang Liang recorded the names.

Then, everyone climbed the giant warship via the rope ladder hanging down.

Boarding the warship, Yue Yun and the students immediately excitedly rushed to various parts of the ship, eager to set sail.

"Your Highness, this warship is only missing its cannons. When will they arrive?" Yue Yun asked.

Xiao Ming pondered, "I have already notified the military workshop. The cannons and ammunition are now being loaded at Qingzhou dock. They will arrive soon."

As they spoke, a group arrived at the dock — it was Yang Chengye, governor of Dengzhou, and commander Ye Qingyun.

Chapter 428: Sudden Incident

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

Yang Chengye ran hurriedly toward the first-class sail warship, his face showing anxiety.



Xiao Ming and Yue Yun were excited moments ago, but seeing Yang Chengye's expression, they exchanged a glance filled with unease.

When Yang Chengye reached the first-class warship and climbed aboard, he didn't bother looking at the ship but said, "Your Highness, there's trouble. Fishermen from Dashicun reported that while fishing at sea, they saw a group of strange-looking people. Their ships resemble our galleons."

"Strange people?" Xiao Ming and Yue Yun were startled. Xiao Ming asked, "What do they look like?"

"They're tall, with red hair, and they fired muskets at the fishermen. Three fishermen were wounded. They flew flags with three horizontal stripes."

"What colors?"

"The top stripe is red, the middle white, and the bottom blue," Yang Chengye recalled the fishermen's words.

"Your Highness, that can only be the Dutch," Yue Yun said nervously. "If they discover our naval port, it'll be trouble. The Dutch just defeated the Chu King. Their arrival at Dengzhou can only mean ill intent."

Xiao Ming's face darkened. The distance from Ryukyu Island to Dengzhou was 1,500 kilometers. The Dutch warships appearing at Dengzhou were definitely not there for sightseeing.

There was only one explanation — something related to Dutch interests was here. He believed the Dutch weren't passing through by chance.

“Chu King!”

Xiao Ming quietly repeated the name. Li Wei had told him about the Chu King meeting the Dutch envoys. He didn't know what was said, but after defeating the Chu King, the Dutch appeared at Dengzhou. There must be a hidden plot.

Thinking carefully, Xiao Ming suddenly had a realization. Li Wei had said the Dutch forced the Chu King to buy matchlock muskets after defeating his fleet. Previously the Chu King had bought them voluntarily, but now he was coerced. Surely the Chu King told the Dutch he had access to cheaper matchlocks.

He would definitely have revealed that.

With this clarity, Xiao Ming said, “Immediately send coastal fishing boats to scout the sea situation and monitor the Dutch position. Also, few people know this bay's location, and neither do the Dutch. But just in case, Yue Yun, lead three warships to patrol outside the bay.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Yue Yun's expression turned cold. Only the previous three warships were armed with cannons.

If the Dutch penetrated the bay, the newly launched warships would be destroyed. For him, these ships were his life. He would never allow this to happen.

After arranging these tasks, Xiao Ming lost his mood to admire the warships. He and Yang Chengye disembarked, walking ashore as Xiao Ming said, “The Dutch and the Wokou have close relations. They

don't know this bay well, but some Wokou near Dengzhou city do. To prevent surprises, the Dengzhou army must immediately enter the city to defend."

Ye Qingyun complained, "Your Highness, the Dutch have muskets, but Dengzhou's troops still rely on bows and swords. How can we fight the Dutch?"

Frowning, Xiao Ming said, "I know some generals resent my favoritism toward Qingzhou troops. But now is not the time to discuss that. It's not that you won't get muskets; musket production takes time. After the Youzhou troops, Dengzhou troops will get muskets."

Ye Qingyun's thoughts were seen at a glance by Xiao Ming. He immediately smiled foolishly, "Your Highness's insight is sharp. Just hearing that comforts the Dengzhou soldiers. I will gather the troops and enter the city now."

Xiao Ming nodded, but he truly did not expect the Dengzhou army to fight the Dutch. At this stage, the Dutch were beyond Dengzhou troops. Dengzhou also lacked cavalry. Infantry against infantry, his plate armor offered no advantage.

"Besides, immediately send someone overnight to Qingzhou to ask Niu Ben to dispatch Qingzhou troops to Dengzhou," Xiao Ming continued.

Ye Qingyun nodded and rode off toward Dengzhou's main camp.

Yang Chengye said, "Your Highness, Dengzhou is too dangerous now. Please don't enter the city. Stay at the bay instead. If anything happens to you, I will bear the blame with my life."

Xiao Ming said, "The situation is unclear. Don't be so pessimistic. The Dutch know I have muskets, so they will be wary. By the way, where is Dashicun?"

Yang Chengye said, "Dashicun lies in the opposite direction from the bay, about 150 li from Dengzhou city."

"In that case, the Dutch fleet should be near the beach outside Dengzhou soon," Xiao Ming said anxiously.

This bay is thirty li from Dengzhou, hidden behind two giant reefs. The two towering reefs form a gate to the bay. In fact, this harbor is quite concealed.

After arranging urgent tasks, Yang Chengye immediately returned to Dengzhou city to command defenses. Xiao Ming stayed in the bay, observing silently.

Now, he could only pray that Chen Qi's cannons and the Qingzhou troops arrived quickly. Otherwise, a year's preparation might be wasted.

That night, Xiao Ming stayed at the naval port. By noon the next day, Dengzhou army scouts reported the Dutch fleet had anchored north of Dengzhou city. About a thousand Dutch soldiers in gray uniforms carrying muskets had landed on the beach.

Simultaneously, about two thousand Wokou followed the Dutch ashore. Guided by the Wokou, the Dutch were advancing toward Dengzhou city.

“Wokou and the Dutch?” The sight Xiao Ming least wanted had appeared.

In the great colonial era, Western powers never ruled colonies alone; natives willingly served as their lackeys.

This was very similar to the barbarians’ rule.

He had heard the Dutch had 10,000 stationed troops, but he guessed the real Dutch numbered no more than 3,000.

This information indirectly confirmed his guess.

This was good news for him, but there was bad news too. It seemed the Dutch were strongly supporting Wokou. Given Wokou’s nature, they were probably very pleased with the Dutch.

Otherwise, the Dutch would not be appearing outside Dengzhou city together with the Wokou.

“Four thousand men,” Xiao Ming calculated the Dengzhou army’s strength.

Since building the naval port, he had expanded the Dengzhou army to ten thousand men.

But facing 4,000 well-armed troops, Xiao Ming was not confident at all.

Chapter 429: History

Rhodes picked up a handful of white sand from the beach, letting it slip slowly through his fingers.

Watching the sand scatter in the wind, he muttered softly, "North wind."

Behind him, small boats ferrying soldiers shuttled back and forth between the ships and the shore. In the distance, ten warships formed a straight line, and he could see Claire sitting on a deck, enjoying the sea breeze.

Since the Battle of Qiantang, Claire had been troubled by the news the Chu King had shared. After resupplying and replenishing ammunition, they set off for Dengzhou, intending to investigate this vassal king of the Great Yu Empire.

It wasn't sensitivity on Claire's part; they simply needed to understand the real situation of the surrounding countries in this sea region.

In fact, their warships had arrived here eighty years ago and once established a colony on what is now Ryukyu Island. But back then, the Dutch were vying for naval supremacy with the British. After six major battles over thirty years, the Dutch were ultimately defeated.

At that time, the Dutch were at their weakest, not yet firmly established and defeated by local pirates. But they never forgot this prosperous land. After more than ten years of recovery, they returned, reclaiming Ryukyu Island and ruling it for forty years.

However, just as the records said, this largest East Asian country was still insignificant. He recalled the first diplomatic mission attempting to establish relations with the Great Yu Empire described it this way:

“Our governor’s gifts became tributes in the Great Yu Empire but were blatantly embezzled by local officials in Guangzhou. Their officials lied about our arrival and tore up our letters to the Great Yu Emperor. To cover up the theft, they expelled us from the country.”

The Great Yu Empire was a mysterious country to them, but behind the veil was a weak and decadent nation.

Officials were corrupt and greedy. A class similar to European nobility ruled here, but unlike European nobles, this so-called “scholar-gentry” class cared only for their own interests, ignoring the huge harm and hidden dangers their behavior caused to the country.

Officials were ignorant, arrogant, and corrupt. The common people lived dissatisfied with the officials. They were as timid and incompetent as the natives we conquered. The Wokou and Filipinos were braver. Facing the northern barbarian tribes, this country merely trembled without the noble spirit we Europeans showed in battle. This alone proved my point.

Also, the emperor and officials were not nationalists. They were unbelievably generous to foreigners but cruel and ruthless to their own people.

Great King, if you wish to send troops, like we conquered the natives of the Americas, we would surely defeat this country and make it our colony.

Recalling this record, Rhodes raised his brows. At least in the south, he found no exaggeration in the mission's description—if anything, they had beautified the country.

The Chu King they contacted was exactly such a ruler. Although Chu was wealthy, its riches were controlled by the scholar-gentry, while the common people remained poor.

But just as they thought the entire Great Yu Empire was like this, the Chu King's words made them doubt.

Because in this backward and ignorant land, matchlock muskets appeared. After defeat, the Chu King even said that the Qi King had built a hot air balloon.

This shocked and terrified them. Although hot air balloons had been replaced by hydrogen balloons in Europe, their presence here was astonishing.

It meant a civilization different from the rest of the Great Yu Empire was rising here.

And this was the source of their fear. A country able to produce matchlock muskets, given its population, could easily defeat them.



After all, their military presence in East Asia was already tenuous and could not support a large-scale war.

For this reason, they planned to go to Dengzhou, even Qingzhou. Once they understood the Qi King's real situation, they would decide whether to establish trade relations or eliminate this threat at its root.

The Dutch had already lost too many colonies; they did not want to lose this sea region again.

“Dengzhou city is about twenty li ahead.”

While Rhodes was distracted, a Wokou man named Sakai came up to him and pointed ahead.

Rhodes looked at the man. Sakai was a Wokou from this sea area. Since they established a trading post in Nagasaki on Kyushu Island in Wokou territory, they had traded with Wokou for over thirty years and maintained stable relations.

These Wokou appeared as pirates to outsiders, but they knew well they were soldiers sent by Wokou daimyos to plunder wealth.

Under their influence, the Wokou mastered matchlock production before the Great Yu Empire. Over the years, as the Wokou armed themselves with matchlocks, their ambitions grew.

But the Wokou remained respectful to the Dutch, reducing Dutch worries about Wokou strength.

Wokou expansion overseas also benefited the Dutch—they could sell more goods to Wokou.

“Mr. Sakai, please lead the way ahead. We lack knowledge of this area,” Rhodes said.

Sakai nodded, eyes scanning the Dutch soldiers’ muskets with fixed bayonets and the six-pound field cannons being unloaded. These cannons were mounted between two wheels for easy transport.

Turning his head, the dangerous-looking weapons revealed a trace of greed in his eyes. He said, “Very well, Mr. Rhodes , as you wish. Our army will go ahead.”

Sakai then gathered three thousand soldiers into neat columns and marched toward Dengzhou city.

Each Wokou soldier carried a matchlock musket and ammo pouch, all part of the Dutch combat style.

Behind the Wokou troops, Rhodes commanded Dutch soldiers ashore. A thousand infantry marched with muskets behind the Wokou. The artillery troops trailed, attaching six field cannons to horses.

Infantry and artillery advanced toward Dengzhou city.

The twenty-li distance was not far. Two hours later, they saw the Great Yu city enclosed by walls.

Rhodes raised his telescope to observe the soldiers guarding the city walls, then laughed aloud, “Is that plate armor? Interesting.”

#### Chapter 430: Siege Below the City

Ye Qingyun gazed solemnly at the troops outside Dengzhou city.

At the front were the Wokou soldiers; behind them stood the tall, red-haired, blue-eyed, high-nosed Dutch soldiers.

Seeing the muskets carried by the Wokou and Dutch soldiers, Ye Qingyun felt a heavy pressure. Ever since Qingzhou equipped its troops with muskets, the power of this devastating weapon was known to the local commanders.

Having fought alongside Qingzhou’s troops, they had firsthand experience of muskets’ power and still harbored fear.

Now, with 4,000 musketeers outside Dengzhou city, he naturally felt tense—especially since the force included six cannons.

However, there was some relief. Dengzhou’s city walls now had artillery. After choosing this location for the shipyard, 36 cannons had been transported from Qingzhou in succession.

These cannons were their only firearms, though compared to the many li-long city walls, they seemed insignificant.

Below the city, Rhodes laughed mockingly at the soldiers on the walls, but his expression soon changed as they spotted the cannons.

“It seems the Chu King did not lie; this Qi King is truly different,” Rod’s expression gradually shifted.

Compared to Rhodes, Sakai’s attitude was reckless. He said to him, “Ambassador, now is the time to show these Great Yu soldiers some real power.”

With that, Sakai ordered his soldiers to form three assault teams.

“Slow!” Rhodes said harshly. They were not fools. They could not rashly provoke the enemy before assessing their true strength.

Both he and Claire insisted on this. Their true goal was trade; they did not want to establish a powerful enemy here.

The long journey from the Netherlands meant they would fight alone. If defeated, they would have to withdraw from these seas.

Sakai's bloodthirsty smile froze. He asked incredulously, "Ambassador, didn't we come here to conquer Dengzhou city?"

"No, we must negotiate first. If this Qi King is as weak as the Chu King, we can make this place our next supply point. If he is strong, we must be cautious," Rhodes said sternly.

Sakai sneered, "Ambassador, it's obvious Great Yu is weak now. Our daimyo Yamada can easily defeat this country. Their troops don't even know how to use firearms, while our soldiers are all equipped with matchlock muskets. Of course, if you gave us flintlock and field cannon technology, we'd defeat Great Yu even easier."

Rhodes glanced warily at Sakai. Wokou was undergoing changes unfriendly to them. After the flintlock technology was introduced to Wokou, they had rapidly armed themselves with matchlocks in just thirty years.

After a civil war, an ambitious daimyo named Yamada Nobunaga took power. Rhodes saw him as highly aggressive and plotting to conquer neighboring countries.

The Wokou were becoming dangerous enough that they had to compromise with them to maintain their East Asian trade.

"War is your East Asian countries' affair. We Dutch only want trade. We're here to understand why Great Yu produces matchlocks—that's your purpose too," Rhodes tone hardened, as if blaming the Wokou for leaking matchlock secrets.

Sakai, with a bulbous nose flushed red from anger, retorted, “We’re not fools. We wouldn’t give flintlock manufacturing secrets to Great Yu. Wokou craftsmen are monitored and can’t leak technology. It was the Dutch who sold matchlocks to the Chu King. Our daimyo are very unhappy about this. If the Dutch want to trade here, they must follow our rules.”

“Mr. Sakai, mind your words. Don’t forget, without us Dutch, your Wokou would never have prospered. We brought European science and technology to you,” Rhodes said angrily.

Sakai sneered again. They knew the Dutch were weak—now just a secondary Western power. Yet, despite this, they still needed the Dutch for more goods.

“Yes, Ambassador. I’ll follow your lead today.” Sakai waved his hand and the Wokou lowered their guns.

“Hmph,” Rhodes snorted and stepped forward. One reason he sought talks with the Qi King was to curb the growing arrogance of the Wokou.

The Wokou were becoming increasingly overbearing. They needed another power in East Asia to balance against the Wokou, securing Dutch presence.

The candidate had originally been the Chu King, but the longer they interacted, the clearer it was that the Chu King cared only for the throne and nothing beyond.

“Identify yourselves and state your name immediately,” Ye Qingyun demanded, watching the approaching Dutch.

The artillerymen had already lit torches, ready to fire on the uninvited guests.

“My name is Rhodes, the Dutch ambassador to East Asia,” Rhodes said beneath the city walls. “We wish to meet your Qi King. Please inform him. We mean no offense.”

“What Rhodes! What ambassador! I don’t understand these words. But since you want to see the Qi King, why bring so many? You clearly mean to invade our city,” Ye Qingyun shouted angrily.

Though outgunned, Ye Qingyun showed no fear. Over the past two years, the provincial armies had built a spirit of loyalty. Their glory was loyalty, ingrained deeply in every general.

They would rather die than retreat.

Rhodes glanced at the soldiers behind him. They brought fleet and troops to show strength, to gain leverage at the negotiating table.

“You misunderstand. These soldiers are for our protection only. To show sincerity, I can enter the city alone to meet your Qi King,” Rhodes continued.

His confidence was firm, but seeing the cannons on the walls made him cautious.

Ye Qingyun's eyes flickered. He exaggerated the distance, "We can notify the Qi King, but Qingzhou is six days away. You must wait."