

I. Dynasty 461

Chapter 461: Steam Engine Workshop

The cold metallic texture came from the body of the flintlock gun.

Raising the flintlock and aiming ahead, Xiao Ming said, "Maybe you can try another type of bullet. This kind of bullet is easier to load because it is round-shaped."

The flintlock gun had been in production and equipment for some time. Xiao Ming was already mentally prepared for the appearance of rifled guns. The first rifled gun in history was born in the early 15th century, and at that time, rifled guns were generally called muskets.

In the early 17th century, the Danish army in Europe was the first to equip themselves with muskets. However, rifled gun production was complex, and loading the bullet was very difficult. This made rifled guns rare in European armies, used only as a part of skirmisher units supporting flintlock troops during attacks.

Besides the loading difficulty, the low-explosive black powder limited the rifled gun's range. But compared to smoothbore guns, rifled guns using black powder increased their range from about 90 meters to roughly 200 meters, which was already quite good.

Right now, he could not change the black powder. But for Xiao Ming, he could change the bullets. He was very aware of the rifled gun's drawbacks and knew how to overcome them. What he told Song Changping was about what later became the Minié ball.

“Your Highness, are you talking about the cylindrical-headed bullet mentioned in the books?” Song Changping said, “Because round lead bullets are hard to load, I am currently trying to produce this kind of cylindrical-headed bullet.”

“You are already making these bullets? Good. Your progress is getting better and better,” Xiao Ming smiled.

The Minié ball was used in the Minié rifle, a front-loading rifled gun from the 19th century. This rifle was powerful, with a range of up to 900 meters and accurate within 500 meters.

Unfortunately, Song Changping’s rifled gun with the reproduced Minié bullets met the rifle’s standards, but the gunpowder could not keep up, since the black powder used at that time was still low explosive. The real Minié rifles used high-explosive gunpowder.

So according to his estimate, Song Changping’s rifled gun with Minié bullets could reach a range of about 300 meters, and maintain accuracy within 150 meters.

Also, because these bullets were slightly smaller than the rifle’s caliber, they solved the problem of front-loading bullets being too large to fit or blocking the barrel.

The slightly smaller Minié bullets could be easily pushed into the chamber by the ramrod, greatly increasing the rate of fire.

At the same time, the Minié ball had spiral grooves on the bullet body to match the rifling. The grooves were filled with animal oil, and the bullet base was made of soft cork.

When firing, the gas pressure from the gunpowder hit the cork, which instantly expanded the bullet.

Because the bullet expanded, it sealed the chamber during firing, preventing gas leakage that would reduce the bullet's kinetic energy, thus greatly increasing the bullet's range.

This was why Xiao Ming guessed that using Minié bullets, Song Changping's rifled gun could increase its range to 300 or even 400 meters.

"But unfortunately, producing these bullets is complicated, and soldiers cannot make bullets anytime on the battlefield," Song Changping said.

Xiao Ming said, "Every advantage has a drawback. Rifled guns take a long time to produce, so for now, produce a small batch for the troops. Also, Lin Wentao has invented the steam engine, so maybe soon this won't be a problem anymore. Now, you should focus on researching how to cut the rifling grooves and produce cylindrical bullets."

Song Changping nodded. This rifled gun was hand-rifled with a hook blade, which was very time-consuming and laborious. Although he did not know what the steam engine was exactly, it seemed to be something powerful.

Leaving the rifled gun behind, Song Changping shared some manufacturing tips with Xiao Ming, then returned to the military workshop.

He came here mainly to seek Xiao Ming's opinion about the rifled gun. Now with Xiao Ming's authority backing him, he could freely produce new-style rifled guns.

Watching Song Changping leave, Xiao Ming smiled as he examined the first rifled gun of the Great Yu Empire. The progress of his territory each day made him feel very comforted.

With these technological foundations, he felt his territory was becoming safer. But for him, the most important thing now was how to apply the steam engine to various industries in Qingzhou.

Thinking about this, he spent the whole night carefully planning. The next day, he went to the machinery department and called Lin Wentao and Zhang Liu.

“Your Highness,”

Lin Wentao was still excited from the steam engine’s appearance, while Zhang Liu was much calmer since the machinery department had worked closely with Xiao Ming early on and had experienced many ups and downs.

After thinking for a long time last night, Xiao Ming decided to have Lin Wentao and Zhang Liu establish the Qingzhou Steam Engine Workshop, dedicated to mass-producing steam engines. He said, “The reason I called you here is simple. From now on, you two will be responsible for producing steam engines. To do this, I will form a special workshop. This workshop will be managed by the two of you, Lin Wentao as workshop director, Zhang Liu as deputy director.”

“Steam Engine Workshop?” Lin Wentao was immediately excited. Previously, he was just a trainee, but now he was becoming the director of a workshop. This status was equal to Chen Qi and Lu Tong, so of course, he was happy.

Zhang Liu also smiled. For both of them, this was a promotion.

“What? Not happy?” Xiao Ming joked.

“Happy, happy. How could we not be?” Lin Wentao and Zhang Liu laughed together.

Xiao Ming nodded and handed a book to Zhang Liu. The book recorded how the steam engine could be combined with other machinery. Lin Wentao would be responsible for production and technical improvement, while Zhang Liu would handle the steam engine’s applications.

Zhang Liu flipped through the book and felt deeply shocked. In his eyes, Xiao Ming was practically an omniscient being.

After deciding the personnel, the remaining tasks were to select the location, funding, and craftsmen for the workshop.

To ensure the steam engine workshop could start production as soon as possible, Xiao Ming decisively transferred half of the craftsmen from the machinery department to Lin Wentao.

The craftsmen in the machinery department had always been Xiao Ming’s personal craftsmen. Now he gave up half of them, showing how determined he was to apply the steam engine.

The three agreed on this plan. Xiao Ming immediately assigned Chen Wenlong to select a factory building in the workshop area. At the same time, he asked Lin Wentao to send the first steam engine to the lathe workshop to combine with the boring machine for cutting cylinders.

The hardest part of steam engine production was cutting the cylinders. Now, with the first steam engine as a base, efficiency would naturally improve.

After setting up the steam engine workshop, Xiao Ming also gave Chen Wenlong the structural diagram of the Jenny spinning machine and told the remaining craftsmen to start production.

This year, he wanted Qingzhou's textile industry to dominate the Great Yu Empire.

Chapter 462: Traitorous Merchants

After the new year, time seemed to pass quickly.

It was already February when Xiao Ming returned from Dengzhou. Then he got busy with the steam engine workshop and the Jenny spinning machine. Before he knew it, it was already March.

Just as Xiao Ming was focusing all his energy on developing his territory, Wang Xuan brought some unpleasant news.

"Georyo is building ships on a large scale?" Xiao Ming carefully reviewed the intelligence Wang Xuan brought.

Now that Wang Xuan no longer needed Xiao Ming's supervision, the Secret Guard had extended its reach wherever possible. Every day they handled large amounts of intelligence. After analysis, the valuable information was presented to Xiao Ming.

"Yes. Since Your Highness left Dengzhou, the King of Georyo ordered warships to be built. The barbarians even provided a large number of slaves to Georyo. Also, Beishan reportedly appeared in Besha City," Wang Xuan reported.

"Beishan!" Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. Since the battle in Jizhou, Beishan had disappeared for some time. Wang Xuan said that after defeat, Beishan had cut off three fingers and was demoted from Shengdu. Unexpectedly, now he had appeared in Georyo's Besha City.

"Your Highness, I suspect this order may have come from Beishan himself," Wang Xuan added.

"Why do you say that?" Xiao Ming asked.

Wang Xuan said seriously, "I received some subtle intelligence indicating that the barbarians are likely planning a full-scale southward attack on the Great Yu Empire. Beishan must want to coordinate with the barbarians' southward forces and lead Korean soldiers to attack Dengzhou by sea, striking us from two sides."

"What subtle intelligence?" Xiao Ming's expression suddenly turned very serious.

Just as he had always felt uneasy, Great Yu's northern neighbor had never abandoned the desire to swallow Great Yu.

"Since Your Highness was assassinated in Chang'an last time, I have been monitoring the Shanxi merchants, a group of profit-driven traders. I found that lately they have been buying large amounts of

war materials—iron ore, coal, saltpeter—across Great Yu. These supplies are then sent through the Liang King's territory to the grasslands to trade with the barbarians."

"These Shanxi merchants have always been up to such dealings, so it's not surprising," Xiao Ming frowned.

Wang Xuan said, "Your Highness, but recently the amount of ore they purchase has suddenly increased more than tenfold. Also, some Shanxi merchants are mapping the terrain and military town distributions inside Great Yu, which is very suspicious."

"There's this too?" Xiao Ming's frown deepened. After pondering for a while, he said, "If what you say is true, the barbarians' ambitions are indeed great. These damned Shanxi merchants don't think of serving the country and are now aiding the enemy."

"Your Highness, that's only part of the problem. The biggest concern now is the Liang King," Wang Xuan sighed, "The Liang King has treated the Second Prince as his own son. Now that the Second Prince is demoted to Bazhou, nobody knows what the Liang King is thinking. Before, he tolerated Shanxi merchants trading with the barbarians for profit, but he still kept some rules with them. Now the Shanxi merchants are brazen, so..."

Xiao Ming nodded thoughtfully. "It's natural for the Liang King to feel resentment, but tolerating these traitorous merchants is truly a failure to distinguish right and wrong. Since he won't control them, I will handle these merchants myself. We cannot let them fatten the barbarians."

"Your Highness is right, but these merchants are all near the Liang King's territory. How can we deal with that?" Wang Xuan was puzzled. "Are you planning for the Secret Guard to assassinate these merchants? But these merchants are powerful local clans with many private troops. They won't be easy to deal with."

“No, there’s no need for me to act personally. Don’t forget Prince Yong has always relied on me. Let him handle these merchants—it suits him.”

Prince Yong had long wanted to get flintlock guns from Qingzhou. When in Chang’an, Prince Yong signed a trade agreement largely because of these guns. If he now made such a request, it would be no problem.

“But, Your Highness, according to the intelligence I got, Prince Yong has also benefited greatly from these Shanxi merchants. Because of this, the guild where these merchants gather is effectively a no-man’s land. If Prince Yong acts, it might...”

“Prince Yong is connected to these merchants too?” Xiao Ming frowned deeply.

Wang Xuan sighed and nodded.

“If that’s the case, I must invite Prince Yong to Qingzhou for a talk about this matter,” Xiao Ming said sternly.

After discussing more domestic news with Xiao Ming, Wang Xuan turned to leave.

After Wang Xuan left, Xiao Ming personally wrote a letter and sent a messenger with it to Prince Yong.

The journey from Jizhou to Qingzhou was short, about three or four days. Xiao Ming used the excuse of having Prince Yong come to receive the first batch of flintlock guns in Qingzhou and discuss things.

After handling this, Xiao Ming issued an order to the shipyard in Dengzhou to speed up warship construction, and told Yue Yun to continue recruiting and training naval soldiers.

Since Georyo was building ships, he would make sure Beishan would not get his way. When the next batch of warships was launched, he would lead his troops to Besha City and completely destroy Georyo's navy. He wanted to see which was faster—his explosions or Georyo's shipbuilding.

As for the barbarians possibly launching a large-scale southward attack, he had to prepare in advance. But now he was mentally ready for this strong northern neighbor and would not panic over their invasion.

He understood only one could rule this land: Great Yu or the barbarians. War between them was inevitable, just a matter of time.

After the battle at Cangzhou, and Beishan's southward push into Jizhou, the myth of barbarian invincibility had been broken. Even if the barbarians came again, it was just soldiers coming and defenses responding.

Shaking his head, he believed development was the hard truth. As long as his strength was strong enough, what could the barbarians do if they came south? And with Shanhai pass in his hands, he could take the opportunity to strike the barbarians from behind, keeping them wary.

Thinking this, he sent for Niu Ben and told him about the news.

“The barbarians stirring?” Niu Ben was calm and said, “Your Highness, the Liang King is really digging his own grave. Now that Shanhai pass is in our hands, if the barbarians come south, they can only go through the territories of the Liang King and Zhao King. In the end, it’s the Liang King who will suffer.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “The Crown Prince’s position is secure, and the Zhao King’s territory is probably stable. The Liang King is really worrisome. If the barbarians break through the Liang King’s lands, Chang’an will be directly exposed to their iron hooves.”

“So, Your Highness need not worry too much. Since Wang Xuan learned of this, the Emperor must be aware too. All we need to do is hold Shanhai pass, so the Imperial Guards don’t get attacked from both sides. And don’t underestimate the Emperor. After all, he rose to his position through military achievements.”

Chapter 463: Proxy War

“Commander Niu’s words make sense. Maybe I’m overthinking things,” Xiao Ming suddenly realized that he had been managing too many things lately. This was a bad habit from the previous two wars — he always felt every barbarian attack was directly related to him.

In fact, the worst hit by this southern push of the barbarians were the Liang King and Zhao King. Just like how Zhao and Liang Kings once watched the tiger fight from the mountain, Xiao Ming now seemed to be in the position they once held.

Niu Ben continued, “Although Your Highness is a prince of the Great Yu Empire, you are also the ruler of your own territory. You have to weigh the pros and cons. Back when we fought with blood and sweat, everyone was just watching and laughing. The soldiers were unhappy about that. To them, their loyalty lies only with Your Highness. If they had to die now for the Liang King or Zhao King, they wouldn’t be willing.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming sighed — this was the reality of Great Yu now.

In fact, the common people of Great Yu had no real sense of country or nation. To them, clans and regional kings were the only objects of loyalty. Now that there were no clans in his territory, their loyalty was only to him.

Niu Ben reminded him simply to say that soldiers need a reason to fight; otherwise, their morale would be low.

“I understand,” Xiao Ming said. He now decided to focus on the essentials and not worry too much. The emperor wasn’t anxious, nor was Xiao Wenxuan, so why should he worry?

While the two talked, a servant suddenly announced outside the main hall, “Your Highness, a general named Luo Hong claims to seek an audience.”

“Luo Hong? Isn’t he Luo Xin’s elder brother?” Xiao Ming was surprised.

Niu Ben looked puzzled too. “Why would Luo Hong come to Qingzhou? There must be a reason.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “Then let him in.”

The servant left, and soon Luo Hong appeared in full armor in the hall.

“General Luo Hong pays respects to Your Highness and Commander Niu Ben,” Luo Hong bowed respectfully upon seeing Xiao Ming and Niu Ben.

Xiao Ming said, “No need for formalities, General Luo. Please sit. I’m close with your father, so there’s no need for such ceremony.”

“Your Highness, if I came to Qingzhou just to visit, I wouldn’t be so formal. But this time, I come under imperial orders.”

“Oh? The Emperor sent you here?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Exactly.” Luo Hong nodded, then took a letter from his chest and handed it to Xiao Ming. “Your Highness, please read.”

Xiao Ming took the letter and read. Xiao Wenxuan mentioned recent unusual signs on the grasslands: first, the barbarians tightened control over horse sales; second, the trade of iron ore and saltpeter with the barbarians increased at the border markets; third, the barbarian tribes roaming the grasslands sent flag leaders to Shengdu.

Based on these odd signs, Xiao Wenxuan speculated the barbarians were preparing to sharpen their horses and weapons for another raid to subjugate the Great Yu Empire.

But the letter showed no old worry — only ambition. It also mentioned buying 500 cannons and 15,000 matchlock guns from Qingzhou, all entrusted to Luo Hong. Now Luo Hong was commander of the

firearm battalion. Xiao Wenxuan instructed Xiao Ming to help train Luo Hong so he could become a firearms commander like Luo Xin.

“Five hundred cannons, fifteen thousand matchlock — that’s big business,” Xiao Ming grinned.

Luo Hong seemed to already know the letter’s content and said to Niu Ben, “Commander Niu, I’ll be relying on you from now on.”

Niu Ben was puzzled and glanced at Xiao Ming.

Smiling helplessly, Xiao Ming gave the letter to Niu Ben. After reading it, Niu Ben understood — Xiao Wenxuan was quite cunning. Not only buying firearms, but also having Xiao Ming help train the firearms commanders.

Besides Luo Hong, thirty other firearms commanders arrived in Qingzhou.

Xiao Wenxuan’s reason for sending Luo Hong was clear: Luo Hong had fought alongside the Qingzhou army and was familiar with them. Also, Luo Xin was already in Qingzhou, strengthening ties.

“Since this is the Emperor’s order, I must obey. Commander Niu, this matter is yours,” Xiao Ming said, winking at Niu Ben.

Niu Ben understood and said, “Yes, Your Highness.”

After that, Luo Hong said, “Your Highness, the barbarians’ movements have worried both the Liang King and Zhao King. I heard they sent officials to Qingzhou to buy firearms to resist the barbarians. Looks like Your Highness will make a fortune again.”

“Is that so? I haven’t heard, but if it’s true, I’m glad,” Xiao Ming smiled.

They chatted for a while, then Niu Ben took Luo Hong away.

After they left, Xiao Ming’s brow furrowed. Xiao Wenxuan’s moves suddenly made things clear to him. As Niu Ben said, he didn’t need to fight personally. Instead, he would profit by supplying arms for the court, the Liang King, and the Zhao King, letting them fight for him.

This way, he could stay safe in the rear and make huge money selling war supplies, while the court and the kings only had to pay silver.

Understanding this, Xiao Ming smiled softly. Not only could he greatly weaken the barbarians’ forces, but also make money — why not? Just as Luo Hong said, only four days later, officials sent by the Zhao King and Liang King appeared in Qingzhou, separately asking Xiao Ming to sell them cannons and matchlock.

This time, the Zhao King did not send Zhao Yuanliang, likely because of their conflict. Instead, he sent a stranger.

The Liang King also sent a trusted official.

The Zhao King requested to buy 600 cannons and 7,000 matchlock guns; the Liang King asked for 400 cannons and 6,000 matchlock.

Adding the court's orders, the military workshop suddenly had orders for 1,500 cannons and 28,000 matchlock guns.

"Your Highness, the territory's finances have suddenly improved," Pang Yukun happily said upon hearing this.

The huge arms order brought Qingzhou enormous wealth. Previously restricted by funds, Xiao Ming suddenly had a surplus.

With this money, Qingzhou's industrialization could proceed steadily. Xiao Ming had to admit, selling arms was profitable indeed.

Chapter 464: Government Reform

The atmosphere in the Qingzhou government office was now somewhat relaxed and cheerful.

Three consecutive military orders had finally eased the financial strain of the territory, much to the relief of the administrative officials led by Pang Yukun.

One thousand five hundred cannons and twenty-eight thousand flintlock guns—these arms orders would bring in more than ten million taels of silver in supplies.

“Don’t celebrate too early,” Xiao Ming reminded them. “These supplies haven’t arrived in our hands yet. You need to coordinate with the court, Zhao King, and Liang King to properly handle the transfer of materials.”

Just like the previous deal with King Chu, in these trades silver, gold, and copper were only part of the payment. Most of the money was offset with materials.

In Great Yu, Zhao King had the most warhorses. After discussion, he contributed 100,000 taels of gold, 1 million taels of silver, 120,000 jin of brass, 92,000 jin of iron, 1 million shi of wheat, 5,000 jin of silk, 50,000 bolts of cloth, 300,000 strings of currency notes, and 20,000 warhorses.

Liang King’s territory was rich in open-pit coal mines, so he offered 50,000 taels of gold, 900,000 taels of silver, 62,000 jin of brass, 108,000 jin of iron, 1.2 million shi of wheat, 1 million jin of coal, and 600,000 strings of currency notes.

Compared to Zhao and Liang Kings, the court’s materials were the most diverse, including 200,000 jin of saltpeter and 160,000 jin of sulfur.

Though the quantities sounded huge, when converted, they were not so large. For example, Liang King’s 1 million jin of coal was only 500 tons; his 62,000 jin of brass was about 31 tons.

One cast-iron cannon alone weighed at least 500 jin; heavy siege cannons weighed over a thousand jin.

“Yes, Your Highness, I will have the Qingzhou treasuries prepare to receive these materials,” Pang Yukun said.

Compared to silver, Pang Yukun preferred tangible goods like food, iron, and copper, which were real hard currency during wartime. Having silver didn't guarantee purchasing power in war.

Also, even if paid in silver, they still had to exchange it with merchants for these goods. Bartering was more convenient and quicker, but the quality of materials had to be strictly controlled.

Xiao Ming nodded and continued, "Our arms trade will only grow. The Qingzhou treasury will likely be insufficient, and the old way of piling everything together needs to change. We need specialized warehouses for different materials."

Before, Pang Yukun hadn't thought much about this. But as trade increased daily, the government warehouse was indeed getting full. He said, "Your Highness is right. Speaking of which, I recently read some of Your Highness's governance books from Bowen Academy. They were quite insightful. I think it's time to reform the government affairs of our territory. With growing tasks, governance should be refined and modeled after the court's official system."

"Official system?" Xiao Ming smiled playfully. It seemed Pang Yukun had really learned some advanced governance ideas from Bowen Academy.

Pang Yukun's usually expressionless face showed slight embarrassment. Though he hadn't cared much about those books before, after reading them he found many useful ideas and reviewed Xiao Ming's governance books from Bowen Academy again.

“Yes, Your Highness. I believe we should reform the government office so that the prefectures and counties under our territory can implement your policies from top to bottom while handling various local affairs,” Pang Yukun said firmly.

“Hm, you’re right. I’ve been busy with Dengzhou affairs lately and neglected this. Since that’s the case, put it on the agenda,” Xiao Ming said.

Overall, his territory was a vassal state, and as such it needed a complete official system. Only then could he manage it effectively.

Also, establishing a full official system would allow him to take control of newly acquired lands at any time, like the Ryukyu Islands now.

In the future, Xiao Ming would have more colonies, so the ability to establish government offices quickly in unfamiliar places would be crucial. A mature official system was essential.

Because it was not just for managing the current territory but to prepare and reserve officials for future needs.

With that settled, Pang Yukun ordered the chief officers of all prefectures and counties to come to Qingzhou government office for a meeting. Meanwhile, he and Xiao Ming spent several days drafting the structure and responsibilities of the new institutions.

Five days later, all the chief officers arrived in Qingzhou for the meeting.

At Qingzhou government office, Xiao Ming sat at the main seat, with officials arranged below him like a court session.

Pang Yukun, as the head official, stood at the front, followed by the prefects of Qingzhou (Zhan Xingchang), Dengzhou (Yang Chengye), Cangzhou (Chang Yuchun), Yizhou (Yan Changhao), Yunzhou (Kong Yong'an), Laizhou (Wei Changming), and Youzhou (Han Jin).

Below the prefects were their respective county magistrates—over a hundred officials in total.

Some officials were appointed by Pang Yukun, some promoted locally, and others assigned from Bowen Academy.

Looking at the gathered officials, Xiao Ming smiled faintly. At this moment, he somewhat understood Xiao Wenxuan's obsession with imperial power.

Imagine so many officials standing before you. Anyone would feel a bit like ruling the world.

"Everyone has come to discuss government reform. You must have heard about it. Our territory's affairs are increasing and changing rapidly. Each prefecture and county office must prepare to adapt for future development. This meeting is also to clarify the official system so that in the future, everyone knows who handles which affairs, preventing shirking responsibility."

Seeing everyone present, Xiao Ming spoke loudly.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the officials bowed immediately.

Xiao Ming continued, “In that case, I hereby inform you of the governance and official system of our territory. From today, I appoint Pang Yukun as the Chief Minister of the Vassal State Cabinet, which will be established immediately. The cabinet will have nine ministers, including the Chief Minister, responsible for reviewing prefecture and county affairs and discussing matters with me. Under the cabinet, six departments will be set up, with responsibilities like the six ministries of the court. Additionally, a Supervisory Court will be established independent of the six departments, overseeing judicial and criminal matters and supervising officials...”

Recalling the official system design, Xiao Ming explained his ideas one by one. From now on, his vassal state would escape chaotic governance and have a thorough management system like a small court.

Chapter 465: Shortage of Officials

“...We will establish the Department of Foreign Affairs, which will handle relations between the vassal state and countries outside the Great Yu Empire. Additionally, each prefecture government will separate the police force, and each county will set up a Guard Office responsible for cooperating with the Supervisory Court in enforcing laws, arresting criminals, and handling civil disputes.”

As Xiao Ming spoke, Pang Yukun handed out printed booklets detailing the vassal state’s official and administrative system to the officials present.

Other vassal states had their own official systems, but Qingzhou and the other six prefectures had never had such a well-organized system due to wars and a shortage of personnel.

Although Xiao Ming was now formally establishing his own management system, it was still very different from the official system of the Great Yu Empire.

Many officials listening were confused, so when they received the booklet, they carefully studied it. Comparing it to what Xiao Ming said, they finally grasped the basics of the new administrative system.

Overall, from now on the officials' responsibilities would be more specialized and fewer in number, which was good news for them.

But the downside was that their powers would be divided; they could no longer hold all power in their hands.

After half an hour of explanation, Xiao Ming finally finished clarifying the new administrative and official system. Then he looked at the officials and asked, "Do you have any questions?"

Zhan Xingchang asked, "Your Highness, since there are nine ministers in the cabinet, who are the other eight besides Chief Minister Pang?"

Hearing this, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun exchanged a smile. Pang Yukun replied, "The other eight haven't been selected yet. Your Highness is still considering candidates, and you all will have a chance."

At this, the officials stirred and whispered among themselves.

Yang Chengye asked, "Your Highness, now that there are six departments, what role does the cabinet have?"

Xiao Ming answered loudly, “The six departments’ affairs must first be reviewed by the cabinet. A decision can only be issued if the cabinet ministers reach consensus and then submit it to me for approval. You can say the cabinet reports directly to me.”

The establishment of the cabinet was not a sudden idea by Xiao Ming, but because the Great Yu Empire’s governance system was outdated and no longer fit for today’s development.

That was why he introduced the cabinet system to his territory. In his view, the Ming dynasty’s cabinet was very close to constitutional monarchy, but unlike a constitutional monarchy, the cabinet system preserved Xiao Ming’s absolute power.

Also, coming from the modern world, Xiao Ming would never favor eunuchs or let them hold power, nor would he panic in governance. So the cabinet system suited his rule over the vassal state and would prevent powerful ministers from dominating.

Since the cabinet had nine ministers, even if Xiao Ming ignored affairs, two-thirds of them still needed to agree before orders could be implemented. Although Pang Yukun was Chief Minister, his power was not the greatest; he only oversaw cabinet operations.

Yang Chengye nodded. Now he understood—it meant Pang Yukun’s previous powers were distributed among nine people.

Other officials had their own thoughts. Would this mean they would become a third tier of officials? After all, beneath the cabinet were the six departments, and beneath them were these officials.

Chang Yuchun said, “But Your Highness, with so many new posts, the vassal state doesn’t have enough officials to fill them.”

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun had already considered this. Xiao Ming said, “I’ve discussed this with Chief Minister Pang. The Bowen Academy has been training officials for a long time. Now it’s time for these students to pass exams and enter officialdom. Of course, you all can take the exam. Since you have administrative experience, I will consider you specially.”

Upon hearing this, the officials became excited. Xiao Ming’s words meant they too had a chance to enter the cabinet and the six departments—an opportunity of a lifetime.

Zhan Xingchang and six other prefects became ambitious. Already in high positions, with Xiao Ming reestablishing an administrative system, naturally they wanted to achieve more.

Moreover, as Xiao Ming said, they had administrative experience, making them suitable candidates for leading roles in the cabinet and six departments.

They certainly didn’t want to lose to the Bowen Academy students.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” the officials said excitedly. They eagerly awaited the exam, as they were all good at tests and already had Xiao Ming’s governance books, even if they weren’t from Bowen Academy.

Besides the cabinet and six departments, the biggest change in this reform was the Supervisory Court.

This marked the start of judicial independence. From now on, officials in the territory—from ministers to commoners—would be supervised by the Supervisory Court and required to follow rule of law.

Like the cabinet, this institution was still in its early stages without concrete organization or staff, which Xiao Ming would need to fill.

The meeting started at noon and lasted into the afternoon. Some institutions had no staff yet and would wait until after exams. Others could be immediately separated out, like the Guard Office planned by Xiao Ming.

Now the Guard Office would be spun off from the government office and unified under the Guard Department, while county magistrates would focus more on civil affairs.

Because this reform was major—almost overturning the old system—Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun answered officials' questions carefully.

That night, Xiao Ming held a banquet for the officials. But none were in the mood to enjoy the meal; they all thought about how the reform would affect them.

However, this meeting only outlined the reform. The detailed measures would be implemented step by step. Xiao Ming was preparing the officials psychologically.

After the banquet ended, officials from various prefectures and counties expressed thanks and left. They would carefully consider the reform.

“Your Highness, what’s going on? So many officials gathered in Qingzhou,” Fei Yue’er came out of the bedroom after they left.

After finishing the day’s tasks, Xiao Ming relaxed and told Fei Yue’er about the government reform.

“Cabinet, Supervisory Court, Guard Department—Your Highness’s reforms are truly innovative,” Fei Yue’er said with a smile. “But that means your territory will need a large number of officials.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “Yes, and I’m troubled by that now. Suddenly there are so many official vacancies—it’s going to be a headache.”

As he spoke, Xiao Ming suddenly thought of something. He said to Fei Yue’er, “The Fei family is a scholarly lineage, producing three generations of high officials. Maybe they can help me solve this urgent problem.”

Chapter 466: Problems at the Medical Academy

The evening breeze was gentle, and in March, the weather was gradually warming up. Xiao Ming and Fei Yue’er had both taken off their thick winter jackets.

The spring flowers in the royal residence had already bloomed, and the willow trees near the pond were sprouting tender green shoots.

“Your Highness, this matter of administrative reform is far too important. I don’t dare to comment on it lightly,” Fei Yue’er suddenly said nervously.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming paused for a moment and asked, "Do you not want the Fei family to be involved in Qingzhou's government affairs?"

"Exactly. I don't want my family involved in politics. Once someone from the Fei family enters Qingzhou's officialdom, I won't be able to stay uninvolved. Even if I remain silent, people will still see them as the Princess Consort's relatives," Fei Yue'er replied with a frown.

Xiao Ming looked steadily at her. He had to admit that Fei Yue'er was a very intelligent woman. In the Great Yu Empire, most women would be eager to push their family into politics, but Fei Yue'er was doing the opposite.

He smiled gently and said, "You don't need to be nervous, Princess Consort. I won't reject someone just because they're family. Besides, the Fei family has many accomplished students and former officials all over the country. Even if they're not direct family, maybe some of them can recommend capable individuals."

Hearing this, Fei Yue'er relaxed a little. She said, "If that's how Your Highness sees it, then my father could recommend some talented officials who haven't had the chance to shine."

"Oh? In that case, why don't you write him a letter right now, and ask Grand Secretary Fei to suggest a few names?" Xiao Ming said.

Fei Yue'er hesitated for a moment, then nodded and turned back toward the sleeping quarters.

Xiao Ming shook his head. He wasn't doing this because he wanted to rely on the Fei family, but because he needed to diversify the officials in the government and avoid forming political factions.

During a recent council meeting, he noticed a growing divide between officials recommended by Pang Yukun and those from Qingzhou.

At the banquet, Chang Yuchun and Zhan Xingchang were clearly one group, while Yang Chengye and Kong Yong'an were another. This emerging rift had caught Xiao Ming's attention.

After studying history using the technology crystal, he realized that even under wise rulers, officials often clashed with each other. The bureaucracy had its own unwritten rules and darkness.

Some officials might remain clean despite all this, but most would eventually turn into slick veterans of the system.

Xiao Ming trusted Pang Yukun, but there were some things even Pang couldn't control. As the saying goes: it's easier to fight a tiger than to deal with flies. So involving the Fei family to balance things out seemed like a good move.

If he could create a system where officials monitored each other, it would help keep the government honest.

Once he settled the plan for the administrative reform, the civil service exams were officially announced.

The news quickly spread across Bowen Academy. The Department of Public Administration, always the largest, instantly became abuzz with excitement. The students were all fired up, waiting eagerly for the examination day.

“It’s been two years. We’ve been studying hard at Bowen Academy for two whole years. Now, the day has finally come!” a student shouted to the sky.

“Thank you, Your Highness! Thank you, Chief Secretary Pang! We finally have the chance to use what we’ve learned to serve the people!”

“I never imagined that law students like us would get this chance too. His Highness even set up the Supervisory Court. That was unexpected.”

“ ... ”

After the exam dates were announced, the students from the Department of Public Administration were buzzing like bees. Many never let go of their books and were busy preparing.

While they were discussing the exam, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun arrived at Bowen Academy.

This time, Xiao Ming had decided to hold the exam right there at the academy.

“Your Highness, look at the students. They must be thrilled right now. We’ve trained them for years, and now it’s finally time for them to show what they can do,” Pang Yukun said with a smile.

Watching the students bobbing their heads as they read their books, Xiao Ming smiled too. “This exam is not just for picking officials. It’s also a test of how much they’ve actually learned. As for those who’ve been slacking off, they won’t be overlooked either. I don’t keep freeloaders around.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “You’re absolutely right. With such great benefits at Bowen Academy, if they don’t study seriously, there’s no excuse.”

He paused, then added, “But Your Highness, the public schools in each province are almost ready too. Should we start selecting some students to go teach in those schools?”

In general, the literacy rate in Xiao Ming’s territory was still very low. Most of the people couldn’t read at all, and that would be a serious problem for future development.

Only through widespread education and public examinations could they stop new aristocratic families from forming. Back in the day, Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty weakened the old aristocratic clans by using the imperial exam system. Xiao Ming planned to take that even further. But his version wouldn’t test boring memorized knowledge—it would be a competitive knowledge-based recruitment process.

As the two men walked through the academy, they drew the attention of the students. Some started reading out loud in hopes of being noticed. Although their eyes were on the books, they were sneaking glances at Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun.

“Heh, those public administration students are finally proud of themselves. Now they’ve got a real shot at joining the government.”

“Yeah. Before, all they did was read books and badmouth the chemistry and physics departments.”

“Ugh, when will it be our turn in the medical academy?”

“Physician Sun only takes care of his own disciples. He just teaches us the most basic stuff. Proud? In your dreams.”

“ ... ”

While Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun were touring the academy, they overheard some students whispering in a corner.

Pang Yukun said, “The medical academy is still under Physician Sun, right? They’ve been awfully quiet lately. They’ve definitely fallen behind the others.”

“You’re right,” Xiao Ming replied, clearly displeased. “I originally thought Physician Sun was focused on studying medicine. But now it seems his thinking is outdated. He hasn’t passed down real medical knowledge to the students. No wonder they’ve lost motivation.”

“All those physicians have bad tempers. They’re arrogant and full of themselves. I think it’s time we give Physician Sun a wake-up call,” Pang Yukun said.

“Not only that, I’m going to bring in new physicians. Physicians are officials too. Like any other position, those who perform stay, and those who don’t get replaced. I won’t let someone hog the seat and do nothing,” Xiao Ming said coldly.

Pang Yukun suddenly laughed. “Your Highness, that was a great metaphor. Just like how a useless official should go home and sell red beans instead of wasting space.”

Xiao Ming chuckled and said, “No time like the present. Let’s go pay Physician Sun a visit right now and see if he still wants to stay at Bowen Academy.”

Chapter 467: The Chief Noble Clan

Medical Academy.

Physician Sun was reading a medical book inside his clinic. This book had been written by Xiao Ming himself, filled with astonishing medical techniques one after another.

Over the past two years, he had gained much from these teachings. Diseases he couldn’t previously understand were now easily treated. He especially regarded Compendium of Materia Medica and Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold as medical masterpieces.

He had also studied Treatise on Epidemics, which offered unique insights into plagues and taught methods to defend against them.

He had asked Prince Xiao Ming several times about the origins of these amazing medical books, hoping to meet the authors, but was told that they had all passed away.

Although he was curious, he didn't dare press further—he didn't want to displease the prince.

Just as he was marveling over the techniques in the book, two people entered the clinic. Seeing who it was, Physician Sun immediately got up to greet them.

"Your Highness, Chief Minister Pang."

He spoke respectfully. The students from the Public Administration Academy had already spread news of the political reform in Qingzhou, so he was well aware that the former Chief Secretary Pang was now Chief Minister.

Xiao Ming glanced around the clinic—it had three rooms and served a function similar to a school infirmary. Normally, sick students would come here, and when Physician Sun wasn't busy, he stayed in the clinic.

Noticing that Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun both looked displeased, Physician Sun felt uneasy. He cautiously said, "Your Highness and Chief Minister visiting the Medical Academy truly brings us great honor."

"Great honor?" Xiao Ming gave a cold hum. "Whether the Medical Academy can be honorable doesn't depend on me—it depends on you, Physician Sun. At least you're self-aware enough to admit the academy is just barely holding together."

His words were blunt, and fear instantly appeared on Physician Sun's face. He nervously asked, "Your Highness, what have I done wrong to make you this upset?"

"What have you done wrong? You really don't know?" Xiao Ming snapped. "When I appointed you to lead the Medical Academy, what did you promise? Now there are over two hundred students—how many of them can practice medicine independently?"

Physician Sun finally understood the prince's anger and responded, "Your Highness, throughout history, the tradition has always been to pass knowledge from master to disciple. Without that bond, there is no teaching. That has been the rule for generations. Now that I teach medicine at the academy, I've already broken those traditions. Other physicians have been scolding me behind my back. I hope Your Highness can understand."

"Who is bold enough to act so arrogantly?" Pang Yukun frowned upon hearing this.

As the Chief Minister of the fiefdom, Pang Yukun stood firmly on Xiao Ming's side. There were far too few physicians in the region, and many people had to travel long distances to seek treatment in Qingzhou.

The Medical Academy had been established specifically to train more doctors for the people. Anyone standing in its way deserved blame.

Physician Sun explained, "Chief Minister Pang, there are only a handful of master physicians in the empire. Now that I've broken tradition, I've been condemned by them all."

Xiao Ming frowned. “So what if they condemn you? Do you not realize this academy was founded to heal the sick and save lives? Have all the teachings about compassion in medicine become meaningless? In truth, all of you care more about status and personal gain than actually helping people. You’re afraid that teaching others will steal your livelihood.”

“This... I...” Physician Sun was speechless. He couldn’t argue—Xiao Ming had hit the nail on the head.

In the Great Yu Empire, being a physician was a highly profitable profession. Xiao Ming’s radical reforms had long made many physicians upset. They grumbled behind the scenes but dared not speak out openly. After all, Xiao Ming was powerful and beloved by the people. If he didn’t hesitate to eliminate noble families, he surely wouldn’t spare some greedy doctors.

Xiao Ming gave a cold laugh. “I’m right, aren’t I? I don’t care about others. I only ask: are you, Physician Sun, willing to set aside your pride and teach everything you know to your students?”

Cold sweat appeared on Physician Sun’s forehead. Xiao Ming’s question was like a sword pointed at his chest. But after a flurry of thoughts, he still couldn’t bring himself to say yes or no.

Seeing his hesitation, Xiao Ming picked up the three medical books from the desk and said, “Since you care so much about tradition, I’ll take back these books. If you’re stingy with your knowledge, then I’ll be stingy with mine. When you’ve made up your mind, I’ll return them. If you can’t decide, then someone else should take over the academy.”

By the end of his sentence, Xiao Ming’s tone had turned even harsher.

Physician Sun's face grew pale. It was clear Xiao Ming was forcing him to choose sides—either follow the old ways or embrace reform.

After a moment of hesitation, he said, "Please allow me a few days to think, Your Highness."

Xiao Ming nodded and signaled Pang Yukun to leave with him.

Once outside, Pang Yukun asked, "Your Highness, I'm afraid Physician Sun may not be able to get past this. After all, medicine has always been passed from father to son, or master to student, with strict rules about how many disciples one can have."

"If he can't get past it, then I'll find someone who can. If the reward is high enough, someone will step up. I refuse to believe we can't break these outdated customs," Xiao Ming said, clearly frustrated.

He wasn't against honoring teachers. What he opposed was the creation of exclusive circles maintained by old-fashioned thinking. These attitudes had led to many valuable skills being lost over generations. People poisoned by this mindset would rather take their skills to the grave than share them.

Now, Xiao Ming wanted to break this cycle and give everyone who wanted to learn a fair chance. Otherwise, his efforts to build schools would be meaningless.

Pang Yukun gave a bitter smile and said, "Physicians are only one problem. Your Highness, have you heard of the Kong family of Qufu?"

“Qufu? You mean the one in Yanzhou?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Exactly. The Kong family has lived in Qufu for generations. They are the direct descendants of Confucius and are considered the true guardians of Confucianism. Every generation’s family head is granted the title ‘Duke for Perpetuating the Sage.’ The current head is Kong Hongming,” Pang Yukun explained. “If we’re talking about nobility, the Kong family is the most prestigious in the Great Yu Empire.”

Xiao Ming glanced at Pang Yukun in surprise. Clearly, Pang brought up the Kong family for a reason. Until now, Xiao Ming still didn’t know exactly which academic philosophy Pang Yukun followed. He smiled and said, “I had almost forgotten the Great Yu Empire’s top noble clan still resides within our borders. No wonder the scholars in Qingzhou are so stubborn—always chanting about Confucian orthodoxy. But since Chief Minister Pang brought them up, are you suggesting I pay the Kong family a visit and ask for their support?”

Chapter 468: The True Face of Pang Yukun

“Your Highness, you misunderstand me. I did not mean that,” Pang Yukun said as they walked through the corridors of Bowen Academy. His face showed deep thought, and he seemed hesitant to speak.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming said, “Just say what’s on your mind. Since when did you become so cautious? You used to be straightforward as the imperial censor.”

Pang Yukun gave a bitter smile. “Your Highness, this matter involves the Kong family. I dare not speak lightly. After all, I follow the Legalist school of thought. If I spoke openly, it might seem like I’m opposing Confucianism.”

Xiao Ming had never asked Pang which philosophy he followed. Hearing this, he was a little surprised. “No wonder you have not been fully trusted at court. That must be one reason.”

“Exactly. Legalism is harsh and rigid, easy to break—this is my shortcoming,” Pang Yukun admitted.

Xiao Ming smiled but suddenly remembered something. “Wait, if you follow Legalism, how did you take the imperial exams?”

Pang Yukun chuckled bitterly. “I’m ashamed to say it, but to enter the court, I had to swallow my pride and study the classics hard. But deep inside, I still value Legalist teachings, because I believe only Legalism can restore our fractured nation.”

“I see.” Xiao Ming, coming from the modern era, treated Legalism and Confucianism equally. He had no extreme views, as he was a pragmatist.

He was willing to use whatever was helpful for development, but if any ideology hindered progress, he would take it seriously.

Changing the subject back, Xiao Ming asked, “So why did you mention the Kong family of Qufu?”

“This political reform apparently has stirred the Kong family in Qufu. And Your Highness’ many actions in the fief have drawn criticism. When I saw the Medical Academy today, I just remembered and mentioned it,” Pang Yukun explained carefully.

“Hmph. I don’t rule this fiefdom by relying on scholars and officials. Even if the Kong family talks nonsense, what of it?” Xiao Ming said calmly.

Prince Xuan had sent him information about the Kong family in Qufu, confirming what Pang said: Xiao Ming had been criticized there, especially for valuing commerce and practical skills over the Four Books and Five Classics, supposedly violating Confucian principles.

But in Xiao Ming's eyes, the real reason the Confucian scholars disliked him was that since taking over Qingzhou, he had never gone to visit the Kong family in Qufu.

Even the previous emperor, Xiao Wenxuan, had personally gone to Qufu to pay respects, showing how important the Kong family was to Confucian scholars.

If even an emperor did that, then Xiao Ming, a lesser fief lord, ignoring the Kong family and refusing to appoint their followers naturally displeased them.

Pang Yukun said cautiously, "Your Highness is right. But because of this reform, many official positions are vacant. From what I hear, the Kong family seems very interested, and their followers are eager to try."

"You mean they want to ask me for government posts?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Probably, but perhaps more than that."

"Oh?" Xiao Ming frowned.

He had been trying to avoid conflicts with the Kong family because his base was still fragile. Confucianism was the orthodox belief in Great Yu Empire. Although he wanted to break that stereotype, he dared not act rashly for now.

After all, the Three Teachings and Nine Schools were the social foundation in Great Yu Empire. The Three Teachings referred to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism was not just a philosophy but a government-centered faith.

The people and officials of the empire were Confucian believers. In fact, Confucianism was the official religion for generations. Confucian learning as a philosophy, the Confucian class as a social stratum, and Confucianism as faith all supported each other, shaping the era.

Because of this, the Kong family in Qufu had never been affected by war and were revered by every dynasty.

Since becoming Xiao Ming's top official, Pang Yukun had worried a lot. He had a personal agenda—to promote Legalist thought to Xiao Ming. He believed Confucianism could no longer lead Great Yu to revival and that Legalism should be advocated.

He hadn't brought this up before because he feared Xiao Ming saw Confucianism as the state orthodoxy like others. But now that Xiao Ming had made the Supervisory Court independent and clarified judicial authority, Pang sensed Xiao Ming might have his own ideas, so he finally dared to speak.

And Xiao Ming's tone convinced Pang that he truly was a unique lord.

“Your Highness, they probably want you to follow Confucian teachings and withdraw some orders that don’t align with Confucianism. I think Confucianism has merits and faults. Its merit lies in the responsibility of managing family, country, and world; the noble pursuit of ‘hearing the Way in the morning, willing to die by evening.’ Its fault is in being overly pedantic, suppressing human spirit and thought. I dare suggest establishing a School of Law in Bowen Academy to revive the old era of ‘Hundred Schools of Thought’,” Pang said.

Though he didn’t say it outright, it was clear he wanted Xiao Ming to balance Confucianism’s influence in government with other philosophies.

Now Xiao Ming finally understood why Pang had not resisted his bold reforms, but instead helped promote them. Pang was simply a Legalist disguised under a Confucian exterior.

He knew Pang’s proposal for a Law School was also a sign of the coming crisis. But it fit Xiao Ming’s own thinking, so he said, “Chief Minister Pang is right. A Hundred Schools of Thought will show Qingzhou’s strength and uniqueness. In that case, I approve your plan to establish the Law School, independent from the Public Administration Academy.”

Pang Yukun was overjoyed. “Your Highness is truly benevolent and wise. Thank you for your grace.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Since I agree to establish the Law School, when Confucians attack me, you’d better not hide and run,” Xiao Ming said. His approval was to counterbalance the Confucian dominance.

In truth, what Xiao Ming hoped most was to see Confucianism used by him to promote a new Confucianism, completely changing the millennia-old national mindset.

But Confucianism was the foundation of Great Yu Empire. He only controlled the small territory of Qingzhou, so he couldn't reform the entire Confucian class yet.

Thus, for now, he had to create a Hundred Schools of Thought to balance Confucian power within his fief—just like medicine, where the cure cannot be too harsh.

Chapter 469: Prince Yong Arrives

The exam atmosphere at Bowen Academy was steadily growing stronger.

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun inspected the exam locations and finalized the order of the examination rooms. This time, they left the academy grounds.

Pang Yukun was naturally very excited. Xiao Ming had agreed to his request, which meant accepting the philosophy he revered. For Pang, this was more important than anything else.

He would now have the chance to promote Legalist thought through the Law School. This was probably the most promising moment for Legalism in a thousand years.

Seeing Pang so excited, Xiao Ming shook his head. Actually, Legalism was straightforward—rule by law without favoritism—and it fit perfectly in the legal system.

Even if Pang had not advocated Legalism, Xiao Ming would have established the Law School to train legal talents. Now that his goal was achieved and he earned Pang's gratitude, Xiao Ming was the true beneficiary.

With Pang now standing with him, Xiao Ming had someone to shield him against the stubborn Confucian scholars.

Thinking of Pang's revered philosophy, Xiao Ming suddenly recalled the two officials Pang had recommended—Zhan Xingchang and Chang Yuchun. He saw some Legalist traits in both: cold and ruthless.

He asked, "Chief Minister Pang, are Zhan Xingchang and Chang Yuchun Legalists?"

Pang's face tightened. "Your Highness, although I have personal preferences, I would never mess up selecting the capable. Zhan and Chang are not strictly Legalists. They respect many schools of thought, taking the essence and discarding the dross. That is why I share common ground with them."

Xiao Ming nodded. Pang's personal bias was simply wanting a place for Legalist thought to survive. He didn't mind. Europe had its Renaissance; Great Yu Empire had its own.

The current effort was to promote Hundred Schools of Thought academically, so officials would no longer rely solely on Confucian belief—even though he knew it would be difficult.

On the way, the two parted ways. Pang returned to the government offices, while Xiao Ming headed back to the royal residence.

Pang's words about the Kong family in Qufu still made Xiao Ming uneasy. He was truly worried the Kong family might make a move. These people were like today's public intellectuals—always talking nonsense but not easy to kill.

If he slapped a big label on them, the court would explode, and Confucian scholars across the empire would stab him in the back.

“Headache,” Xiao Ming muttered. It was easier to kill enemies physically than to change their minds.

But he still had some advantage: he controlled public opinion. Thinking of this, he decided to strengthen the influence of newspapers in his fief.

From now on, government offices must subscribe to newspapers, and all officials must read them. Besides reporters going to villages to spread news, officials must visit production teams to convey policies and ideas. He was determined to wrest ideological control from Confucians and prevent the people from suffering harmful thoughts.

With a worried heart, Xiao Ming returned to the royal residence. As he arrived at the gate, he saw a luxurious carriage parked outside.

The carriage bore a large character “Yong” (雍). Seeing this, Xiao Ming knew Prince Yong had arrived.

Entering the residence, Ziwan greeted him unhappily. “Your Highness, Prince Yong was quite rude. Even though we said you were not home, he still forced his way in.”

“Did he treat you badly?” Xiao Ming asked.

“No, Prince Yong went straight to the main hall and asked us to serve him tea,” Ziwan replied.

Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s good. At least Prince Yong still respects me. If it were elsewhere, he would have caused a big scene by now.”

Prince Yong was impulsive and hot-tempered, and no one paid him much respect except Xiao Wenxuan.

That he came and behaved properly was already surprising. Otherwise, by his nature, he would have been teasing the maids.

Going straight to the main hall, Xiao Ming found Prince Yong waiting and drinking tea.

Seeing Xiao Ming, Prince Yong was delighted and quickly stood up. “Dear nephew, you’re finally back. Your uncle has waited a long time.”

“Fourth uncle, you’ve come a long way. I failed to greet you properly. Please forgive me,” Xiao Ming said politely.

Prince Yong slapped Xiao Ming’s back heartily and laughed loudly. “Nephew, you speak too formally. Now that you are giving me the firearms to take back, it shows I’m always in your heart.”

“Of course. When I was in Chang’an, I promised you. I naturally can’t shirk responsibility with the firearms,” Xiao Ming smiled. Prince Yong had always favored violence.

He loved weapons and warhorses, and now with cannons and firearms, he was even more obsessed with these powerful weapons.

If not for this, he wouldn't be so polite with Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming had asked Prince Yong to come for two reasons: to hand over the firearms and to deal with the Shan merchants.

The Shan merchants were located between the fiefs of Prince Liang and Prince Yong. They controlled a lawless zone that facilitated smuggling war materials to the barbarians. Over the years, they had grown extremely wealthy.

Removing these merchants would cut off the barbarians' access to war supplies, and their wealth could be divided among the princes.

More importantly, once the Shan merchants were removed, Xiao Ming's own merchants could exploit the opportunity. Li Kaiyuan had repeatedly said trade with the steppes was difficult, mainly because these merchants sabotaged it.

Prince Yong laughed heartily and said, "Then let's go inspect the firearms. Your uncle can't wait any longer."

"Don't rush, uncle. I have something to discuss with you first," Xiao Ming said.

Prince Yong had already stood, but sat back down. "Go ahead, nephew."

"Do you know the Nine Great Shan Merchants?" Xiao Ming asked with a smile.

"The Nine Great Shan Merchants?" Prince Yong's expression stiffened. "Why do you ask? I know about them."

Xiao Ming continued, "Do you know these merchants are now betraying the country, selling war materials to the barbarians?"

Prince Yong's face darkened. He understood the situation. He asked, "What do you mean by this? Are you accusing me of colluding with the Shan merchants?"

"Uncle, you worry too much. I've always trusted you. But Prince Liang is another matter. I've received news about the merchants' treason. I'm sure father knows as well. This won't stay secret for long. When father orders, you'll be in a difficult position," Xiao Ming smiled.

Chapter 470: Secret Dealings

The atmosphere in the main hall was serious.

Prince Yong frowned tightly, looking ready to explode at any moment. The Shan merchants had managed to play both sides between Yong's and Liang's territories for a reason. Both he and Prince Liang were well aware of these merchants' existence and their activities.

But these merchants were generous in their payments—every year they gave him hundreds of thousands of taels of silver, not to mention jewels and beauties.

Because of this, Prince Yong naturally turned a blind eye. Who could say no to silver? As long as these merchants didn't harm their interests, that was enough.

But now these merchants had clearly made a serious mistake and were discovered by Xiao Ming.

"Are these Shan merchants really betraying the country?" Prince Yong asked.

He never cared what business these merchants did with the barbarians, only how much silver he could get from them.

Xiao Ming nodded and told Prince Yong the intelligence gathered by his secret guards.

"Hmph, these treacherous merchants. I told them not to go too far, but they secretly did this behind my back. Nephew, don't worry. When I return, I'll deal with them," Prince Yong said carelessly.

Xiao Ming sneered inwardly. He didn't really believe Prince Yong. The fief lords in Great Yu Empire had long acted independently.

He knew that even invoking Xiao Wenxuan's authority wouldn't make Prince Yong obey. Most likely, Prince Yong would just kill a few scapegoats and let the merchants continue their business under a new guise.

Using imperial authority to pressure these border lords was less effective than negotiating interests. After all, whether it was Prince Yong or Prince Liang, these frontier lords often ignored imperial orders.

“Fourth uncle, we’re both smart people. Don’t use those words to brush me off,” Xiao Ming said, slowly sipping his tea.

Prince Yong frowned, “Nephew, what do you mean by that? Haven’t I already agreed with you? What more do you want?”

“If you’re sincere, I will send three thousand cavalry with you. If I don’t see the heads of those Nine Great Shan Merchants, I won’t believe it,” Xiao Ming blew on his tea, and Prince Yong’s face darkened.

To Prince Yong, Xiao Ming was overreaching. His hot temper wouldn’t allow it.

Before Prince Yong could get angry, Xiao Ming continued, “I understand what you worry about. It’s just the hundreds of thousands of taels a year, right? If you remove those merchants, I will pay you back that silver.”

Prince Yong’s expression gradually returned to normal. He said, “Nephew, I speak bluntly. I don’t believe you do all this for the good of Great Yu. You’re just a small fief lord; the empire belongs to the Crown Prince. The real worries are for your elder brother and the Crown Prince, not you. Why exhaust yourself? Too much success can be dangerous—your achievements might be poison. The more you succeed, the quicker you might die. We lords only need to manage our own lands. Reaching too far only makes others unhappy.”

“People say you, Fourth uncle, are brave but lack wisdom. I’m not so sure,” Xiao Ming was surprised. Prince Yong’s words reflected the thinking of most fief lords now. After pondering, he said, “You’re right. I think the same way now. This purge of the Shan merchants is for Great Yu—and for myself.”

“Oh?” Prince Yong exclaimed. “How did those merchants offend you?”

“Because they buy goods from my merchants, then sell to the barbarians at four or five times the price. They also block my merchants’ trade on the steppes. How can I tolerate this?”

Although the empire forbade private trade with barbarians, with imperial permission, some trade was allowed—except for iron, saltpeter, and similar goods, just as barbarians were restricted in owning warhorses.

Border trade was heavily taxed, so smuggling was the only profitable way. That’s how the Shan merchants grew rich.

Now that Xiao Ming had official merchant status and tax exemption, he naturally wanted to capitalize on the lucrative border trade. The barbarians were powerful, having plundered much gold, silver, and jewels from Western kingdoms during years of war.

Noble barbarians also loved luxury goods, and competition for status was fierce. For Xiao Ming, this was an opportunity. Even in war, trade could continue.

“Hahaha... I see. These Shan merchants have indeed gone too far,” Prince Yong said.

Xiao Ming smiled and continued, "Driven by greed, the Shan merchants sell anything. How can they compare to Qingzhou's merchant guild? At least I won't sell saltpeter or sulfur. So eliminating them cuts off supplies to barbarians and lets my guild control border trade. Uncle, you can take the silver openly, right?"

Prince Yong was tempted. He only kept the Shan merchants for the silver anyway. Now that Xiao Ming promised compensation, why not? He also disliked Prince Liang, as those merchants paid Liang more silver than him.

What angered him most was the battle at Jizhou. Prince Liang watched Jizhou besieged and did nothing to help.

Thinking of this, Prince Yong nodded, "Then I'll help with this favor. It's also a chance to test these firearms."

"Then I'll wait for good news," Xiao Ming said, relieved to have found an ally.

This plan could both punish the treasonous merchants and expand his own trade—a double win.

After the discussion, Prince Yong prepared to take the firearms. He was impatient, eager to equip his troops with the new weapons.

They went to the warehouse at Qingzhou harbor where the military supplies were stored, guarded by layers of soldiers. All the weapons traded with other lords were kept here.

According to their agreement, Xiao Ming was to produce two thousand matchlock guns for Prince Yong. The guns were ready, waiting for Prince Yong's inspection.

Prince Yong arrived at Qingzhou with silver and bodyguards specifically for this matter.

"Fourth uncle, these matchlock guns are for you," Xiao Ming said. Since Prince Yong came personally, he had to accompany him.

The armory was filled with boxes of matchlock guns. Seeing them, Prince Yong's eyes lit up. He nodded approvingly to Xiao Ming, "Thank you, nephew. Bring the silver off the ship."

While speaking, Prince Yong wandered through the armory. When he saw the cannons, his eyes gleamed. "Nephew, can you also give me these twenty cannons?"