

I. Dynasty 431

Chapter 431: Intimidation of Strength

The salty sea breeze blew over from the ocean.

Ye Qingyun's words left Rhodes silent.

Whether to wait six days was a difficult question. He knew all too well that six days would be enough time for reinforcements to arrive.

Once reinforcements came, the land's ruler might choose to negotiate or fight—it was unpredictable.

But options were limited now. The cannons on the city walls proved this place was special. He needed to understand it quickly to plan his next move.

So he said, "Very well, we will wait six days. I hope to meet the Qi King after that."

With that, Rhodes waved his hand, ordering the Dutch troops to retreat.

"Ambassador, shall we withdraw to the sea?" Sakai asked, watching the Dutch soldiers pull back toward the beach.

“Yes. We’re not here to fight but to clarify the matchlock musket issue. The cannons on the city walls prove this place is dangerous. We can’t risk provoking an unknown enemy,” Rhodes said.

Sakai shrugged but muttered silently, “Cowards.”

Though displeased, Sakai followed the Dutch troops’ retreat to the beach. As they left, he glanced unwillingly at Dengzhou city. If they could seize this city and establish a foothold, Lord Yamada’s plan would be easier to carry out.

The troops under the city withdrew to the sea, and Ye Qingyun breathed a sigh of relief. He immediately sent word to the bay to notify the Qi King and report the situation.

“The Dutch want to see me?”

Yang Chengye arrived at the bay with scouts.

“Yes, Your Highness. We said you’d arrive in four days, and the Dutch really retreated. In my opinion, the Dutch’s goal is not to fight us,” Yang Chengye said.

Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s a wise choice. Looks like these Dutch just want to probe my strength.”

To Xiao Ming, the Dutch were weak, which was why they rashly attacked the Chu King—to stop his military adventurism. The Chu King didn’t see through this, but he did.

Even in the age of sail warships, deploying troops halfway across the globe was extremely difficult.

So the Dutch knew well they had no reinforcements. Failure in East Asia would mean total withdrawal.

Yang Chengye had little concept of the Dutch. He asked, “Your Highness, no matter what plans the Dutch have, as long as Qingzhou troops arrive, we needn’t fear them.”

“Right. Once Qingzhou troops arrive, I’ll meet the Dutch ambassador and see what they want,” Xiao Ming said. The Dutch arrival was the first collision between his people and a foreign civilization.

Deciding to meet the Dutch ambassador, Xiao Ming stayed in the bay awaiting reinforcements. The next day, twenty merchant ships loaded with cannons entered the naval port—the first batch of cannons from the military workshop.

Seeing the cannons arrive, Yue Yun was thrilled. He immediately helped the soldiers load the cannons and ammunition onto the warships. Without cannons, the galleons were toothless tigers; with them, they truly became ferocious beasts.

This first batch included over three hundred cannons. Two more batches were to arrive later.

Yet even these three hundred cannons could arm five or six small galleons, which was enough.

Over the following days, batches of cannons arrived, and twelve galleons were progressively armed.

Niu Ben led the Qingzhou troops arriving with the merchant ships into the bay.

“Your Highness, we are ready for war at any time,” Yue Yun said excitedly after the cannon loading finished.

Niu Ben had basically figured out the crisis’s root. “Your Highness, supplies are crucial in war. The Dutch are overextended; they can’t match us. If we capture Ryukyu, the Dutch supply line is cut, and failure won’t be far off.”

With muskets and live ammo, Qingzhou troops’ arrival eased Xiao Ming’s worries about Dengzhou’s safety. He said, “It’s not time to fight yet. The Dutch came this far for money. They won’t rashly wage war. Their ambassador’s proposal is to negotiate. We only need to show our strength so they understand what to do.”

“Your Highness aims to win without fighting,” Niu Ben said cheerfully. “Wise thinking. If we can negotiate, why start a war?”

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded. “Let’s go. Today is the day we meet the Dutch ambassador.”

Leaving the temporary quarters at the naval port, Xiao Ming and Niu Ben headed toward Dengzhou city.

At the port, ten thousand Qingzhou soldiers formed lines, their gleaming matchlocks poised. At Niu Ben's command, the troops marched toward Dengzhou city with Xiao Ming.

Meanwhile, Yue Yun and the naval soldiers boarded the warships, ready to attack.

As agreed, Rhodes arrived at Dengzhou city's outskirts on time. Unlike last time, he was now allowed into the city.

Entering Dengzhou, Rhodes eyes soon revealed contempt. In his view, this city was far poorer than any Dutch city.

However, his contempt quickly turned to fear. Upon reaching the city center, a large number of soldiers bearing flintlock muskets poured out of the west gate, rushing toward the east gate wall.

"God, these are flintlocks? How is this possible?"

He couldn't believe his eyes. Rubbing them, he looked again. No mistake—all those soldiers carried flintlocks.

At that moment, his heart sank. Though flintlocks were common in Europe, seeing them appear in such a backward region shocked him.

As he marveled, sudden hoofbeats approached. A group of horsemen appeared before him.

“Ambassador Rhodes , this is our Qi King,” Ye Qingyun announced loudly.

Rhodes looked at the young man leading the group, incredulous that someone so young ruled a territory.

He removed his hat and performed a noble’s salute to Xiao Ming. “Respectful greetings, Your Highness Qi King, on behalf of Count Claire.”

Xiao Ming’s eyes scanned Rhodes, a typical European dressed finely. He dismounted and said, “Ambassador Rhodes, I hear you wish to meet me. What business do the Dutch have with me? Do you plan, like with the Chu King, to force an unequal treaty?”

Chapter 432: Three Bottom Lines

The solemn and imposing soldiers made Lord Rod feel a bit uneasy.

The young Prince of Qi’s first words sent a cold sweat down Rhodes’s back. He did not know much about the Great Yu Empire and did not understand the prince’s purpose—was he preparing for revenge? Or was it just a test?

After a moment of silence, Rhodes spoke cautiously, “Your Highness, the war with the King of Chu was not started by us. It was the King of Chu who has long planned to monopolize maritime trade.”

At this moment, everyone was standing outside the prefecture office in Dengzhou. Xiao Ming sneered and said, “Ambassador, let’s talk inside. I know your Dutch people very well.”

Rhodes was startled but followed Xiao Ming into the prefecture office.

Everyone took their seats. The guards served tea. Xiao Ming took a small sip and said, “You have twelve warships in East Asia. Ryukyu and Nagasaki are your two supply points in this region. On Ryukyu Island, you built two castles—one at the southern end and one at the northern end. Among the ten thousand troops stationed there, only about three thousand are real Dutch soldiers; the rest are native Ryukyans and, of course, the hired Japanese pirates, right?”

Xiao Ming said nothing more, but Rhodes cold sweat kept increasing. He looked at Xiao Ming in disbelief and asked, “Are you spying on us?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I am spying on you just as you spy on me,” Xiao Ming said calmly.

Rhodes was shocked and speechless. His thoughts were confused. Facing this young vassal prince, he could not remain as calm as when he faced the King of Chu. It seemed this young prince had seen through him completely.

“Tell me, what is the purpose of your visit?” Xiao Ming said.

Seeing Rhodes shocked expression, Xiao Ming changed the subject. His goal was to intimidate him.

Swallowing hard, Rhodes said, “Your Highness, we came here with the intention to establish a long-term foreign trade relationship and to seek cooperation partners.”

“Foreign trade relationship? Cooperation partners?” Xiao Ming sneered. “You bombard our Great Yu Empire’s merchant ships and monopolize our coastal shipping routes. Is this your idea of foreign trade?”

Rhodes did not know how to explain. Originally, they viewed the Great Yu Empire like the indigenous peoples of the Americas—seemingly strong but actually weak.

But things had changed unexpectedly. There was clearly a strong force in the north of this country.

If this place was close to America, he would not be so worried because the continuous support from the mainland army would back them up. But now, they were thousands of miles away. Their armed forces with the same weapons had become a real threat.

“Your Highness, I believe this is a misunderstanding. We only attacked the King of Chu’s merchant ships, not others...”

“I know you colonizers very well!” Xiao Ming cut him off because Rhodes was clearly lying.

Staring sharply at Rhodes, Xiao Ming continued, “You slaughter natives in North America, trade black slaves in Africa, plunder spices and raw materials in South Asia. Your hands are stained with blood. Now, you point your slaughter knives at my country. You know my country is weak and divided, yet you want to force your trade hegemony on us.”

“You... you... how do you know about America and Africa?”

He was beyond shocked. The flintlock gun had overturned their understanding of this Prince of Qi, and now his knowledge shocked Rhodes even more.

He had talked with many Great Yu officials, and no one knew much outside their country. To him, Great Yu was a closed nation, but this prince shattered his perception completely.

“I not only know America and Africa, but I also know where your Netherlands is—between France and England. You Dutch must be living an unhappy life,” Xiao Ming said with a trace of mockery.

No matter how the Dutch were in Europe, now to him they were just colonizers.

Rhodes psychological defense completely collapsed. The unknown always brings fear, and now he faced the unknown.

“Your Highness, please believe in our sincerity. We really came with the intention of establishing trade relations,” Rod said with difficulty.

In the Age of Discovery, no war was truly just. At this time, power spoke louder than words. Just like the Dutch colonizing Ryukyu and dominating trade routes, it was all backed by force.

The truth was only valid within the range of cannon fire. Only the victors had the right to set the rules. For Xiao Ming, it was time for him to set the trade rules in East Asia. So he said, "You can establish trade, but first, you must hand over Ryukyu Island to me. Second, the trade routes in East Asia belong to me. Third, Dengzhou will be your only trading port. If you agree to these three points, then I will agree to trade with you."

"Impossible!"

Rhodes stood up angrily. The indigenous countries had always followed rules made by the Dutch. When had the natives ever made the rules?

Moreover, these rules would reduce the Dutch from trade leaders to mere vassals. That was unacceptable.

"Nothing is impossible, East Asia is our territory so the rules here should be set by us. You Dutch are just outsiders and obeying the rules is your duty. Ryukyu also belongs to the Great Yu Empire. You have occupied our land, which is an act of aggression and I have the right to demand you return Ryukyu."

"Your Highness, your demands are too much. We will not agree to any of these three points, especially Ryukyu. It is not your land; it now belongs to the Dutch," Rhodes said angrily.

"Ryukyu belongs to Great Yu!" Xiao Ming's expression turned cold. He had lost patience with these bandits. The Dutch still did not realize what they would face.

"I think we have nothing more to discuss," Rhodes stood up.

“As you wish,” Xiao Ming replied firmly. These were his bottom lines. Ryukyu must be taken back. The trade routes must be regained.

Rhodes snorted coldly, stood, and walked out. His followers left with him.

“Your Highness, these barbarians fear power but have no virtue. Talking won’t help; war is the only answer. Also, the Dutch have made peace with the Japanese, which is very disadvantageous to us. The Japanese outside the city walls all carry firearms,” Niu Ben said seriously.

Xiao Ming nodded. In the sixteenth century, Japan was a world-class gun manufacturing center. Data showed that at one time, Japan produced 300,000 firearms.

Though subjectively Xiao Ming did not favor Japan, objectively he had to admit Japan was a powerful opponent not to be underestimated. That was why he wanted to cut off contact between the Dutch and Japan, to prevent more Western technology from flooding into Japan.

Chapter 433: Fanaticism

Outside the city, Rhodes returned to his army with a dark expression.

“Ambassador Rhodes, it seems your negotiations have failed. I told you this Great Yu Empire is arrogant and ignorant. It is better to use guns and cannons than to reason with them,” Sakai said lazily. “But now it is too late; we have lost our chance.”

Rhodes snorted coldly. “Damn it. God knows how this Prince of Qi mastered the flintlock technology. But you are right in one thing—this Prince of Qi is far too arrogant and ignorant. They think that just because they have flintlock technology, they can defeat us Dutch at sea?”

“Exactly. Let’s teach them a lesson on the sea,” Sakai said, glancing at the soldiers gathering on the city walls. These soldiers were now aiming their guns at them. If a battle broke out now, they would be utterly defeated.

Rhodes turned his head toward Dengzhou city and said, “I must return and report this to Count Claire. The three conditions this Prince of Qi demanded are intolerable to us Dutch.”

With that, he and Sakai led the troops away from Dengzhou city.

At this time, Xiao Ming had already climbed the city wall. Looking at the Dutch troops’ equipment and their six-pound field cannons, he frowned. At any time, the equipment of a country’s army reveals the nation’s wealth.

Now, the Dutch soldiers under Dengzhou’s walls all wore leather boots, tall hats, and gray cotton uniforms. This seemed to be the standard Dutch military attire, showing the advanced European textile industry.

The soldiers’ flintlock muskets were polished and shiny, reflecting metal luster under the sunlight. This steel alone reflected Europe’s advanced steel technology.

The six six-pound field cannons, dragged by tall warhorses, further proved the current state of European military equipment.

If this Dutch force had come two years ago, it would have easily captured Dengzhou city.

Putting away his telescope, Xiao Ming said to Niu Ben, "It's time to send Yue Yun. These Dutch won't compromise until they see our warships."

Niu Ben nodded and immediately sent scouts to the bay to inform Yue Yun.

Descending from the city wall, Xiao Ming said to Yang Chengye, "From now on, Dengzhou's position will be very important. You must start building coastal defense artillery to prevent enemies from attacking us by sea."

"Coastal defense artillery?" Yang Chengye looked confused. This was beyond his knowledge.

Xiao Ming said, "You don't need to understand what it is. The engineering battalion will come here to build it. You just need to cooperate. Simply put, these cannons are for attacking warships at sea. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Yang Chengye nodded.

Previously, the main threat was from the north, so Xiao Ming concentrated all resources to defend against the northern barbarians. But now the maritime threat had become serious, so he had to strengthen Dengzhou's coastal defense and the Dengzhou army.

Although the Dengzhou army had not yet been equipped with flintlocks, Ye Qingyun often went to Qingzhou for training. Once firearms were supplied, Ye Qingyun could train a firearm unit.

“Your Highness, shall we pursue them now?” Ye Qingyun asked as Xiao Ming walked outside the city.

“No. Let’s see how the Dutch react when they see our fleet,” Xiao Ming smiled.

Niu Ben and Ye Qingyun exchanged glances and smiled maliciously. Yue Yun’s heavily armed warships were truly terrifying to imagine.

An hour later, Rhodes led his troops to the coast and boarded small boats to return to the warships.

“Count Claire, I think our negotiations have failed. The Prince of Qi’s demands cross the bottom line for us Dutch. Two of these three bottom lines alone give us reason to declare war,” Rhodes said.

During Rhodes’s time ashore, Claire waited on the warship, stroking his curled beard. Claire asked, “What are the conditions?”

Rhodes repeated Xiao Ming’s original demands. Claire’s face grew darker with each word. He said, “This foolish Prince of Qi—does he not know that colonies are extensions of a country’s territory? His demands are basically a declaration of war.”

“Respected Count Claire, that is why I refused. Not to mention the colonies, these trade routes are the lifeline of us Dutch. We fought wars with the Spanish, the English, and the French over these routes. We Dutch fear nothing,” Rhodes said passionately.

Claire patted Rhodes's shoulder. "You did well. Those who make such demands to us Dutch deserve to be humiliated."

Sakai's eyes flickered between Rhodes and Claire, a faint smile on his lips.

He had been a pirate at sea for many years and had traveled widely with a Dutch pirate. He was very familiar with these Europeans' ways.

In his view, these Europeans had a kind of fanatic adventurous spirit, driven by the wealth of the entire world.

Unless defeated, nothing could stop these Europeans mad for plunder, because they were even crazier than pirates.

Just as he expected, upon hearing the Prince of Qi's conditions, Rhodes and Claire were furious, because both Ryukyu and the trade routes belonged to the Dutch East India Company. Claire and Rhodes were important stakeholders of these interests.

Even the soldiers' livelihood on this fleet depended on Ryukyu and these routes. He remembered that in the Netherlands, this was called stocks.

"War! War!"

Following Claire's lead, the soldiers on the ship began to shout, brandishing their flintlocks.

"Throw these natives into the sea to feed the sharks!"

"Let's show them our power!"

...

The fanatic spirit spread through the ship. Claire and the soldiers shouted together. He shouted, "Soldiers, these natives want to steal what belongs to us. Tell me, what will you do?"

"Kill them all! Kill them all!"

The soldiers roared.

Claire raised his hat and shouted, "Then let us use cannon fire to show these natives how they should speak to us, let—"

"Enemy sighted! Enemy sighted!"

Just as the soldiers were caught up in their frenzy, a Dutch soldier on the lookout tower suddenly shouted urgently, pointing to the northern sea. The shout interrupted Claire's passionate speech.

Claire looked up at the soldier on the masthead, then immediately grabbed his telescope and went to the bow. Rhodes also took out his telescope to look toward the northern sea.

Through Claire's telescope, fifteen warships formed a line sailing toward them. The lead ship was a massive three-deck warship, followed by second-rate and third-rate warships, with smaller warships behind.

"My God, can someone tell me what the hell is going on!" Claire felt like he had fallen into an ice cave.

Chapter 434: Intimidation

On the vast ocean, fifteen warships stretched in a line more than a mile long, radiating deadly intent.

In an instant, the Dutch fanaticism seemed frozen by the northern cold wind. Clearly, the Prince of Qi they faced was no simple native.

"Damn it! Rhodes, you should have told me there was a powerful fleet here," Claire shouted in frustration.

Fanaticism does not mean stupidity. Their warships were all third-rate sailing ships, but they had already lost in firepower. What made them more uncertain was how well-trained this suddenly appearing fleet was.

Rhodes opened his mouth. He finally understood why the Prince of Qi made such an impudent demand—the fleet before them explained everything.

“The King of Chu deceived us. He must have done it on purpose,” Rhodes shouted angrily. “He hid everything from us to lead us into this trap.”

At this moment, Sakai also saw the fleet on the sea through his telescope. These warships were not much different from European ships, but their flags bore the characters for Great Yu.

The soldiers on the ships also wore Great Yu-style uniforms. Seeing this, Sakai was stunned. If this was the Great Yu fleet, it would be a disaster for them.

“Count, you should give the order now,” Sakai reminded. “The more time wasted, the fewer chances we have. Fight or retreat?”

Claire came back to his senses from shock. He looked around as if pondering a difficult decision.

The news Rhodes brought was clear. The Prince of Qi wanted Ryukyu and the trade routes. If no agreement was reached, war was inevitable, now or later.

Watching the Great Yu fleet getting closer, Claire said, “We cannot fight this fleet here. Our supplies are low. We should return to Ryukyu and destroy this fleet in the waters outside Ryukyu.”

Rhodes nodded in agreement. This was undoubtedly the right decision.

After the order was given, bells rang on the ships. The Dutch fleet slowly set sail toward Ryukyu.

At this time, on the Prince of Qi's flagship, Yue Yun was observing the Dutch fleet through a telescope.

When he saw the Dutch fleet fleeing south, he frowned. Because of the hurried battle, their supplies were also limited. If the Dutch fleet kept avoiding battle and continued south, it would be very disadvantageous for them. After all, the journey from Dengzhou to Ryukyu was long.

He looked toward the coast. Great Yu's troops had already appeared there. He saw the Qingzhou army waving a military flag signaling "Do not pursue."

Lowering the telescope, he ordered the crew: "Stop the pursuit."

This was Xiao Ming's order. The Dutch retreat showed they lacked confidence in victory. He thought they should give the Dutch time to consider accepting his terms.

If the Dutch still stubbornly refused, he would have to use force to seize the island and drive the Dutch out of these waters.

One reason for ordering Yue Yun to stop pursuing was the supply problem. He knew the warships had little food for the soldiers, and supplying them along the way without communication would be difficult.

Therefore, he needed to establish supply points along the coast and prepare the Qingzhou army before launching an attack on Ryukyu. In the age of sailing warships, if the enemy refused to fight, the battle would turn into a long chase.

Among sailing warships, first- and second-rate ships were less agile than third-rate ships and were at a disadvantage in a chase. Directly attacking Ryukyu would force the Dutch fleet to accept battle.

“Your Highness, when will you prepare to attack Ryukyu?” Niu Ben asked, relieved that the Battle of Jizhou had made the Prince of Qi understand the importance of logistics and avoided reckless pursuit.

Xiao Ming said calmly, “No rush. Ryukyu is like a cooked duck that cannot fly. We still need to wait for the Tiger cannons and field artillery from the military workshop. We cannot afford to be at a disadvantage when the two armies clash.”

Niu Ben also saw the Dutch’s field artillery mounted on wheels. These cannons were short, thin, and small-caliber but very lightweight.

On the battlefield, these cannons had longer range and more power than flintlock muskets, making them excellent weapons.

“Chen Qi should produce a batch of cannons like these,” Niu Ben said seriously.

No general liked to gamble with soldiers’ lives.

Xiao Ming had originally thought the Dutch fleet would fight briefly and then retreat, but he did not expect them to withdraw so decisively. This reflected the Dutch's anxiety.

The Dutch did not know how many warships he had, but they knew no reinforcements would arrive.

Now, the Dutch probably felt panic, constantly worrying about an attack on Ryukyu.

Watching the Dutch fleet disappear, Xiao Ming and his group returned to Dengzhou city. The war could only begin after preparations were complete. After returning, he planned to talk with the Kings of Wei and Chu to have them leave supply points along the coast.

Now, both kings had leverage in his hands, so they would dare not make any trouble.

Yue Yun led the fleet back to the naval port and then came with several naval commanders to Dengzhou prefecture office.

"Your Highness, these Dutch run fast," Yue Yun smiled. "We were chased badly by their warships before. It's a pity we didn't teach them a good lesson."

"You will have your chance for revenge," Xiao Ming said to Yue Yun. "But this time, you may not be a match for the Dutch. Naval battle is not just about size. You just took over the warships and are unfamiliar with their operation. From now on, stay in Dengzhou for three months of training. After you are familiar with handling warships, then we will talk about naval battles. For now, clear out nearby pirates."

Hearing this, Yue Yun suddenly felt a cold sweat on his back. Xiao Ming was right. If they really fought now, the outcome was uncertain. Although his soldiers knew how to operate warships, they were unfamiliar with the new ships, especially first- and second-rate large warships, which were difficult to handle.

Ashamed, Yue Yun said, “Yes, Your Highness. I will lead the soldiers in hard training and form a strong army as soon as possible.”

Xiao Ming nodded and said to Yang Chengye, “Commander Yang, this is a great opportunity for Dengzhou. Once Ryukyu is taken, Dengzhou will become a maritime commercial port, which will benefit Dengzhou’s development.”

Chapter 435: Salt Transport Bureau

The Dutch were scared away by the fleet, and the atmosphere inside the prefecture office was lively.

Yang Chengye was the most excited. Hearing Xiao Ming’s words, he grew even happier and said, “Your Highness, really?”

Nowadays, almost all the Great Yu Empire’s ports were in the south. Everyone knew how important ports were to a region. If Dengzhou could become a prosperous port, it would soon become a wealthy city.

As the governor of Dengzhou, Yang naturally welcomed this news.

“Of course it’s true, but that depends on General Niu Ben and Yue Yun taking Ryukyu first,” Xiao Ming smiled.

Upon hearing this, Yang Chengye stood and cupped his hands toward Niu Ben and Yue Yun. “Generals, the future of Dengzhou depends on both of you.”

“Governor Yang, no need for formalities. This is our duty,” Niu Ben smiled.

With the completion of the warships, Xiao Ming could now control the seas around Dengzhou. For him, this meant gaining a vast maritime territory. He said, “From now on, wherever our warships sail, it is Great Yu’s sea. Governor Yang, your vision should not stop at the port. Actually, Dengzhou sits on a great source of wealth.”

“Oh? Please explain, Your Highness,” Yang Chengye said, puzzled.

“Marine fishing,” Xiao Ming replied softly.

Yang Chengye was overjoyed. He slapped his thigh and said, “Ah, Your Highness, you speak the truth. We’ve been badly bullied by Japanese pirates at sea all these years. I had forgotten about fishing. Now our fishing boats can finally sail out to sea.”

“Not just fishermen fishing. I will allocate thirty merchant ships, which will be converted into fishing vessels. Dengzhou will establish specialized fishing teams to supply meat to inland prefectures,” Xiao Ming said.

The Dutch soldiers’ robust physique amazed Xiao Ming. Apart from the wealthy elites in Great Yu, who were all well-fed, many common people looked malnourished.

From the Europeans' perspective, this was no different from refugees, even seen as a symbol of poverty.

Xiao Ming noticed this issue during the wars against the barbarians. At first, his soldiers' physical fitness was inferior, which was a disadvantage in battle.

Back then, his troops could only eat meat once a month, which was the limit of Qingzhou's meat supply.

Without meat, soldiers could not build their bodies to match the barbarians or even the Europeans. This was unacceptable to him.

In modern times, soldiers' diets are just as important as modernization itself. Training consumes great energy. Without proper food, training quality declines.

The fish caught by the thirty fishing ships might not fully feed his army, but at least he could make broth so soldiers could occasionally drink meat soup.

"I will remember this," Yang Chengye suddenly felt the weight of his responsibilities.

Dengzhou had once been a marginal city, but now it had become crucial—tasked with building coastal defenses and serving as a trade port and fishing base.

Xiao Ming nodded, having given all instructions. The New Year was coming, and after that, his focus would turn toward the sea.

After staying in Dengzhou for a few days, Xiao Ming inspected the development of the local prefectures and the implementation of various policies.

His main concern was whether policies were actually enforced. Even today, top-down policies often face local resistance, and in an age of limited communication, policy implementation could easily fail.

Thus, when appointing Yang Chengye to heavy responsibilities, he had to check whether Yang was responsive to Qingzhou's directives.

His inspection was somewhat sudden, leaving Yang Chengye flustered. Still, Xiao Ming was relatively satisfied with the results.

Now, no powerful clans oppressed their neighbors. Formerly dominant clans had become merchants and no longer maintained armed retainers.

Land distribution in Dengzhou was reasonable, with no peasant complaints. In fact, because Dengzhou was less populated, locals had more land than those in Qingzhou.

This was the difference between "wide" and "narrow" countryside in ancient times—the wide countryside had more land per family.

Besides, he checked the granary reserves, which were crucial in ancient times as the amount of grain determined how long a war could last.

After receiving satisfactory reports, Xiao Ming finally visited the Salt Transport Bureau in Dengzhou.

After marine fishing began, salt became a big issue. Without refrigeration technology, salt and spices were used to preserve food. This was why spices were so valuable in ancient times.

Europeans occupied Malaysia mainly to trade spices.

Xiao Ming did not have enough spices, so he planned to preserve sea fish by salting them. Though sea fish are salty, their salt content was insufficient for proper curing.

Therefore, he needed the Salt Transport Bureau to produce more salt. He also planned to sell salt to other parts of the Great Yu Empire, but only if his salt was cheaper than others'.

This required a more efficient salt production method.

"Your Highness, this is how we produce salt in Dengzhou," said Yao Wenyuan, the Salt Transport Officer, who hurried over after learning Xiao Ming had visited the salt fields.

They stood on a flat beach with over a hundred thatched huts emitting smoke.

Some villagers carried seawater into the huts, filtered it several times through cloth, then boiled it in pots to produce salt.

“Is this your method of salt production?” Xiao Ming frowned. This was the seawater boiling method.

Yao Wenyuan nodded, “Yes, Your Highness. Since ancient times, the Salt Transport Bureau has used this method. Now, our production meets the needs of the six prefectures.”

“It’s not enough now,” Xiao Ming said. “This method is too slow. You must switch to a faster and more efficient method.”

“Other methods?” Yao looked confused.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Remember what I say now. In the future, use this method.”

Then Xiao Ming explained the modern salt harvesting method.

“This method is simple. The area is large. You can dig salt fields on this land. When the tide rises, seawater covers the salt fields, and the sun dries them...”

Chapter 436: Salt Fields

The sea breeze blew gently, and the waves lapped against the white sandy beach, creating the sound of rolling surf.

“Salt fields are divided into two parts: one is the evaporation pond, and the other is the crystallization pond. Generally, salt harvesting requires seven steps: building the tidal flat, leveling the flat, introducing seawater at high tide, preparing the brine, testing the brine, crystallization, and collecting the salt lumps,” Xiao Ming carefully explained the seawater salt harvesting method to Yao Wenyuan.

At this moment, the diagram of the salt harvesting method from the technology library kept appearing in Yao’s mind, as if Xiao Ming’s every word was letting him experience the process firsthand.

Gradually, he understood what an evaporation pond was, what a crystallization pond was, what a saturated solution meant, and how to dissolve crude salt and extract edible salt afterward.

After this detailed explanation, Xiao Ming asked Yao, “Do you understand now?”

Yao nodded. “Yes, Your Highness, I understand. This salt harvesting method first requires building tidal flats, then leveling the beach. When the seawater rises with the tide, it is led into the salt fields to produce brine. Then lotus seeds are used to test the brine’s saturation. Generally, brine saturation is divided into ten levels. Two lotus seeds are used: one is half the size, and the other is full size. If the half-size lotus seed floats with its top above the brine, the saturation is 20–30 percent; if it floats flat on the surface, it is 50 percent saturated. The full-size lotus seed floating at an angle indicates 70–80 percent saturation; floating flat means 100 percent saturation.

When the brine reaches 100 percent saturation, the mud on the crystallization pond’s floor is cleaned, smoothed, and compacted. The brine is then poured in, and salt crystals will form that very day. After a few days, the salt lumps are collected.”

Pausing, Yao continued, “The salt obtained is still crude salt. To make edible salt, it must be dissolved again, filtered through charcoal, and recrystallized into fine salt.”

Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction. “Exactly. The construction battalion will arrive in the next few days to help build the salt fields. Governor Yang, you must cooperate with the Salt Transport Bureau to increase the number of salt workers—expand to two thousand workers. Salt making is hard work, so give the salt workers better pay. Also, salt production is a vital state matter. The Salt Transport Bureau must not neglect duties or steal salt. Otherwise, do not blame me for being ruthless.”

At this, Xiao Ming’s tone suddenly became very stern.

Yao and Yang Chengye immediately bowed. “We dare not, Your Highness.”

“Good,” Xiao Ming said calmly. The destruction of an empire often begins from within. In ancient times, peasant uprisings often failed because insiders indulged in luxury.

These past two years in the fiefdom had been easier, but his greatest worry was rising hedonism and corrupt officials.

After discussing salt harvesting, Xiao Ming and Niu Ben rode horses to patrol along the coastline.

The salt fields under the Salt Transport Bureau were already at Dengzhou’s border. To the west lay Laizhou. Apart from this salt field, Xiao Ming also ordered three more salt fields to be built at Laizhou Bay.

In modern times, Laizhou Bay's salt fields are famous nationwide. In ancient times, Qi territory was also the richest salt-producing region, even a source of tribute salt. Xiao Ming had once neglected it but now needed to strengthen the salt industry as a stable income source. Once production increased, he planned to sell salt to every corner of the Great Yu Empire.

Traveling along the coast toward Dengzhou, Xiao Ming vaguely saw a small island on the sea—that was modern Changdao County.

Great Yu's Dengzhou covered a wide area. The location of Dengzhou city corresponded to today's Penglai. Changdao County faced Penglai directly. Besides Penglai, Dengzhou included modern Yantai, Weihai, Qixia, Haiyang, Rushan, and other vast regions.

The naval port he established was the famous Ming Dynasty Penglai naval port. During the Wanli period, the Ming navy departed from here to battle Japanese pirates at sea. It was also where Qi Jiguang trained soldiers. After the Second Opium War, Dengzhou was designated as a trading port.

Thus, the naval port's location was not a whim but carefully chosen.

Moreover, Dengzhou's position was excellent. Opposite lay the Korean city of Beisha—modern Dalian. The sea distance from Dengzhou was only about two hundred li, and his navy could arrive in a day.

Now, Korea and the barbarians colluded, allied with Japan, sending many soldiers disguised as Japanese pirates to attack the coast. After taking Ryukyu, it would be time to deal with the Koreans and teach them manners.

Several days of inspection gave Xiao Ming a detailed understanding of Dengzhou. It would become a prosperous seaport city, which he had to take seriously. Once steam locomotives were developed, he planned to build a railway from Qingzhou to Dengzhou, allowing constant material transport via the sea.

After returning to Dengzhou and resting two days, Xiao Ming prepared to return to Qingzhou.

Now, with the navy beginning to show strength and the north temporarily stable, he could finally stop worrying day and night. The rest could proceed step by step. He could also calmly teach at Bowen Academy, sharing the knowledge from his technology library with students.

Honestly, he was merely practicing military-first politics. All industries served the army, and civilian industry had little development.

Scientific fields beyond military technology had not progressed much either. This development was unbalanced. Compared with Europe's civilization level, his fiefdom was still a backward region.

Changing a people's mindset was very difficult. Governing a great country was like cooking a small fish—gentle, slow, and not rash.

"Yang Chengye, I have said all I should these days. Your responsibility as governor is heavy. Do not disappoint me," Xiao Ming instructed before leaving.

Yang Chengye had always thought himself a minor frontier official but now found himself an important official, feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

“I will do my best, Your Highness,” he said.

Xiao Ming nodded and looked at Ye Qingyun. “The defense of Dengzhou is in your hands. Do not fail, especially coastal defense of the naval port.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Ye Qingyun bowed.

After giving his orders, Xiao Ming and Niu Ben led the army back. This time he planned to discuss the coastal supply points with the Kings of Chu and Wei. After all, attacking Ryukyu required supplies.

Three days later, they returned to Qingzhou. The round trip took half a month, and the weather was growing colder.

Upon arriving, Xiao Ming and Niu Ben parted ways outside the city. Xiao Ming went straight to the royal residence.

Unexpectedly, as soon as he entered his chamber, a very scandalous scene suddenly appeared before his eyes.

Chapter 437: Fei Yue'er's Handicrafts

“Ah!”

Several startled cries rang out as the singing girls in the chamber quickly covered themselves with their clothes.

In the middle of the singing girls, Fei Yue'er was holding a bra with a bright smile. The voices made her glance toward the door.

Seeing Xiao Ming, she suddenly stretched out her hand to block his view, playfully scolding, "Your Highness, why didn't you have Xiao Huan inform me when you came back? Now you've taken quite an advantage."

Xiao Ming turned aside, avoiding looking at the singing girls. Although in this era men held authority over women and he could ignore Fei Yue'er's feelings, he came from the modern world, and to him, respecting one's wife—especially a princess consort—was important.

"To not know is no sin. I did not know the princess consort was doing this," Xiao Ming smiled.

Fei Yue'er rolled her eyes at him. She told the singing girls to put their clothes on and leave, then said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, you were away in Dengzhou for half a month. I was quite free and decided to try making some items from the books."

"How is it? How does it work?" Xiao Ming asked with a smile.

Fei Yue'er was very serious, fully in the scholar's mode. "The singing girls say it's definitely more comfortable than the traditional chest wraps, especially the panties—they help cover modesty."

Xiao Ming nodded, secretly relieved. Since arriving in the Great Yu Empire, he had endured too many days without underwear.

In Great Yu, the concept of underwear did not exist. Generally, to avoid exposure, people wore open-crotch pants, the same for men and women. Some bold women wore no pants at all, revealing bare bottoms beneath their skirts.

This was not just in Great Yu; Europe was similar in this era.

In 1717, Russian Tsar Peter the Great visited Paris. Riding through the cheering streets, a woman accidentally fell in front of his horse, exposing herself.

The beautiful woman was mortified, but the tsar wrote playfully in his memoirs, “The gates of paradise suddenly opened before me.” This incident proved that in the 18th century, the world’s most fashionable city—Paris—women did not wear underwear.

In China, before the Han dynasty, it was the same. Later came the “poor pants,” which were open-crotch pants. The Japanese modeled kimonos after Tang dynasty robes.

Women wearing kimonos also did not wear underwear. Ancient women, whether Chinese or foreign, wore large robes that concealed everything, so it did not matter.

“Good, good. The next step is to sell these things,” Xiao Ming mused.

He understood the people of Great Yu were used to this lifestyle, but he was not. During inspections in Qingzhou, he often saw Lu Fei lifting his uniform to bare his butt while urinating, which was quite a disturbing sight.

The popularity of underwear must have a reason. For a merchant, it's not about existing demand but creating demand—that is the way of business.

It was like diamonds. Do diamonds really have value? Actually, diamonds are abundant worldwide, but merchants hoard diamonds to create an illusion of scarcity.

Diamonds themselves are not very meaningful, but once linked to love, they become an essential gift for couples.

This is demand created without prior need. Underwear design, after all, facilitates movement. The image of a soldier falling in battle exposing his buttocks is too painful to bear.

“Sell them?” Fei Yue'er picked up the underwear, blushing. “Your Highness, can these be sold? They're too embarrassing. How could they be sold?”

Xiao Ming hugged Fei Yue'er's slender waist and said, “Madam, the singing girls said they're very comfortable once worn—that's enough. Besides, the books mention many benefits of underwear.”

Fei Yue'er recalled that it was the book's descriptions that inspired her to make these.

She had also tested them and found they better protected women's bodies.

"I just worry, Your Highness, that selling these will invite ridicule," Fei Yue'er's eyes showed concern for Xiao Ming. As princess consort, she had to consider him in everything.

Xiao Ming had anticipated this. "The princess consort can filter these matters. I cannot get involved. Can the princess consort open a women's clothing shop where men are not allowed? That would solve the problem."

Every product Xiao Ming needed. A product's birth not only meant profit but also created jobs, which helped the textile industry advance rapidly.

Fei Yue'er pondered and thought Xiao Ming's words made perfect sense. She said, "You are right, Your Highness. That way, I can help you earn more silver."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke.

Now everyone in Qingzhou was busy. She did not want to live idly in the palace. The atmosphere in Qingzhou was lively, nothing like the stagnant Chang'an.

After this talk, Fei Yue'er softly asked, "Your Highness, will you go on a long journey from Dengzhou this time?"

Xiao Ming paused and carefully studied her. It seemed he had seen through her thoughts. Fei Yue'er lowered her head.

He smiled gently, took her small hand, and understood her feelings.

Having come alone from Chang'an to Qingzhou, she naturally felt insecure. When he was around, she had no worries, but when he left, she would be fearful.

In Xiao Ming's eyes, Fei Yue'er was a little delicate woman who depended on him.

"No, I won't go. We will spend the New Year in Qingzhou," Xiao Ming said.

In a daze, this was already his third year in Qingzhou. His fiefdom was thriving, and he now had a family.

Once an orphan in his previous life, he now felt satisfied. He would work hard for the future of himself and this family.

Feeling Xiao Ming's care, a peaceful expression appeared in Fei Yue'er's eyes. To her, this man was different from any other man in Great Yu.

Suddenly, Xiao Ming's return soon stirred the royal residence. Just as the couple enjoyed their reunion, a loud voice suddenly rang out.

"Your Highness, good news!"

"Qian Dafu?" Xiao Ming asked, puzzled.

Fei Yue'er said, "Steward Qian returned two days ago. He said he found a copper mine."

"Copper mine?" Xiao Ming was delighted. The copper mines in his fief were poor and undiscovered. That was why he had to use cast iron cannons.

Besides casting bronze cannons, copper had many uses. Due to its corrosion resistance, sailing warships were often sheathed in copper on the hull to prolong their lifespan.

Chapter 438: Upgraded Tiger Cannon

The sudden sound caused Xiao Ming and Fei Yue'er to separate. Instinctively, Fei Yue'er moved toward the inner chamber.

Coughing lightly, Xiao Ming stepped out of the chamber and immediately met Qian Dafu.

"Your Highness, we have found the copper mine," Qian Dafu said excitedly, pulling out a handful of copper ore.

“Copper mine.”

Xiao Ming felt a surge of excitement. Besides copper still being the currency of the Great Yu Empire, its wide industrial applications made it an extremely important resource for Qingzhou.

“Your Highness, this copper mine was truly hard to find. After more than two years, this old servant finally located it. Now the mining operations are underway, and Qingzhou will be able to mint coins on its own,” Qian Dafu said.

“Mint coins?” Xiao Ming shook his head.

Qian Dafu said, “Yes, Your Highness. Nowadays, any vassal lord who can mine copper uses the copper to cast copper coins. Don’t you want to mint your own coins?”

“Coins must be minted, but not recklessly,” Xiao Ming replied.

In the Great Yu Empire, no one understood inflation, so reckless coin minting was inevitable, causing the people to distrust copper coins.

Sometimes one copper coin could buy a steamed bun; sometimes three coins could not. This was due to the chaotic copper coin market.

For Xiao Ming, he would not blindly mint coins like other vassal lords because it was irresponsible to the people. To avoid inferior foreign coins flooding in, he planned to issue his own currency.

More importantly, he was happy not because of minting coins but because Qingzhou now had a strategic resource.

Qingzhou was about to launch an attack on Ryukyu for the New Year. Now with copper mines, he could have Chen Qi forge six-pound bronze field cannons.

Field cannons did not require large-scale production like siege or naval cannons, and bronze material would improve their quality.

During Napoleon's era, field cannons were mostly made of bronze.

After a pause, he told Qian Dafu, "Mine and transport a batch here. I will have the Machinery Department produce bronze field cannons."

"Yes, Your Highness." Qian Dafu paused, finally understanding Xiao Ming's intent. "The copper mine is not far, about 180 li northwest of Qingzhou. The first batch of copper ore will arrive in five days."

Xiao Ming nodded, then said, "Besides copper, send people to look for gold in Laizhou and silver in Dengzhou. These are what I need now."

Qian Dafu smiled knowingly, "Your Highness, leave it to me."

After delivering the good news of the copper mine discovery, Qian Dafu cupped his hands and left.

Xiao Ming exhaled softly. Besides casting field cannons, copper had many uses. Most importantly, it could be used to make copper wires.

Thus, the copper mine was a reserve for future electrical applications.

After seeing Qian Dafu off, Xiao Ming returned to his chamber where Fei Yue'er waited. After half a month apart, their reunion was joyful, and intimate moments needed no words.

The next day, mid-morning, Xiao Ming leisurely got up. It is said that leaders have busy subordinates, while those without subordinates are busy themselves.

Now he finally experienced having busy subordinates while he relaxed. After all, political affairs were handled by Pang Yukun, and the army was managed by Niu Ben.

Both generals worked tirelessly, almost recklessly, so local prefectures and the army were well managed.

After a lazy wash and meal, a servant informed him that Fei Yue'er had gone with Lu Luo to the textile workshop that morning.

He understood—Fei Yue'er was busy with designing underwear.

Xiao Ming smiled wryly and then went to the military workshop to check on the Tiger Cannon and discuss the field cannon.

“Your Highness, you have come at the right time. This is the new Tiger Cannon design,” Chen Qi said, lifting a brand-new Tiger Cannon as soon as Xiao Ming arrived.

Seeing it, Xiao Ming immediately gave a thumbs-up. Chen Qi had upgraded the Tiger Cannon. This new version had moved beyond the original Ming Dynasty design and was developing toward a mortar-type cannon.

The base was now a square metal plate. The cylindrical barrel was fixed to metal plates on both sides by trunnions, allowing free up-and-down aiming.

Two soldiers could easily carry the whole mortar by the handles on the metal base. It was very convenient and quick to move.

“Not bad. This is progress,” Xiao Ming said, examining the new mortar.

Chen Qi smiled. "Your Highness, I modified the mortar according to the textbook. I also redesigned the shells."

He handed Xiao Ming a shell with a hollow wooden plug. A fuse was inserted through the plug. By rotating the plug, the fuse's direction could be adjusted inward or outward.

He asked, "Can you now control the exact explosion time of these shells?"

"Accuracy is not high, but much better than the old powder barrels. At least it prevents premature explosions in the barrel, and by rotating the plug, we can roughly control the timing," Chen Qi replied.

"Is that so?" Xiao Ming was hopeful. Effective results would make attacking the Dutch much easier.

Chen Qi nodded and told the craftsmen nearby, "Test it for the lord."

Two craftsmen carried the mortar before Xiao Ming. They poured gunpowder into the mortar base and loaded a shell with a flat wooden bottom.

"Your Highness, fire at the target 300 meters away."

Chen Qi had mastered parabolic calculations and could now estimate the shell's landing point based on the mortar's angle. Though the error margin was large, progress was evident.

“Fire!”

At the command, the craftsmen ignited the powder.

After a muffled boom, the shell flew along a parabola and dropped at about 300 meters. Three meters above ground, it suddenly exploded with a “boom.”

Chen Qi said sheepishly, “Your Highness, the problem now is the blooming shell’s explosion timing is inconsistent.”

Though Chen Qi spoke lightly, Xiao Ming was amazed. Achieving such control within this error range was remarkable.

He said, “This is already very good. Start producing mortars for the Qingzhou army. Also, I want to discuss field cannons with you.”

Chapter 439: Field Cannons

“Field cannons?”

Chen Qi’s expression turned serious. Now that Xiao Ming personally came to discuss this, it meant the Qingzhou army would soon be able to use these field cannons.

When Chen Qi saw the Dutch dragging their field cannons in Dengzhou, he realized their military technology was still behind Europe's, since the Dutch cannons were basically the same as the contemporary Napoleonic field cannons.

The appearance of Napoleonic-style weapons at this time showed that Europe in this timeline had advanced about fifty to sixty years ahead of the real historical period.

This assessment aligned with Chen Qi's judgment. If so, he had to focus and catch up. Europe's progress was society-wide, while his own progress was limited to a few workshops in Qingzhou.

"Yes, field cannons—and Napoleonic field cannons at that. You've probably seen them in textbooks. Napoleonic cannons come in two types: twelve-pounders and six-pounders. The twelve-pounders are used for sieges; the six-pounders are used in battles between armies," Xiao Ming reminded him.

Chen Qi nodded. "I remember. The six-pounder field cannon barrel is 1.52 meters long, caliber 93 millimeters, weighing 389 kilograms. The twelve-pounder barrel is 1.6 meters long, caliber 117 millimeters, weighing 556 kilograms. But, Your Highness, the Napoleonic field cannons are all cast in bronze. These can even withstand double the explosive force. Should we also cast ours in bronze?"

"Qian Dafu found a copper mine northwest of Qingzhou, so we now have enough copper to make field cannons. But the number of cannons won't be large. I am willing to invest. In three months, I need thirty six-pounders and twenty twelve-pounders," Xiao Ming said.

Chen Qi pondered. "In that case, we need to recast the iron molds and manufacture carriages."

“Exactly. I brought you the Napoleonic cannon blueprints. With your current craftsmanship, manufacturing Napoleonic cannons won’t be a problem,” Xiao Ming said.

Taking the blueprints, Chen Qi studied them carefully. These were more detailed than those in the textbook.

Xiao Ming wasn’t hiding anything; he simply used modern textbook methods to teach the basics. The real detailed field cannon blueprints weren’t in the textbooks.

After all, too much detail would be a leak. It’s like how everyone today knows nuclear weapons release energy through fission, but not everyone can build an atomic bomb.

Textbooks are for teaching—not technical manuals.

“Are there no problems now?” Xiao Ming smiled. Sometimes it’s not the lack of technology but lack of creativity. Now that Chen Qi fully understood the field cannon structure, and with the current iron mold casting tech, producing Napoleonic field cannons was feasible.

The key to production was the carriage design, which he now provided in detail. With that solved, no more problems remained.

Chen Qi studied it for a while and praised, “This carriage is ingenious. It lets the field cannon be mobile under horse traction and supports the cannon’s base. The downward-bent structure resists ground pressure so the cannon doesn’t shift much when firing. No problem this time.”

Chen Qi looked enlightened. Xiao Ming relaxed and said, “Start manufacturing iron molds now. When the copper arrives, begin production. These field cannons are not just for the Dutch—they’re also for the barbarians.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Chen Qi replied solemnly.

With naval cannon handover completed and mortar experiments done, production could start. Now Chen Qi had plenty of time to focus on field cannons.

After discussing this, Xiao Ming felt relieved. Wang Xuan’s news said the Dutch had built a star fort in Ryukyu. Without field cannons, a strong assault on the fort would cause heavy losses. But now, the situation was different.

While Xiao Ming ordered the military workshop to produce field cannons, the Dutch fleet had already arrived in Ryukyu.

The fleet docked at the pier. Claire and Rhodes headed to Fort Zeelandia, their fortress in Ryukyu, not far from the pier.

Claire’s face was gloomy, clearly thinking about something serious. Rhodes looked very displeased. After retreating from Dengzhou, the enemy fleet had not pursued them.

Yet the powerful enemy fleet remained deeply in their minds, shaking their confidence at sea.

After walking about ten li inland, they saw a typical European star fort.

Built over five years since their occupation of Ryukyu thirty years ago, the fort was two li long and wide, shaped like a pentagram. Each point had a bastion with cannons able to cover one another.

“The count has returned,” a sentry shouted from the wall as the iron gates slowly opened.

Dutch soldiers guarding the fort saluted Claire.

Inside, some local natives with black hair and yellowish, somewhat lean skin were carrying rice. Since occupying Ryukyu, the Dutch had forced the natives to grow rice and sugarcane.

These were the products they sold to Europe.

“Count Claire, you must make a decision now. What shall we do?” Rhodes asked.

Claire scowled, “What else? Surrender to this Prince of Qi and accept their terms?”

“Our soldiers are scared. We’re too far from home and face too many powerful enemies. This Prince of Qi has a strong fleet, flintlock-equipped soldiers, and cannons on the walls. Our weapons might be more

advanced, but we can't win by numbers, especially if our fleet can't protect us. I'll be trapped here," Rhodes said.

"Coward! Are you ready to run now?" Claire sneered.

Rhodes defended himself, "I'm not scared. We must find reinforcements or we won't stand against this Prince of Qi. We should ask the British for help. After all, we're all Europeans."

"Is that so? Replacing one villain with another to chase away a scoundrel?" Claire grew more displeased. "Rhodes, you're scared out of your wits. You'd better rest."

Rhodes knew Claire was trying to dismiss him. He said, "Count, please reconsider carefully."

Chapter 440: Claire's Decision

The setting sun cast its last glow on the official residence in Fort Zeelandia.

After seeing Rhodes off, Claire walked to the window. It was already evening, and dusk covered the red-tiled city buildings, blending beautifully with the sunset.

Since arriving in Ryukyu, Claire had been captivated by the beauty of the place. He even thought about bringing his wife here, but now everything was worsening.

Frowning, Claire struggled to understand why this Prince of Qi was so obsessed with Ryukyu. From what he knew, Great Yu officials seemed indifferent toward Ryukyu.

Even when dealing with the King of Chu initially, Chu tacitly accepted their occupation of Ryukyu. But now, this Prince of Qi had changed everything.

“Fifteen galleon warships?”

Claire recalled the Prince of Qi’s fleet. His biggest confusion was how this prince had both flintlock muskets and European-standard galleon warships.

Since returning from Dengzhou, he kept pondering this but found no answers.

Matchlock muskets could be explained, but flintlocks and warships baffled him. Given Great Yu’s industrial capacity, even with flintlock technology, it seemed impossible to easily produce flintlocks and warships.

Especially the cast iron cannons on the city walls. Cast iron naval guns had only been mainstream in Europe for about thirty years. Yet their bursting rate was higher than bronze guns.

The cast iron cannons bought by the King of Chu from Qingzhou were of very good quality. According to Chu, although some burst, explosions rarely caused significant damage, and the failure rate was low—proof of their excellent quality.

Thinking of this, Claire grew more uneasy. If this Prince of Qi really possessed such industrial strength, he had to consider matters carefully.

Fighting such a powerful vassal in nearby waters would be a disaster, possibly forcing them to permanently withdraw from East Asian trade.

So he never considered Rhodes's suggestion of involving the British. That would only anger the Prince of Qi, and the British coveted East Asian trade routes. It would be inviting wolves into the fold.

After long hesitation, Claire decided to take a more cautious approach. He planned to send Rhodes again, this time to Qingzhou, the Prince of Qi's capital.

If it turned out the prince was as strong as he imagined, he would have to seriously consider the prince's demands. At least they could maintain some presence in East Asia, which was better than losing everything.

Claire thought Rhodes had stayed in Ryukyu too long and did not understand the current European situation. The Netherlands was weakening and could no longer compete with stronger European powers for trade routes.

Therefore, East Asian trade was vital to the Dutch.

Sighing, Claire looked toward the bay where his fleet was moored in a crescent-shaped harbor. Many Dutch merchant ships were docked here, bringing East Asian goods back home.

As the sun gradually set, Claire finally made up his mind. The Great Yu Empire was completely different from the Americas and Africa they had conquered. It was a civilization similar to theirs, not a primitive tribal society.

A nation like this with a war machine in motion would be terrifying.

...

Qingzhou.

Xiao Ming's days suddenly became leisurely. For the past two days, he had either been in the palace dealing with Fei Yue'er's underwear design or supervising students at Bowen Academy.

With the big situation temporarily stable, he planned to cultivate more talent. Relying on just Lin Wentao and Lu Tong was not enough.

His goal was for Bowen Academy's technology to flourish everywhere.

"Your Highness, the underwear design is basically finalized. The textile workshop's female workers are producing it. Now the question is, how to promote this underwear?"

In the chamber, Fei Yue'er rested her arms on the table. She was unfamiliar with Qingzhou and had no idea where to start.

Xiao Ming already had an idea. There were few nobles or ladies in Qingzhou, so he had to find an influential person from outside.

He said to Fei Yue'er, "Actually, there is a person perfect for promoting the underwear."

Fei Yue'er's eyes lit up. "Who?"

"Princess Pingyang," Xiao Ming said lightly. Pingyang was known for her bold style. Such bras and underwear would surely interest her.

After all, Princess Pingyang was Great Yu's fashion icon. Underwear was not just for modesty; it made women more attractive.

Fei Yue'er understood but her excitement faded quickly. She said sadly, "But Princess Pingyang is very respected and currently in Chang'an. Will she come?"

“Not necessarily. Last time she came to my fief just for glass. You can write her a letter in your name as the Prince of Qi’s consort. Maybe she will come,” Xiao Ming said, eyes twinkling. “Describe Qingzhou’s changes. With my aunt’s personality, she might come.”

Fei Yue’er bit her lip. She was timid but wanted to help Xiao Ming. She nodded, “I will write to Princess Pingyang right away.”

She asked Xiao Huan for paper and pen and began writing.

Xiao Ming supervised. Fei Yue’er’s neat, beautiful handwriting looked like calligraphy. Xiao Ming was embarrassed by his own messy handwriting that looked like worms searching for their mother.

After writing the letter, Fei Yue’er gave it to Xiao Huan to send via the courier to Chang’an. Then she remembered something.

“Your Highness, we have made the underwear, but there are very few dyeing workshops in Qingzhou, and they only dye single colors. I think the dyeing workshops should learn some dyeing techniques from the books you gave.”

Textile and dyeing were inseparable. Although Qingzhou was calm, Xiao Ming was always thinking about improving clothing quality to dominate the market quickly.

Besides textile techniques, quality dyeing workshops were needed. Only fabrics dyed in rich colors could be sewn into exquisite clothes.

Dyeing workshops were the next industry Xiao Ming planned to improve. He said, “Princess Consort, you and I are truly in sync. Qingzhou’s textile workshops are inherited from the Sun family. It’s time to improve the dyeing process.”

Hearing Xiao Ming’s playful tone, Fei Yue’er smiled softly.