

I. Dynasty 441

Chapter 441: Pingyang's Astonishment

In the chamber, Xiao Ming and Fei Yue'er huddled together discussing dyeing techniques.

It was already night. The royal residence was dimly lit by lanterns casting a warm, yellow glow. For Xiao Ming, improving dyeing techniques was no problem, though reaching modern standards was impossible.

Still, he could raise Qingzhou's dyeing level above the current highest in the Great Yu Empire.

"Madder (red), purple gromwell (purple), sappanwood (black), sappanwood bark (red), indigo (blue)..."
Xiao Ming wrote down each natural dye carefully.

Chemical dyes were beyond his reach now; only natural dyes were available. His technology library contained over one hundred kinds.

These natural dyes could produce all the colors needed.

He also noted how mixing the seven basic colors could create others, ensuring Qingzhou's textile workshop could produce garments in any color.

"Your Highness, so many?" Fei Yue'er looked at the densely written paper, both excited and surprised.

“That’s just a few. Most are tie-dye patterns,” Xiao Ming said.

Handmade tie-dye methods remained the same: fabric was tied into shapes, soaked in dye to create varied patterns.

Xiao Ming’s technology library combined many tie-dye patterns and tying techniques. Teaching these to the textile workshop would bring their craft near modern levels.

With all this detailed information drawn out, the next day Xiao Ming and Fei Yue’er went to the textile workshop to teach the tie-dye methods and natural dye preparation to the artisans.

Since the Sun family had been purged, the textile workshop now belonged to the prefecture office. Xiao Ming was not worried about artisans leaking secrets, as strict supervision was in place.

Because there were so many tie-dye patterns, the two stayed busy for days. Fei Yue’er also dyed some underwear in the process.

After her letter reached Chang’an, Princess Pingyang immediately sent a reply, expedited over 800 li. The letter said she had already left Chang’an and was heading to Qingzhou.

Hearing this, Fei Yue’er was ecstatic, spending her days imagining how to promote her designs to Pingyang and other noblewomen, many of whom would visit Qingzhou.

Four days later, a large entourage entered Qingzhou. Protected by golden-armored soldiers, it was Princess Pingyang.

“Aunt!”

After two years, Pingyang returned to Qingzhou. The last visit had been unpleasant due to an assassination attempt. This time, coming showed her determination.

The convoy stopped at the city gate. Pingyang lifted the pearl curtain and stepped down. Xiao Ming and Fei Yue'er waited.

“Nephew and princess consort, no need to greet me at the gate. It's not my first time to Qingzhou,” Pingyang said kindly.

She wore a gentle, loving smile. This visit was different. Two years ago, Xiao Ming had been an insignificant vassal lord.

Now he was a crucial figure in the Great Yu Empire and close to Xiao Wenxuan.

Pingyang was smooth and worldly. She had been close to the King of Wei because of Xiao Wenxuan. Now, seeing the shift, she wanted to get closer to Xiao Ming.

But recalling past disputes, she feared Xiao Ming held grudges and didn't know how to improve their relationship.

Fei Yue'er's invitation helped, and Qingzhou's new products interested her. She also wanted to mend ties with Xiao Ming.

This time in Qingzhou, she felt she had come to the right place.

Compared to two years ago, Qingzhou was bustling. Merchants crowded the official road, rivaling Chang'an. Even more surprising were the clean concrete roads.

Perhaps an illusion, but stepping onto the smooth road, she suddenly felt Qingzhou was no longer a frontier city but a place nobler than Chang'an.

"Aunt, don't be so formal. No matter how many times you come, I will greet you personally," Xiao Ming smiled.

He had matured. He would not push away a valuable ally because of old grievances. In this circle, there were no eternal enemies or friends, only eternal interests.

Clearly, cooperating with Xiao Ming was now far more beneficial than with the King of Wei.

Xiao Ming's polite words made Pingyang smile. She took his hand and Fei Yue'er's and entered the city, saying, "Among all my nephews, you're the most considerate. Whatever new products Qingzhou launches, I will promote them for you."

"Thank you, Aunt," Xiao Ming said.

Fei Yue'er also said, "Thank you, Princess."

Pingyang squeezed Fei Yue'er's hand. "Why still call me Princess? You should call me Aunt."

Fei Yue'er was startled, then shyly said, "Aunt."

Pingyang nodded and asked about Fei Yue'er's underwear designs. The two happily talked.

Originally Xiao Ming walked beside them, but as Pingyang and Fei Yue'er got more excited, he gradually fell behind.

Pingyang was accompanied by thirty noblewomen from Chang'an, each dressed magnificently with long gowns trailing the ground.

Perhaps due to underwear, Xiao Ming mischievously wondered if these noblewomen also went without panties under their skirts.

Shaking his head to dismiss the wicked thought, Xiao Ming led the group to the Wei family's inn. He planned to lodge them there; his palace couldn't hold so many guests.

When the group arrived, the noblewomen, chatting cheerfully, suddenly gasped in surprise.

Pingyang looked at the inn and asked Xiao Ming, "Ming'er, are those glass windows?"

"Aunt, the Wei family inn now has glass windows and doors," Xiao Ming said. After ordering the establishment of a glass workshop, the first batch of glass windows had been installed here.

In no time, the inn's windows were all replaced with glass and curtains hung inside.

The Wei family inn had basically become an antique-style modern inn.

"Spendthrift! Using such expensive glass for windows," Pingyang said, feeling a sharp pang in her heart.

Chapter 442: Impressing Everyone

"Aunt, this is not wasteful. For me, Qingzhou has an abundance of glass and can use it for many things," Xiao Ming said with a gentle smile.

Once glass production techniques mature, output would greatly increase. Currently, the glass workshop was producing more glass than it could sell.

Xiao Ming was intentionally holding back stock to avoid sudden price drops. Once the market was saturated, he would lower prices and sell glass to more common folk, maximizing profits.

“An abundance?” Princess Pingyang was momentarily stunned, then sighed. She basically understood what Xiao Ming was doing—it was similar to her own business methods.

The entire Wei family inn was fitted with glass, instantly appearing noble. Changing the topic, Pingyang said, “Feng Deshui said this Wei family inn was very comfortable, even telling the emperor it was more comfortable than the palace. I’m curious if that’s true. I came to Qingzhou this time to see for myself.”

“Aunt, Minister Feng never lies. I just worry you won’t want to leave once you stay here,” Xiao Ming replied.

Pingyang rolled her eyes. “You really underestimate me. I’ve seen every kind of spectacle.”

With that, she and the noblewomen entered the Wei family inn.

Knowing Pingyang would come, the inn had cleared thirty rooms on the top floor for her party.

Seeing Pingyang enter, Xiao Ming and Fei Yue'er exchanged smiles.

Before, Fei Yue'er would never have believed in the inn's charm, but after living there with Xiao Ming, she was won over. Returning to normal lodgings felt disappointing.

Half an hour later...

"Ming'er, I plan to stay in Qingzhou a few more days. Also, recommend some decent residences—I'm considering buying one," Pingyang said brightly.

Meeting in person was better than hearsay; now she understood why Feng Deshui praised the inn so much.

Overall, the rooms were clean and comfortable—comfort not found in Chang'an.

New things in the room made her reluctant to leave. Drawing the curtains aside, she looked through the transparent glass and saw the lively scenes of the East Market.

This wondrous feeling was captivating.

“Aunt, are you planning to stay long-term?” Xiao Ming asked.

Pingyang nodded without hesitation. “Of course. I’m tired of dull Chang’an. Your Qingzhou is truly interesting.”

Xiao Ming laughed. His plan had succeeded. Though Fei Yue’er’s goal was to launch female products, Xiao Ming took the chance to get these noblewomen to invest in Qingzhou real estate.

He said, “Aunt, ordinary residences are dull. Why not let me build you a special home? I promise it will be even more comfortable than the Wei family inn—warm in winter, cool in summer.”

These noblewomen sought comfort, and Pingyang seriously asked, “Is that true? Will the furnishings be as good as the inn?”

“Absolutely,” Xiao Ming assured her. “But Aunt, as you see, everything in the inn is very expensive. So...”

“What? You afraid I don’t have silver? Humph! Build that home for me. I won’t be short a single tael,” Pingyang said.

Xiao Ming had been waiting for her to say that.

Qingzhou's development needed silver everywhere. Building twelve galleons and more than a thousand naval cannons nearly emptied his savings.

After returning from Dengzhou, Pang Yukun showed him the prefecture's accounts. When in Dengzhou, Xiao Ming had confidently promised new equipment for the Dengzhou army—now he was stunned.

Not to mention labor shortages, iron ore was insufficient, saltpeter too, and sulfur even scarcer. This year's massive shipbuilding plan nearly collapsed Qingzhou's finances.

Though he pursued military-first politics, the army now consumed eighty percent of the treasury's silver.

When Pang Yukun learned of new equipment plans, he exploded—nearly storming off in frustration.

For this reason, these days Pang Yukun spent time with Fei Yue'er researching women's intimate clothing. It was all to increase income.

Even the plan to build residences was to raise more funds. Xiao Ming had even introduced modern real estate economics.

Seeing Pingyang so straightforward, Xiao Ming smiled and said to the noblewomen, "If any of you have ideas, tell me. I will start construction simultaneously so next spring you can enjoy Qingzhou's beauty while living in comfortable homes."

Hearing this, many noblewomen were tempted. Unlike Pingyang, they couldn't decide immediately; they needed to consult their husbands.

Pingyang took the initiative. "You don't have to handle this yourself, Nephew. Aunt will help. I'll send you a list from Chang'an, alright?"

"Thank you, Aunt," Xiao Ming said happily.

Pingyang and the others were very pleased with the Wei family inn. Later, the inn's delicious food nearly shattered their usual composed images as they ate like cows chewing peonies.

Especially the fried potato fries—they became addicted.

After dining with Pingyang, Xiao Ming knew these noblewomen were truly impressed.

They entered the city at dusk. The inn's lanterns were lit, making the place as bright as day.

Looking at the night outside, Pingyang suddenly said, "The Wei family inn is incredibly comfortable, and the food exquisite, but it lacks some entertaining amusement."

"You came so far, how could I forget?" Xiao Ming said.

He clapped his hands, and immediately a troupe of performers entered, led by Ziwan.

"Aunt, this is Qingzhou's opera troupe. I recently had them rehearse 'The West Chamber,' which can entertain you now," Xiao Ming said.

Pingyang smiled brightly. "Ming'er, you really think of everything."

Chapter 443: Guidanc

In the center of the Wei family inn was a stage used for performances.

This time, the Chen family troupe was performing The Romance of the Western Chamber.

Since Xiao Ming took the Chen troupe under his wing, he had Xiao Wan arrange many dramas for them. These were not imitations of European plays but performed in the traditional Peking opera style.

Xiao Ming believed that Chinese culture was profound. Although this era lagged behind Europe in technology, there was no need to feel inferior culturally. He was confident that promoting traditional Chinese culture would have excellent results.

However, while promoting tradition, he also needed to reform its flaws and promote new ideas. Drama was a form of expressing ideas, transcending national or cultural differences.

As the troupe approached, Princess Pingyang and the noblewomen showed excited expressions.

Throughout history, the lives of the rich and powerful were quite similar. They enjoyed vast wealth, and converting wealth into life's pleasures was one of their joys. Showing off wealth, buying luxury goods, and competing were perpetual hot topics in noble circles.

Regardless of country or era, Xiao Ming grasped this consumer psychology of the wealthy and designed an experience program—from lodging at the Wei family inn to enjoying the drama.

After returning, the noblewomen's stories of Qingzhou would become popular topics among elites, and jealous rivals would flock to Qingzhou to keep up.

"Aunt, you must be tired of Chang'an dramas by now. I thought Qingzhou had a few exciting plays to relieve your boredom," Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Pingyang became even happier and lightly patted Fei Yue'er's hand. "Yue'er, see? My nephew truly cares. Now that you're with him, you won't suffer."

"True, Your Highness is extraordinary. Yue'er feels lucky," Fei Yue'er said softly to Pingyang, unsure if it was polite or sincere.

Pingyang glanced between Fei Yue'er and Xiao Ming. The couple had treated her well on this visit, easing her earlier worries.

The three chatted as the orchestra on stage began to play.

Chen Xier sang clearly, "Who dyed the frost-covered woods so beautifully? The blue clouds, yellow flowers, and the west wind blow strong. Tears of parting flow endlessly. Early or late separation, it makes one melancholy. The steed cannot be restrained; the long willow branches sway aimlessly..."

With the clear and stirring melody, the audience was captivated.

The Romance of the Western Chamber was a traditional Peking opera. Directing it required little effort since it was a classic. Xiao Ming chose this play intentionally.

For women, love has always been an enduring theme.

Because feudal rites restricted human relationships, women longed more for touching love stories. This play depicted Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying overcoming obstacles to be together.

As the performance began, Princess Pingyang and the noblewomen were absorbed in the story. Even Fei Yue'er watched intently, having never seen this play before.

Watching the crowd become enraptured, Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction and quietly accompanied Pingyang.

When Sun Feihu heard of Yingying's beauty and led troops to besiege Puji Temple to force marriage, Pingyang looked worried.

When Zhang Sheng sent a letter to summon his friend, General Du Que, to rescue them—but afterward, Lady Cui insisted on calling them brother and sister—Pingyang bit her lip angrily.

The play was long. After an hour, when Zhang Sheng became the top scholar and married Cui Yingying, the drama finally ended.

At this point, Pingyang could not help but wipe her tears. She said softly, "May all lovers in the world be united, but alas, things often do not go as hoped..."

Fei Yue'er's reaction was different. She smiled, happy at the happy ending.

Xiao Ming understood why Pingyang was saddened. Years ago, Xiao Wenxuan had arranged a disliked husband for her to ally with the Zhao family, which he knew.

The siblings even quarreled over this. In the end, Xiao Wenxuan sent the general Pingyang loved north to resist barbarians, but after a great battle, that general disappeared without a trace.

This play stirred Pingyang's memories, deeply moving her.

"What a superb play! Bravo!" Pingyang suddenly exclaimed.

At her words, two maidservants threw silver coins onto the stage.

Other noblewomen quickly followed suit, showering the stage with silver coins like rain.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming smiled softly and said, "Aunt, this troupe knows many plays, but it's late tonight, so probably only this one."

Pingyang felt moved. Life in Chang'an had been boring, with little fun. Now in Qingzhou, she had many expectations. She said, "In that case, I should get a residence in Qingzhou. Ming'er, make sure to handle that well for Aunt."

"Don't worry, Aunt. I won't disappoint you. Next year Qingzhou will have even more entertainment. You won't be bored," Xiao Ming teased.

For over two years, Xiao Ming had not changed the entertainment options in Great Yu. Instead, he focused on development. Now Qingzhou was at a turning point, and he needed to introduce activities to attract the wealthy.

Pingyang stood and stretched. She said, "It's late. You two should rest early. Tomorrow, we'll see the princess consort's handiwork."

"Then I won't disturb you," Xiao Ming bowed.

After seeing Pingyang upstairs, Xiao Ming and Fei Yue'er returned to the palace.

Back at the palace, Fei Yue'er eagerly summoned the singing girls. Tomorrow, she would showcase her designs, which made her a bit nervous.

Because it was so private, Xiao Ming wouldn't be able to enter the display room often and she would have to handle it alone.

After a restless night, Fei Yue'er went directly to the Wei family inn the next day.

Chapter 444: The Noblewomen's Imagination

At the Wei family inn,

After Princess Pingyang took up residence, the entire inn was staffed by maidservants. The former waiters and managers temporarily stepped aside.

After all, Princess Pingyang's status was noble, and having men around was inappropriate, especially since Fei Yue'er was about to display very private items.

"Princess Consort of Qi, what secret things are you going to show us?" someone asked.

Pingyang had just finished washing and looked relaxed, having slept until the sun reached the treetops—such was the comfort of the bed.

The noblewomen had gathered downstairs, just like Pingyang, all eyes fixed on Fei Yue'er, waiting for her to reveal her female products.

Fei Yue'er was a bit nervous but recalled Xiao Ming's words. She took a deep breath and said, "Aunt, what I'm going to show you today is called underwear. I'm sure everyone often wears bellybands and undergarments."

Fei Yue'er's words made many noblewomen blush. She had mentioned something very shameful; who normally spoke openly about intimate clothing?

"These things are essential for us women," Princess Pingyang said boldly, more frank than the others.

Partly it was Pingyang's nature, partly she wanted to support Fei Yue'er.

Fei Yue'er had invited her by letter, which definitely wasn't just her idea—Xiao Ming was surely behind it.

Thus, Pingyang felt she should support Fei Yue'er and keep the atmosphere pleasant. It was a kind gesture.

Gratefully looking at Pingyang, Fei Yue'er feared these noblewomen might resent her since this topic was quite embarrassing.

Pingyang's words calmed them. Recalling what they spoke last night, Fei Yue'er said loudly, "Today I'll show you a kind of clothing that makes women more comfortable, fits closely, and also makes us more attractive."

Afterward, she looked toward the stage and gently clapped her hands.

At her signal, thirty singing girls appeared on stage wearing underwear of different colors and styles.

At that moment, everyone, including Princess Pingyang, was stunned by the peculiar appearance of these singing girls.

"Heavens! What is this?" someone exclaimed.

“Hehe, those in front really look like steamed buns,” someone teased.

“This visit to Qingzhou really broadened my horizons. I didn’t expect the Princess Consort of Qi to be so different, actually bringing out such female handiwork.”

“...”

Princess Pingyang stared steadily at the girls modeling the intimate garments on stage. Suddenly she said, “Don’t you think these girls look beautiful in those clothes?”

The noblewomen were initially shocked by the novelty but upon closer look found the singing girls had a certain charm.

One noblewoman said, “Since the princess said so, I think the clothes are really good. They look quite alluring on these girls.”

“Pah! How can you say such vulgar things in front of the princess and the consort?” another noblewoman scolded, though she clearly agreed.

After all, their own clothes were more revealing than these.

Their words sparked laughter among the noblewomen, who pointed at the girls on stage, chatting and judging which clothes looked best.

Pingyang was used to such behavior. She said to Fei Yue'er, "Princess Consort of Qi, tell us why you made these close-fitting garments."

Fei Yue'er was prepared and expected these reactions. Now that only women remained, she spoke frankly, "Aunt, these garments the singing girls wear are called bras. Their main function is to prevent sagging."

"Sagging? What sagging?" Pingyang repeated, then realized and glared at Fei Yue'er. "Girl, everyone knows you're talented, but how do you know this actually prevents that?"

Fei Yue'er said seriously, "Aunt, this is not nonsense but based on facts."

She called a singing girl forward and took off her bra, pointing at her chest. "Your Highness, please look."

Pingyang was stunned. When the girl came down, she seemed well-endowed, but after the bra was removed, Pingyang laughed.

As Fei Yue'er said, the bra indeed made the girl's chest firm and perky.

"I didn't expect bras to have this effect," Pingyang laughed.

Fei Yue'er smiled slightly and explained what she learned from books: "Aunt, girls begin developing around thirteen or fourteen years old. At this time, it's easy for..."

Recalling the book's contents, Fei Yue'er spoke fluently. The noblewomen, who had been joking, now felt she was very convincing. She described the age and physical changes clearly.

They initially thought Fei Yue'er brought out these items just to make money. After listening, they realized she truly cared about women in Great Yu.

"Also, wearing this means we don't have to fear riding horses or falling down. Simply put, we can run and jump like men without being exposed," Fei Yue'er summarized. "During that time of the month, we can insert silk fabric inside, and the panties ensure nothing falls out, so no blood stains remain."

At that moment, all the noblewomen showed eager expressions. Fei Yue'er was right. They thought about it and agreed.

One noblewoman immediately said, "Princess Consort, can I try it on?"

"Of course," Fei Yue'er smiled. She felt she had persuaded them, even Princess Pingyang looked very interested.

Fei Yue'er picked up a new set of underwear and had the singing girls help the noblewoman put it on.

This noblewoman thought her figure was poor. After putting on the new clothes and then her original clothes, the others exclaimed, "Hey, how did yours get bigger?"

Everyone looked and indeed, the noblewoman's flat chest became perky with the bra on.

"I want to try too."

Seeing this, other noblewomen quickly asked to try as well.

Chapter 445: Great Success

The entire Wei family inn became lively and noisy.

The noblewomen completely shed their restraint, eagerly scrambling to the stage to try on various bras and panties.

At this moment, Fei Yue'er had a maid bring a large mirror to the stage.

With this mirror, the noblewomen could clearly see how the new garments looked on them.

Some noblewomen began to admire themselves in the mirror, turning around repeatedly, as the clothes better showcased their alluring figures.

Since arriving in Qingzhou, Fei Yue'er had been influenced by Xiao Ming. Seizing the moment, she said, "Sometimes, for men, the beauty of a glimpse—half-hidden—is even more appealing. These clothes obviously have that effect."

The noblewomen agreed wholeheartedly. In Chang'an, which noblewoman did not have multiple wives and concubines? Though they were principal wives, seeing their husbands dally with concubines daily often made them resentful.

Hearing Fei Yue'er's words, they began to scheme. Regardless of the garments' benefits, they wanted them to compete for favor.

One noblewoman asked, "Princess Consort, how much are these? I want ten sets."

"I want twenty. I must give some as gifts," said another.

"I'll make the little foxes at home envy me," another boasted.

The noblewomen joyfully chattered.

Princess Pingyang smiled at Fei Yue'er. "Princess Consort, your handiwork is popular. I like it very much too. Why don't you prepare some for me?"

"If Aunt wants, Yue'er will gladly prepare some within days," Fei Yue'er replied.

Promoting underwear was planned, and the results pleased Fei Yue'er. But her goal was not just to sell to these noblewomen.

She continued, "Aunt need not worry. Yue'er plans to open a shop in Chang'an selling these garments. Then you can buy them there."

"Really? That's wonderful," Pingyang smiled. She basically understood. "When you open the shop in Chang'an, I'll be there to support."

"Thank you, Aunt," Fei Yue'er said happily.

The noblewomen on stage continued comparing and trying the garments. Pingyang wanted to try too but refrained to keep her status, watching enviously.

She asked, "Yue'er, how much do these sell for a set?"

“Not expensive—ten taels of silver per set,” Fei Yue’er said.

“Ten taels?” Pingyang’s eyes flicked. Ten taels could buy a cotton jacket. Such new clothes were expensive. She asked, “These use so little fabric—does the price...”

As if expected, Fei Yue’er explained, “Aunt, the fabric is minimal, but these garments are supported by steel wire. Without that, these bras wouldn’t differ from ordinary cloth.”

“Steel wire?” Pingyang was surprised. “What is that?”

“I don’t know exactly. It’s made by Qingzhou’s steel workshop. Your Highness said it’s spring steel—a kind nowhere else in the Great Yu Empire.”

Pingyang picked up a bra and felt the stiff support inside, nodding, “I see.”

Successfully promoting the underwear, Fei Yue’er smiled knowingly. She had perfectly fulfilled Xiao Ming’s task.

At ten taels a set, just the noblewomen’s purchases earned her over five thousand taels of silver. And these noblewomen were only part of Chang’an’s wealthy circle.

Including noblewomen from other vassal territories, sales of these garments would bring Qingzhou considerable income. Thinking this, she grew even happier.

After accompanying Pingyang and the noblewomen trying various underwear styles, the noblewomen finally let Fei Yue'er leave. This visit to Qingzhou had truly been eye-opening.

Bidding farewell to Pingyang, Fei Yue'er eagerly returned to the palace.

Xiao Ming was writing a book when she arrived. Seeing her, he asked, "How did the underwear promotion go?"

"They didn't like it at all," Fei Yue'er said, pouting.

Xiao Ming looked at her. Though she looked aggrieved, her eyes sparkled with excitement. "You can't even lie properly. Humph. It must have been a success. I told you it would be."

"Hehe, nothing escapes Your Highness," Fei Yue'er said, leaning affectionately on Xiao Ming. "Princess Pingyang liked it very much, and so did the other noblewomen. They bought all the underwear I brought and I earned more than five thousand taels."

Her cheeks flushed—clearly the first time earning money gave her a sense of accomplishment.

“Good, good. No wonder you’re my princess consort,” Xiao Ming smiled warmly. As Zhen Fei said, Fei Yue’er was indeed his capable partner.

Remembering something, he asked, “Did Aunt ask about anything else?”

“Not much, only that the clothes are too expensive, so I explained Your Highness’s words to her,” Fei Yue’er replied.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Good. Now they understand that simply copying the style cannot make such intimate clothes.”

In the Great Yu Empire’s male-weave female-sew society, women usually wove and sewed their own clothes. These things were routine for them. So Xiao Ming had her spread the idea that making underwear required some difficulty.

And that was true. The underwear Fei Yue’er made used steel wire, but not spring steel—that was a deliberate exaggeration.

Even so, no other part of Great Yu could produce steel wire at Qingzhou’s quality.

To support underwear production, Xiao Ming assigned artisans to make steel wire. Since he lacked industrial tech, they used primitive methods—pulling molten steel through tiny molds, then stretching the steel further.

Though production was limited, the steel wire quality was barely sufficient for underwear.

With this, he was not worried others could copy his products.

Now that the underwear sales succeeded, Xiao Ming planned to generate profits quickly. After all, the finances were tight.

Chapter 446: Negotiation Bottom Line

The north wind blew snowflakes onto the smooth cement roads of Qingzhou city.

The gray ground was covered with a layer of shimmering white, which meant the year-end was drawing closer by another day.

Since experiencing the lingerie launched by Fei Yue'er, Princess Pingyang had been spending her time in Qingzhou. Only after half a month did she choose to return to Chang'an, since she had to celebrate the New Year there.

Before leaving, Princess Pingyang repeatedly urged Xiao Ming not to forget the construction of the princess's mansion.

Xiao Ming naturally promised wholeheartedly. Even modern countries rely on attracting wealthy residents to boost economic growth, so he wanted to make good use of this as well.

During these two weeks, Fei Yue'er stayed with Princess Pingyang. After becoming a princess consort, Fei Yue'er gradually took on the responsibilities fitting her position, especially handling diplomatic relations for the consort.

Xiao Ming was also busy. Qingzhou's finances were tight, so he had to seize any opportunity to increase government income.

He had Lu Luo rush the production of a large batch of lingerie, and sent Li Kaiyuan to take the lingerie to Chang'an.

While Princess Pingyang was enjoying herself in Qingzhou, she also agreed to fully support promoting this intimate clothing in Chang'an. As the fashion trendsetter there, once she wore it, this product would quickly become popular in the city.

This added another source of income for the government. Naturally, Pang Yukun was pleased. Moreover, the textile workshop recruited three hundred workers, helping three hundred homeless families find livelihoods. They made money and also boosted the local economy.

After seeing off Princess Pingyang, Xiao Ming prepared to spend a peaceful New Year in Qingzhou with Fei Yue'er. But unexpectedly, an uninvited guest arrived in Qingzhou.

This person was none other than Rhodes, the man Xiao Ming had met in Dengzhou city, who claimed to be the Dutch ambassador.

“Ambassador Rhodes greets Prince Qi,”

In the main hall, Rhodes bowed respectfully to Xiao Ming. After receiving orders from Count Claire, he had come back into the heartland of the Great Yu Empire.

In Dengzhou, he expressed his desire to meet Prince Qi. Yang Chengye sent word to Xiao Ming, and with Xiao Ming’s approval, Yang Chengye arranged for Rhodes to be sent to Qingzhou.

“No need for formalities, Ambassador Rhodes. Since you have come to Qingzhou, I assume you have changed your original stance. I also do not wish to resolve the Ryukyu issue through war, but sometimes when negotiations fail, we must take action.”

Rhodes’s gaze was deep. Since arriving in Qingzhou, he had been observing the city. Seeing Qingzhou’s clean cement roads, orderly underground pipes, and soldiers armed with flintlock guns standing at the city gates made him feel a sense of defeat.

He did not know what this cement paving was. Though the locals called it “cement,” it seemed Europe had no such thing.

“Respected Prince Qi, Count Claire also does not want to solve our conflicts through war. That is why he sent me here to Qingzhou to discuss again about Ryukyu and the shipping routes.”

Xiao Ming nodded. "Then how does your Count Claire plan to handle this matter?"

To him, if it could be peacefully regained, he did not want to start a war, as every battle cost a great deal.

"Count Claire is willing to give up the main island of Ryukyu, but he hopes Your Highness will allow us Dutch to keep Fort Zeelandia. This is our last dignity," Rhodes said with a bow.

"Fort Zeelandia?" Xiao Ming frowned. Fort Zeelandia was a city built on a small island off the east side of the Ryukyu main island. The Dutch port was located there.

At the same time, there was also a fortress called Menkse, facing Ryukyu across the sea. Wang Xuan had already informed him of this.

"That's right. We still have the fort called Menkse facing the Ryukyu main island. We are willing to hand over Menkse together with the Ryukyu main island to Your Highness."

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming fell silent. One cannot allow others to rest peacefully beside his bed. The Dutch maintaining armed forces in Fort Zeelandia was an unstable factor.

He said, "No. Fort Zeelandia must also be returned."

A flicker of anger showed in Rhodes's eyes, but after understanding the power of this Prince Qi, he chose to suppress it. He said in a deep voice, "Prince Qi, this is our final bottom line. If Your Highness leaves no dignity for us Dutch, then we can only meet on the battlefield."

Frowning, Xiao Ming said, "I haven't finished. All territory of Ryukyu belongs to me. This is not open for negotiation. But after you acknowledge that Ryukyu belongs to me, I can transform Fort Zeelandia into a trading port. Your Dutch merchants can continue business as before, with one condition: your warships and garrison must withdraw, replaced by my soldiers and fleet."

"Is this any different from returning Fort Zeelandia?" Rhodes's heart grew cold.

"Of course it is. At least your Dutch merchant ships can still travel to Ryukyu. Otherwise, you will lose all of this forever," Xiao Ming said bluntly. "Remember, you are the invader. You should feel lucky that you can still participate in East Asia trade."

Regarding Ryukyu, Xiao Ming did not want to discuss much with the Dutch. There was no need to be polite with invaders.

Rhodes was silent. As he had guessed before coming, they faced a very strong prince, which pushed them almost to the edge.

After a long time, he said, "Sorry, Prince Qi. I think I need to discuss one last time with Count Claire. After that, we will decide whether to finally accept Your Highness's terms."

“Of course, but your time is limited. I hope you can make the decision soon,” according to the plan, the fleet would sail south in March after the New Year.

Rhodes nodded. He asked, “May I ask, what exactly is this cement? And would Your Highness allow me to visit Qingzhou’s factories? Perhaps this will help us understand each other better and deepen cooperation in the future.”

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming smiled. The Dutch still wanted to see his true strength.

He said, “Cement is a fine building material, very common in Qingzhou. Since the ambassador is interested, I will take you on a tour.”

In reality, Europe’s first cement was produced only in 1796. According to the timeline, Europe truly did not have cement yet.

After speaking, Xiao Ming had horses prepared and led Rhodes onto Qingzhou’s streets.

A red-haired, blue-eyed foreigner suddenly appeared on the street, scaring the locals who fled in all directions. Some even shouted “monster,” which made Rhodes very upset.

Chapter 447: The Newcomen Steam Engine

The two walked along Qingzhou’s hard roads toward the workshop district. Along the way, Rhodes was stared at like an animal.

Leading Rhodes, they arrived at the workshop area, where craftsmen were busy building new workshops.

Next to the buildings under construction, there were large piles of cement, sand, and gravel. Xiao Ming brought Rhodes over, and the craftsmen immediately stopped working and respectfully stood aside. Xiao Ming picked up a handful of cement and said to Rhodes, "This is cement. Mixed with water, sand, and gravel, these materials combined harden in three or four days to become as solid as the roads you just saw."

Rhodes looked at the powdery substance, like flour, and seemed incredulous. He then watched several craftsmen stirring concrete. "Is this what makes the road so hard?"

"Yes. Don't underestimate it. Don't think only you Europeans have such a miraculous material." Saying that, Xiao Ming went to the mixing site, picked up a few hardened lumps, and returned to Rhodes. "Try this. These cement blocks haven't fully hardened yet. They aren't very strong now, but after a few days, even swords and knives won't easily cut through."

Rhodes took one and squeezed it with considerable effort, crushing it to powder, his mind filled with shock.

He had thought the Great Yu Empire was just a backward civilization, that even though this Prince Qi had flintlock guns and cannons, it was just copying Europe. But now, everything was wrong.

Here was something Europe did not even have. It was unbelievable.

The cement was just a small part. Xiao Ming knew Rhodes wanted to see more than just this everyday material, so he took Rhodes to the Qingzhou army.

Seeing Qingzhou's equipment and training, Rhodes became visibly unsettled. As they walked through the barracks, his body trembled. Lu Fei and the others seemed to train even harder, as if to intimidate Rhodes.

Later, Xiao Ming also took Rhodes to the machinery department. They briefly toured the military workshops and Qingzhou's military production base. After seeing all this, Rhodes looked like a defeated rooster.

"Ambassador Rhodes, what do you think of Qingzhou?" Xiao Ming asked with a smile after visiting a few places.

Rhodes forced a smile and said, "Your Highness's strength exceeded my expectations. I will report to Count Claire about the Ryukyu issue after returning."

Xiao Ming nodded. From Rhodes's expression, he knew Rhodes was shocked.

He had brought Rhodes to see these places to win without fighting. Now that the Dutch attitude had softened, scaring them a little more might allow Ryukyu to be taken back without bloodshed.

Seemingly affected, Rhodes had no plan to stay longer in Qingzhou. He kept a gloomy face and didn't reveal his thoughts.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming said, "Ambassador Rhodes, it's almost mealtime. Why not dine at the prince's mansion?"

"No, I think I must hurry back."

"Alright then," Xiao Ming said. He didn't really want to host this arrogant Dutchman anyway.

Rhodes declined the invitation and left that day under the guard of officials, heading to Dengzhou to return to Ryukyu.

After seeing Rhodes off, Xiao Ming turned to head back, when Liang Yubin rode up on horseback.

In front of Xiao Ming, Liang Yubin excitedly said, "Your Highness, Lin Wentao has built a steam pump!"

"A steam pump?" Xiao Ming was stunned. Could it be the Newcomen steam engine?

Thinking this, he immediately told Liang Yubin to go to Bowen Academy.

When he arrived at Bowen Academy, Liang Yubin directly led Xiao Ming to the physics lab.

The lab was packed with students, all focused on Lin Wentao's new invention.

"Not bad!"

The steam engine before Xiao Ming was just a simple model, not a full-size engine.

The steam engine had two parts: a conical boiler, which was the steam section, and another part connected by a lever, which was the pumping section. The lever's back-and-forth motion allowed water to be pumped up from a tank.

The success of the steam engine energized the students. Lin Wentao was full of tears. After the last explosion, he had finally completed the Newcomen steam engine.

Although this steam engine could only pump water and was not yet a true compound steam engine, it was still progress for Qingzhou and the physics academy.

"Wentao, you've done a great job!" Xiao Ming patted Du Zhiping's shoulder.

So far, this steam engine was the most difficult achievement, as it was a huge leap from nothing to such a complex device.

Lin Wentao had to solve both steam and lever mechanism problems. He said, "Tell me, what reward do you want?"

Lin Wentao said, "Your Highness, I don't want any reward. This Newcomen steam engine is just the most basic model. When I build a compound steam engine, please reward me then."

Xiao Ming nodded. He was pleased. Lin Wentao had changed from researching steam engines for a title to loving science itself. "Alright, I promise you."

Even though Lin Wentao refused a reward, Xiao Ming still gave him a thousand taels of silver. He wanted other students to see that with effort, anything was possible.

With the Newcomen steam engine model successfully made, Xiao Ming immediately assigned Lin Wentao to develop Newcomen steam pumps for the mines. Given the number of mines under his control, they would need over thirty pumps at once. This would allow the mines to dig deeper.

After all, many minerals were in deep mines. Once flooded, mining would stop. Now with the Newcomen steam engine, efficiency could be greatly improved.

However, this steam engine was still primitive, consuming a lot of coal and suitable only for mines.

The New Year was coming. Xiao Ming hadn't expected such a surprise from Bowen Academy.

He planned to make building Newcomen steam engines a priority and also have the machinery department assist Lin Wentao to build a real steam engine. After all, what Lin Wentao experimented with was a small model; full-scale production still required many craftsmen.

After praising Lin Wentao and others, Xiao Ming excitedly returned to the prince's mansion. Although the Newcomen steam engine was simple, later improvements on this engine would lead to Watt's steam engine.

Science isn't achieved overnight but through gradual exploration. Now that Lin Wentao had found the path to the steam engine, Xiao Ming believed it wouldn't be long before the true steam engine was developed.

Chapter 448: Year-End Account Reconciliation

After three days of continuous light snow, it suddenly turned into a heavy snowfall.

Overnight, Qingzhou was again covered in a layer of shimmering white. But unlike previous years, even in the cold and snow, the merchants refused to stop their work.

At the docks, merchant ships came and went nonstop. They unloaded coal, iron ore, cotton, grain, fur, saltpeter, sulfur, and other goods, while also loading Qingzhou-produced soap, glass, wine, cotton clothing, coal stoves, and other products to ship out.

Everyone hoped to make a big profit during the New Year period, since for merchants these were the busiest days.

“Your Highness, the close-fitting clothes designed by the princess consort are really popular in Chang’an. The eight thousand sets we shipped there sold out completely, earning eighty thousand taels of silver.”

Every New Year was the time to audit the fief’s accounts. For the past two days, he and Pang Yukun had been busy with this, reviewing the year’s lessons and planning for the next year.

To do this, he instructed Pang Yukun to have all six prefectural government offices and the newly added Youzhou office come to Qingzhou for account reconciliation.

Besides government offices, the army, merchants’ guild, mines, shipyards, and military workshops were no exceptions. To prevent officials from corruption, Xiao Ming maintained a strict policy on this.

From now on, account audits would be conducted every year.

After reviewing the merchants’ guild accounts verified by the government offices, Xiao Ming picked up a pen, signed his name, and stamped it with his seal. The merchants’ accounts were approved.

“Eighty thousand taels? Not bad. That’s just Chang’an. If sold elsewhere, that’s a considerable income,” Xiao Ming said.

“You’re absolutely right, Your Highness. The textile workshop’s cotton-padded jackets and clothing sell well in other parts of the Great Yu Empire. Our prices are low, and the quality is superior. This year alone we earned three hundred thousand taels. With the new style clothing, I estimate next year the textile workshop will earn at least two million taels annually,” Li Kaiyuan analyzed.

Xiao Ming nodded in agreement. The textile workshop was just established this year and spent most of its time producing uniforms for the Qingzhou army. Only in the past half year did it start external trade.

Taking advantage of the tax exemptions in Jinling, Jizhou, and Chang’an, his products had an absolute price advantage.

After signing, Xiao Ming handed the merchants’ accounts to Li Kaiyuan, who breathed a sigh of relief.

The year-end account audit was the most tense time in the entire fief. If errors appeared, there was no comfortable New Year. A few days ago, there was a problem with accounts sent from Yizhou. Yizhou’s governor Yan Changhao was ordered to come to Qingzhou immediately to reconcile accounts. If the accounts really had problems, Yan Changhao would be in trouble.

“The textile workshop is thriving, but other products can’t be ignored. This year, soap and white liquor sales were normal, bringing in three million taels through the city’s merchants’ guild. But glass sales dropped significantly.”

Recalling the numbers, Xiao Ming frowned.

Li Kaiyuan explained, “Your Highness, this is unavoidable. Soap and liquor are consumables; once used, they must be repurchased. But mirrors don’t need replacing for a long time. To expand sales, we must find new markets. May I boldly ask, Your Highness, when can we begin maritime trade?”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming frowned.

Rhodes had just left. He wasn’t sure if the Dutch would accept the negotiation terms, but after seeing Qingzhou’s strength, he believed the Dutch would reconsider.

Actually, from the start, he never intended to completely drive out the Dutch; otherwise, he wouldn’t have negotiated with them.

Negotiations were to avoid total conflict.

Compared to the terms in Dengzhou, Rhodes lowered Dutch demands after coming to Qingzhou. He already allowed the Dutch to keep their presence in Fort Zeelandia.

The only requirement was that the Dutch couldn’t keep such a strong military force in Fort Zeelandia. He would also not station many troops in Ryukyu in the future. If the Dutch left 100% of their troops in Fort Zeelandia, it would be a threat to him.

His minimum was for the Dutch to keep only necessary self-defense forces in Fort Zeelandia. Negotiations were like bargaining: first, state a price the other party can't accept, then slowly lower it. Getting a low price would be best.

"That depends on the end of negotiations," Xiao Ming said to Li Kaiyuan. "But it won't take long. At the latest, by April next year, we will control the Australian trade route."

Li Kaiyuan smiled. "Hehe, then I'll wait for good news." Saying that, he took his leave.

Turning to the next account, Xiao Ming reviewed the army's books, which listed annual grain consumption, ammunition use, and equipment purchases.

The huge expenses on each item made him a little alarmed. The army was truly a big money eater. He finally understood why countries constantly reduce their armies during peacetime—because the military drains the treasury.

After auditing accounts for half a month, Xiao Ming's third spring festival in this world finally arrived.

Unlike the previous two years, this time he had a lifelong wife and someone to celebrate with.

On New Year's Eve, Xiao Ming celebrated with Fei Yue'er and the mansion's servants, while officials celebrated at home with their families.

Last year, Xiao Ming had invited them out of loneliness, but they still wanted to reunite with their families for the New Year.

A sumptuous feast was prepared, followed by fireworks, theater, and other events. The mansion was lively and cheerful, and everyone wore smiles.

“Your Highness, the fireworks are truly beautiful.”

Watching the fireworks explode above the mansion, Fei Yue’er’s eyes sparkled with a dreamy light.

“Yes, just as beautiful as you,” Xiao Ming flirted, making Fei Yue’er smile sweetly.

They stood side by side under the brilliant fireworks and the deep night sky, beside a stunning beauty.

Drunk resting on the beauty’s lap, awake to hold the world’s power. In this moment, a surge of boldness rose in him. Looking at the sky, Xiao Ming’s eyes were like stars and seas.

If he lived another life, he would live it wildly without regrets.

Closing his eyes, Xiao Ming seemed to see specks of starlight—proof of the technology crystals existing in his mind. After two years of struggle, he had finally secured a foothold.

From now on, he would truly play the role of a creator of civilization and lead this civilization to glory.

Chapter 449: The Final Negotiation

Fort Zeelandia.

The cold north wind blew past. Count Claire tightened his windbreaker. Rhodes stood beside him, recounting his observations from Qingzhou.

“Overall, this Prince Qi’s fief is developing somewhat unevenly. They have strong military industry, but civilian industries lag far behind Europe. The people of Qingzhou are more enlightened than elsewhere but still can’t compare to Europe,” Rhodes recalled.

Claire frowned. “This Prince Qi really lives for war. He puts excessive funds into the military but neglects the nation’s foundation. We Dutch do the opposite—invest too much in social welfare and civilian life, ignoring the war threat. That’s why we’re in this predicament.”

“Looks like we could actually complement each other,” Rhodes said self-mockingly. “But do we really agree to withdraw troops from Fort Zeelandia? That leaves our merchant ships without protection.”

After hearing about the negotiations and Rhodes’s tour of Qingzhou, Claire’s expression relaxed. He said, “Rhodes, you’re better as a merchant than a politician. This Prince Qi is extraordinary. This is just his bargaining tactic. He’s testing our limits with minimum demands. If he truly left us no room, he wouldn’t waste time with you.”

Rhodes paused. As a Dutch trade company employee, his ambassador title was just for dealing with neighboring countries. He shrugged and said, "I don't see it that way. This Prince Qi is tough."

"The stronger side always is. But I think it's worth one last try. We're both nobles; maybe we have common ground." Claire smiled. "Let's go back to Dengzhou. This next talk will decide everything."

Rhodes sighed. "Count, why do we negotiate? Maybe war costs us nothing."

"No, you're wrong. We'd lose more." Claire's gaze was deep. Looking down at Sakai holding a matchlock, he said, "Japan's ambitions grow daily. The beast we raised will swallow us. Meanwhile, the British are expanding eastward. They're too strong for our fleet. We need an ally."

Rhodes nodded. "Then may God grant us luck this time."

After speaking, Rhodes left the governor's office and entered the city.

"Ambassador Rhodes, what now? Are we going to war? We're impatient," Sakai licked his lips, his sharp eyes flickering dangerously.

Rhodes said, "We have no plans to fight Prince Qi. He's very strong."

Sakai's eyes shifted. "So you're continuing negotiations? That's a foolish decision."

"Watch your words, Sakai. We pay you well, but not to interfere with our decisions." Rhodes's tone carried a stern warning.

Like Claire, they sensed Sakai was trying to meddle in Dutch decisions in East Asia. Behind him was the shadow of Nobunaga Yamada, who hoped the Dutch and Great Yu would go to war.

Perhaps Claire was right—they should be more wary of Japan's expansionist ambitions.

After two days of preparation, Claire led the fleet north again. Seven days later, they returned to Dengzhou's offshore waters.

Qingzhou.

After New Year, the government offices quickly resumed work. In fact, with the lack of entertainment, the Great Yu New Year celebrations lasted only three or four days. After the festivities, people stayed home, warming themselves by coal stoves and unwilling to go outside.

During the New Year, Xiao Ming actually had a rare break. He accompanied Fei Yue'er wandering Qingzhou city leisurely, until news arrived again from Dengzhou.

“Count Claire?” Xiao Ming mused on the noble title. Even in Europe, ‘count’ was rare. To the Dutch, Claire was a respected figure.

Over a month had passed since the last negotiation. Claire’s personal arrival in Dengzhou seemed to want to conclude the talks.

After some thought, Xiao Ming told the courier, “Go ahead and tell Count Claire that I will personally come to Dengzhou to meet him. Let him stay there a few days for now.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The courier nodded and left.

After the courier left, Fei Yue’er said, “Your Highness, are you going out again?”

“Yes. This negotiation is crucial. If successful, it will avoid a war.” Xiao Ming said.

Fei Yue’er understood the gravity and said dutifully, “In that case, I will have the servants prepare your things.”

“Don’t you want to go?” Xiao Ming smiled, surprised.

“Me too?” Fei Yue’er was a little surprised.

Xiao Ming nodded. "There may be many matters to handle in Dengzhou, and it will take some days. Why not come with me? That way you can see what the Dutch are like."

Fei Yue'er happily replied, "Yes, Your Highness. I will prepare immediately."

With that, she hurried back to the chamber to pack.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming smiled helplessly. Fei Yue'er was deeply influenced by Great Yu's traditional Confucian values, believing women should stay at home.

If he didn't mention it, she wouldn't offer herself. Now that he did, she was delighted.

After preparations, the next day Xiao Ming set off for Dengzhou under the protection of five thousand musketeers. Three days later, he returned to Dengzhou.

"Your Highness, Count Claire is already waiting at the government office," Yang Chengye reported as soon as they entered Dengzhou city.

This time, the Dutch sent no soldiers to the city gates. Only Rhodes and Claire, accompanied by four soldiers, entered the city.

Nodding, Xiao Ming said to Fei Yue'er, "Princess consort, rest at the temporary residence. I will meet the Dutch first."

"Yes, Your Highness." Fei Yue'er said softly in the sedan chair.

Following Yang Chengye, Xiao Ming returned to Dengzhou government office after two months. There he saw Rhodes and a slightly overweight but dignified European man.

"Respected Prince Qi, this is Count Claire, Governor of Dutch affairs in East Asia," Rhodes said respectfully.

As Xiao Ming sized up Claire, Claire also studied Xiao Ming. Then he said, "It's an honor to meet you, Prince Qi."

Chapter 450: The Argument

The refined manners and speech showed that Count Claire was a genuine noble.

Rhodes acted as translator between the two, conveying Claire's words to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming nodded slightly and gestured for Claire to sit down. He said, "Welcome to the Great Yu Empire, and to Dengzhou."

Claire sat and glanced over Xiao Ming. To his surprise, this Great Yu prince was so young. He began to understand why this Prince Qi was so tough.

In Claire's experience, young people usually lacked patience but were passionate and impulsive.

After a moment of silence, Claire spoke first. "Respected Prince Qi, I believe you understand why we came. Regarding Ryukyu, I hope for a negotiation outcome satisfactory to both sides. That is why I am here."

Between them was a long table. Rhodes and Claire sat opposite Xiao Ming and Yang Chengye, looking like a modern negotiation.

Xiao Ming said, "I also hope to resolve this through negotiation. No one wants to risk their soldiers' lives."

"If so, Prince Qi, please allow us to keep Fort Zeelandia. Beyond that, we agree to your other demands," Claire said seriously.

By saying this, Claire agreed to let Xiao Ming control the East Asian trade routes and restrict Dutch trade to Dengzhou and Ryukyu. But like Rhodes's last visit to Qingzhou, Claire refused to withdraw Dutch troops from Fort Zeelandia.

Xiao Ming tapped the table, his eyes scanning Claire's calm face, which showed no emotion. Claire's tone was firm.

“If you don’t withdraw the troops, you need to give me a reason.” Claire’s personal visit meant this negotiation would end soon.

Xiao Ming had to be cautious. Claire was much steadier than Rhodes—a tough opponent.

“First, without guaranteed security, we cannot be without troops for protection. The Ryukyu fleet not only protects the East Asian trade routes but also prevents privateers from raiding merchant ships. Your Highness, are you familiar with what privateers are?” Claire’s words probed, wanting to know if this Great Yu prince had deep knowledge.

“Privateers?” Xiao Ming frowned.

Privateers were civilian ships authorized by governments to be armed to attack enemy merchant ships—state-supported piracy.

From the 16th to 19th centuries, European powers used all means, including encouraging pirates to attack rival ships, to gain sea dominance.

Though nations publicly condemned pirates, secretly they employed them.

Armed civilian ships were born in this context.

“Do you mean the privateers from England and Spain?” Xiao Ming said lightly. “It is said England rose from a band of pirates; the whole country was one big pirate, with the queen as their leader.”

Claire’s expression changed slightly. He was surprised how closely the prince’s description matched the Dutch view of English and Spanish privateers.

Sighing, Claire said, “Yes. Those privateers from these two countries have seriously threatened our merchants. They’ve even appeared near Manila’s routes.”

“Alright, that’s one reason,” Xiao Ming said. “But how do you explain the soldiers in Fort Zeelandia? Privateers operate at sea; I doubt they’d attack Fort Zeelandia rashly.”

“These soldiers defend against Japan,” Claire’s eyes flickered. “I’m sorry, but the Dutch first started trade in Nagasaki. Some greedy merchants even sold matchlock technology to the Japanese. To us, Japan is now more dangerous than Great Yu. Their matchlock manufacturing is excellent, and with firearm troops, Japan has expansion ambitions. This is very dangerous for us.”

Mentioning Japan, Xiao Ming’s face darkened. “Thanks to you, Japan is planning invasions of Korea and Great Yu. This is your own fault. You know well islanders are no different from pirates. In Europe, they are England; here, Japan. They’re the same—always thinking about robbery and murder.”

“I must say I agree,” Claire suddenly smiled. “But unfortunately, Great Yu has a problem too. This problem stopped us from trading with you earlier.”

“Oh? What problem?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Arrogance,” Claire said bluntly.

Xiao Ming nodded. “I admit that’s a mistake. But there’s no point discussing this now. Let’s return to the negotiation.”

“Isn’t that enough reason to keep our troops?” Claire asked.

“Fine. But you may keep only two thousand soldiers and four warships,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Claire was surprised. The real Dutch garrison in Ryukyu was just two thousand troops. This prince was quite cunning, and Claire believed he had already learned all about Fort Zeelandia.

Of Ryukyu’s twelve warships, eight were originally from the Manila colony. To stop Prince Chu’s reckless moves, he had pulled eight more warships from Manila to Ryukyu.

“It seems Your Highness knows everything,” Claire said with a bitter smile.

Xiao Ming sneered. Europeans no longer cared about the lives of native troops and were happy to use them recklessly.

Because of this, he would only allow Claire to keep pure Dutch troops. This way, the Dutch would have to think carefully before risking war to reduce casualties.

“This is my bottom line. I will also send two thousand soldiers to Fort Zeelandia to protect you,” Xiao Ming said with a malicious smile, then looked at Claire, waiting for his response.

Claire furrowed his brow, his gaze wandering. He knew this prince was testing their sincerity.

After a long silence, he hesitated, “Alright, I accept these terms.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming relaxed. This was his last test. If the Dutch had ill intent, they would not accept his condition about the garrison.