

## **I. Dynasty 471**

### Chapter 471: The Death of Doctor Sun

Inside the armory warehouse, a row of twenty cannons lay quietly. These cannons were a batch produced by the military workshop for export.

“Royal Uncle, these cannons were custom-ordered by Prince Liang and Prince Zhao. They are about to be delivered soon. I’m afraid they can’t be sold to Your Highness,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Prince Yong was quite disappointed. Every prince was stockpiling weapons to strengthen their power. Compared to them, he was falling behind, especially after learning these cannons were for Prince Liang. He felt a strong sense of crisis.

Although he was unhappy that Xiao Ming was selling cannons to Prince Liang, he understood that his nephew sold weapons to whoever had money. He even suspected that if the barbarians offered a high price, Xiao Ming would sell to them too.

Thinking of this, Prince Yong’s eyes shifted. “Nephew, since we are all part of the royal family, business should be more personal. Why don’t you sell this batch of cannons to Your Highness first, and produce another batch for him?”

Those cannons were purposely left by Xiao Ming in the warehouse. They weren’t actually prepared for Prince Liang but were set as a trap for Prince Yong because Yong’s territory was a treasure land rich in mineral resources.

To get the rights to mine these resources, Xiao Ming had to come up with some sly ideas. So he said, "Your Highness wants cannons, that's easy. I will produce another batch just for you. If that doesn't work, I'll transfer some cannons from the army to you."

"Really?" Prince Yong was overjoyed.

Xiao Ming nodded slightly and hinted, "Prince Liang bought 400 cannons from me this time, so I have to take care of Your Highness as well, right?"

"Four hundred?" Prince Yong was shocked and immediately said, "Nephew, Your Highness wants more than Prince Liang. I want 500 cannons!"

"Five hundred? Your Highness, these 500 cannons won't be cheap," Xiao Ming said seriously. "I heard your treasury doesn't have much silver. These 500 cannons will cost at least six or seven million taels of silver. This..."

Prince Yong suddenly felt uneasy. Xiao Ming had hit his sore spot. He indeed had little silver now. He suddenly remembered last time when Xiao Ming made him exchange coal mines for cannons and said, "Nephew, if it's really impossible, can you send some coal mines instead?"

Having experienced the shortage of iron ore, Xiao Ming now deeply resented the lack of iron ore. Also, with the steam engine about to be used, coal consumption would greatly increase. The current mining output of the Great Yu Empire could not meet the demand.

However, he did not want to use too much manpower on mining. Instead, he planned to trade industrial goods for mineral resources, getting other princes to provide ores for him.

After all, even if he claimed mines in their territories, those mines were still under their control. If relations soured, they could take them back at any time.

So it was better to directly name cannons as the price to exchange for ores, making those princes his miners. He said, “Your Highness, I really want to help but I have no power. Your territory has few people, so how can you have so many miners? Since you sincerely want to buy cannons, why not exchange coal and iron ore directly?”

“Coal and iron ore?” Prince Yong hesitated. “Nephew, I do have some coal mines, but very little iron ore.”

Prince Yong’s territory included the current Hebei region. In modern times, this area has the largest iron ore reserves in the country. Because of this, it became a steel production base. Prince Yong was like a man in a treasure mountain who did not know the real value of the mountain.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Your Highness, you underestimate yourself. Your territory has more iron ore than coal. If you don’t believe me, I can help you find some. But mining the iron ore can only be done by Your Highness.”

Prince Yong was always a person who relied on the resources around him. Since coal and iron ore could be sold for money, why not? Excited, he said, “Nephew, is what you say true?”

“True,” Xiao Ming said.

Prince Yong nodded. “If it is as you say, then I will send people to mine and exchange ores for cannons.”

“Your Highness is very generous. It’s settled then,” Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed. His first plan was complete. To make the Great Yu Empire become the resource supplier of Qingzhou, he had worked very hard.

For him, the world’s resources were limited. If he ate more, others would eat less. That’s why countries kept scheming against each other to get more resources.

The current wealth of the Western countries was built on controlling living resources. Xiao Ming understood this very well, so he was preparing to start a journey to make the whole world work for Qingzhou. Now it was time for him to trade high-tech products for one hundred million shirts.

While Xiao Ming was busy planning the resource acquisition, an unexpected event suddenly made the atmosphere in Qingzhou tense.

“Doctor Sun is dead!” When Pang Yukun said this, his expression was grave.

“Dead? How did he die?” Xiao Ming was shocked.

Pang Yukun said, “According to the official investigation, it is confirmed that Doctor Sun was poisoned with arsenic. Now there are rumors among the people that Doctor Sun was forced to death by His Highness. I suspect someone is stirring trouble to slander His Highness and pressure him.”

Xiao Ming's expression turned cold. He had only asked Doctor Sun to go back and think things over. It had only been a few days, but Doctor Sun was dead. Not only Pang Yukun, but Xiao Ming also found this very strange.

"Tell me what happened," Xiao Ming said irritably. Although he disliked Doctor Sun's rigidity, Doctor Sun was a good doctor. It was painful that he died for no reason.

"Doctor Sun was highly respected in Qingzhou City. After this incident, many Confucian scholars talked, accusing His Highness' Bowen Academy of being heretical. They implied that His Highness' Bowen Academy broke the rules, disobeyed the ancestors' laws, violated heaven's principles, and committed great treason."

Chapter 472: Public Opinion Swells

"Outrageous!"

Xiao Ming exploded in anger, "Since when did I stop handling serious matters, allowing these Confucian scholars to talk nonsense all day long!"

Pang Yukun cautiously glanced at Xiao Ming. This outburst showed him a glimpse of the dignity a prince should have.

He bowed and said, "Your Highness, please calm down. These Confucian scholars have never truly respected the Bowen Academy. They are focused only on studying the classics, hoping one day to pass the imperial exams. To them, encouraging scholars to learn such 'tricky skills' is despicable, and they believe their own path is the true way."

“How ridiculous! Can’t they see the development Qingzhou has made? Are they all blind?” Xiao Ming was extremely angry. Doctor Sun’s death had already upset him, and now these scholars were stirring trouble. How could he not be furious?

“But right now, the most important thing is to find out the real cause of Doctor Sun’s death,” Xiao Ming said. “These Confucian scholars are making a fuss for nothing. Could it really be that Doctor Sun valued the master-disciple legacy more than his own life?”

At this, Xiao Ming suddenly felt defeated. He hadn’t expected the power of deeply rooted ideas to be so strong.

“Yes,” Pang Yukun nodded. After hesitating, he asked, “Your Highness, should we arrest these troublemaking scholars and interrogate them?”

After a moment’s thought, he said, “No need. Let them continue making noise. It’s better if they make a big scene; otherwise, how can Your Highness have a reason to deal with them?”

“But letting these scholars slander Your Highness might harm your reputation,” Pang Yukun worried.

Xiao Ming then laughed, “Chancellor Pang, you worry too much. If this were Chang’an, I would be concerned. But don’t forget what Qingzhou’s foundation is. Now that there are no powerful aristocratic families, I rely on the common people. These scholars are useless to my territory.”

“Your Highness speaks truly. As long as the people are stable, these scholars won’t be able to cause real trouble,” Pang Yukun said.

With that, he turned and left.

After watching Pang Yukun leave the main hall, Xiao Ming sent someone to call Li San to the prince's residence. Everywhere in Qingzhou was under secret guard surveillance, so to find the root of this matter, they only needed to ask him.

Before the servant could leave, Li San had already arrived.

"Your Highness, you must have summoned me about Doctor Sun," Li San said.

Xiao Ming nodded. "Since you know, tell me what you have found."

Li San nodded and said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, Doctor Sun really poisoned himself. Before he did so, he told his family that he did not want to offend Your Highness, nor be criticized by fellow doctors. So he chose death. These words reached the ears of the Confucian scholars, which is why they started talking about Your Highness."

"I see," Xiao Ming sighed softly. "Why did it have to be this way?"

Li San continued, "But Your Highness, Doctor Sun's suicide may not be your responsibility. I believe this is also strongly connected to Doctor Sun's eldest apprentice. The day before Doctor Sun's suicide, his eldest apprentice, Dong Haoran, visited him. From what I know, they parted on bad terms."

"That's good progress. You've already figured out the whole story first," Xiao Ming felt relieved.

Wang Xuan manages external affairs, Li San internal affairs. Together they form a complete secret guard. Over two years, Xiao Ming invested hundreds of thousands of taels building the secret guard. Now, Qingzhou truly has his spies everywhere.

“Your Highness, I told you I would not disappoint you,” Li San said happily. After repeatedly being overshadowed by Wang Xuan, he was now motivated to improve.

During this time, he worked hard to train his subordinates, securing firm control over the territory.

“Good. Immediately give the clues you have to Chancellor Pang and have him arrest Dong Haoran at once,” Xiao Ming ordered.

Li San nodded and left.

Xiao Ming then left the main hall. His heart was already filled with killing intent. He had not feared the Battle of Cangzhou or the Battle of Jizhou. Why should he fear the deeply rooted feudal superstitions or the endless chatter of Confucian scholars?

Doctor Sun’s death was surprising, but if anyone wanted to use this to attack his policies, they were thinking too simply.



If necessary, he wouldn't mind a direct confrontation with these scholars to see if their stubborn words or his guns were stronger. For the past two years, his tolerance for these scholars was only to avoid unnecessary trouble.

But this time, Doctor Sun's death affected him deeply. He felt it was necessary to strike back at these scholars.

However, before that, he must thoroughly handle Doctor Sun's case. Otherwise, his medical academy would be finished, and his army would lose its battlefield medical corps.

Frowning, Xiao Ming sighed. He thought it necessary to establish an astronomy academy within Bowen Academy.

In his view, this would be the most effective weapon against feudal thinking. But he would not use it yet; only when necessary. Because once he introduces astronomy, it means denying the divine right of kings.

At that time, the most frightened would not be the Confucians but the reigning emperor, Xiao Wenxuan. If the scholars stirred trouble then, Xiao Ming would be no different from a rebel.

So it was necessary to prepare secretly. Once the opportunity arose, he could release astronomical knowledge and even use it as a weapon.

He already had a plan for this, a risky and bold plan. If successful, the Kong family of Qufu might be under his control.

While he was thinking this through, Li San had already delivered the news to Pang Yukun.

After receiving the news, Pang Yukun immediately ordered the arrest of Dong Haoran. He understood Xiao Ming's plan: to clean up the corrupt doctors in the territory. Dong Haoran was the key point in this event.

Meanwhile, at a medical official's home south of Qingzhou City, Dong Haoran sat facing three men dressed as scholars.

One scholar said, "Doctor Sun was a man of great righteousness. To uphold Confucian teachings, he would rather die than bow to Prince Qi. He is truly a model for us."

"Exactly. The Bowen Academy has long lost favor. We scholars despise it. In Qi and Lu lands, the home of sages, such absurd things happen. We have sent many petitions to Qufu, asking Confucius to speak for us."

"Yes! Why does the state reform forbid us scholars from taking the exams and entering officialdom? What qualifications do those ungrateful students in the Bowen Academy have to compare with us?"

Chapter 473: Intimidation

A faint smell of herbal medicine filled the clinic.

Dong Haoran held a teacup in his hands, eyes gently narrowed.

After Doctor Sun's death, he had been frightened for a while, but the many Confucian scholars who came to visit had calmed his heart.

Because so many scholars supported him in this matter, it proved he was right and his junior apprentice was wrong.

"Everyone's words are reasonable. We have no objection to Prince Qi's reforms, but these reforms must not break our rules—whether it's the rules of the clinic or the rules of the officialdom. What do you all say?" Dong Haoran spoke passionately.

"That's right, that's right. No other principality acts as recklessly as Prince Qi. We've tolerated it for a long time, but this time Prince Qi really went too far," the three scholars immediately showed fierce unity.

The four grew more and more agitated as they spoke, when suddenly there was a loud bang. The clinic's main door was pushed open by a group of fierce soldiers. Leading them, a general strode into the main hall and asked, "Who is Dong Haoran?"

With so many soldiers bursting in, the clinic immediately fell silent. The three scholars' faces turned pale. They quickly stood up and pretended to be patients.

Dong Haoran trembled all over. He looked at the three once resolute scholars, now acting like they didn't even know him, cursing in his heart, "Fence-sitters... cowards."

"I, I am..." Seeing the scholars wouldn't help, Dong Haoran had no choice but to admit it.

"In that case, come with us," the general sneered, signaling the soldiers behind him. They immediately stepped forward to escort Dong Haoran out.

As Dong Haoran was taken away, the three scholars breathed a sigh of relief.

They exchanged glances. One said, "This is bad. Prince Qi is truly furious now. What are we going to do?"

The others panicked too. Another said, "We should go back and tell Xie Ziyun. Let him figure out what to do."

The three nodded and left together.

Meanwhile, Dong Haoran was directly taken to the Qingzhou government office, where he saw Pang Yukun and Prince Qi.

"Your Highness, Dong Haoran has been brought here."

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun turned to look Dong Haoran over. Xiao Ming sat in the main seat and said, "So you are Dong Haoran. You forced Doctor Sun to death, didn't you?"

"Your Highness, Doctor Sun was my junior apprentice. How could I harm my own apprentice? I am innocent! Innocent!" Dong Haoran knelt down, crying bitterly.

“Innocent? If so, what did you say to Doctor Sun before he died?” Xiao Ming asked sharply. His image in Qingzhou was always kind, but he wanted everyone to know he could kill too. This matter started with Doctor Sun, and now someone was using it to spread rumors about him among the people.

He had to clarify everything and severely punish those stirring trouble in his territory.

Dong Haoran’s face changed immediately. He hadn’t expected Xiao Ming to know about his visit to Doctor Sun. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He defended himself, “I only spoke some old matters with my junior apprentice. As to why he committed suicide, I’m just as confused as you.”

“You really don’t feel remorse until it’s too late. I know exactly what you did at the Sun family. Do you forget who rules Qingzhou? The four great families were wiped out by me overnight. Do you think I will care about you doctors?” Xiao Ming’s tone suddenly turned harsh.

This matter annoyed him. He wanted to promote medicine, but these people were sabotaging it for their own selfish reasons.

Dong Haoran’s body stiffened. He recalled the bloody February two years ago when the Qingzhou aristocrats were almost wiped out overnight. Even now, some dried black bloodstains could occasionally be seen near the lotus pond outside Qingzhou city.

“Your Highness, I deserve death! I was blinded by greed! I shouldn’t have pressured my junior apprentice. Please spare me, Your Highness, spare me!” At this moment, Dong Haoran suddenly understood that the kind-looking Prince Qi was once a ruthless killer.

When Xiao Ming mentioned this, he was basically telling Dong Haoran he could kill him anytime.

Pang Yukun shook his head helplessly. He finally understood why Xiao Ming arrested Dong Haoran. No harsh torture was needed—simple threats were enough to keep Dong Haoran obedient.

Now that Qingzhou's people lived in peace and safety, no one wanted to lose their life for no reason.

Dong Haoran was fearful. His dislike of Xiao Ming setting up the medical academy was because his clinic's business had increased three or four times in these two years.

The growing merchants and population in Qingzhou made him wealthy daily. Because he wanted to monopolize this profit, he pressured Doctor Sun to refuse the reforms.

Faced with Doctor Sun's past life-saving help to him, Dong Haoran was caught in a dilemma, which eventually led Doctor Sun to take his own life.

"Spare you? Who can spare Doctor Sun!" Xiao Ming roared. "I have investigated everything thoroughly. If you hadn't threatened him with that past life-saving debt, how could he have committed suicide? What you did is no different from murder. Take him to the prison. Tomorrow at noon, he will be executed in the East Market."

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" Dong Haoran felt his mind go numb. Coming back to his senses, he crawled to Xiao Ming's feet and cried, "Your Highness, spare me, spare me. This was not my intention. It was Xie Ziyun's idea. If not for him, I wouldn't have pressured my junior apprentice. Please spare me!"

“Xie Ziyun?” Xiao Ming looked at Pang Yukun. “Who is this Xie Ziyun?”

Pang Yukun explained, “Your Highness, Xie Ziyun is the leader of Qingzhou’s Confucian scholars. He claims to have studied under Cui Hao.”

“Cui Hao?” Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. “This just got interesting.”

“Your Highness, Cui Hao is a famous Confucian scholar of the Great Yu Empire. Many students studied under him. Every year when Qingzhou scholars went to the capital for the exams, they would visit Cui Hao. In the past two years, Cui Hao has become more fond of Qingzhou scholars and often helped them,” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming nodded and looked at Dong Haoran, “Is everything you said true?”

“Absolutely true. I dare not lie,” Dong Haoran said, pale-faced.

“Then do you dare face him directly?” Xiao Ming continued. He didn’t want a big public commotion but needed to make an example of the troublemakers so these scholars would behave.

Chapter 474: Divide and Conquer

“I dare! I, a commoner, dare to face you!”

Dong Haoran shouted as if grabbing a lifeline. He was just a doctor running a clinic, with different goals from those scholars.

While the three scholars and Dong Haoran were confronting each other, suddenly a commotion came from outside the government office. A clerk rushed in and said, “Your Highness, hundreds of scholars have gathered outside, making noise, demanding the release of Dong Haoran. They say he is innocent and ask why the government arrested him.”

“Scholars?” Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun exchanged glances.

Hearing this, Dong Haoran’s expression grew complicated. Trying to make amends, he carefully said, “Your Highness, these people are likely the scholars organized by Xie Ziyun. From my point of view, these scholars are only pretending to help me. What they really want is for Your Highness to allow them to take the exams. In my clinic, these scholars shamelessly claimed that the vacant official posts should belong to them.”

Under the threat to his life, Dong Haoran immediately turned against the scholars. He was smart — his alliance with the Confucians was only for his own benefit.

Now exposed and threatened by Xiao Ming, he dared not oppose him. Saving his life was his priority.

Xiao Ming snorted coldly. Dong Haoran was nothing but a greedy merchant, only after silver. He said, “Good timing. I want to meet this group of scholars and see what kind of trouble they can stir up.”

With that, he and Pang Yukun went outside.



As the clerk said, hundreds of young men dressed as scholars stood outside the government office, shouting loudly, acting as if fighting for the nation and the people.

When they saw Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun appear, the scholars' voices slowly died down. Recognizing them, they clearly did not expect Xiao Ming to be here and were momentarily confused.

The leader of the scholars spoke loudly, "Your Highness, we come for Dong Haoran's life. Dong Haoran is innocent. We do not understand why the government arrested him. Your Highness is usually open-minded, so why would you do something so unfair today?"

"How do you know Dong Haoran is innocent? And how do you know I want to harm him?" Xiao Ming asked sharply, suspecting this leader was Xie Ziyun, brainwashed by Cui Hao.

"Doctor Sun died, but the government arrested Dong Haoran. Isn't this to cover up Doctor Sun's suicide?" As Xiao Ming expected, the leader was indeed Xie Ziyun.

When Qingzhou's exam reform excluded them, these so-called Confucian scholars exploded with anger. Those unhappy gathered, and Xie Ziyun, a student of Cui Hao, quickly became their leader. Together they plotted how to change this situation.

Doctor Sun's death gave them the perfect opportunity. They tried to prove that they were the true followers of the right path and that the reform exam should include them.

"So you mean Doctor Sun's death is all my fault?" Xiao Ming said calmly.

"I dare not say," Xie Ziyun looked fearful.

"Dare not say?" Xiao Ming sneered at the scholars behind Xie Ziyun. "What else are you afraid of? Do you think the law won't punish the crowd, so you can pressure me with these scholars?"

"I dare not," Xie Ziyun kept a calm face.

Xiao Ming laughed then. He had to admit the Confucians had pros and cons, but some were truly stubborn. However, he didn't believe Xie Ziyun was one of the tough ones.

Anyone driven by self-interest was not tough.

His eyes shifted. "Hmph, I'm not falling for your tricks. Since you want Dong Haoran, I'll give him back to you."

With that, Xiao Ming signaled. The clerk immediately brought Dong Haoran out of the government office and pushed him in front of the scholars.

Xie Ziyun's expression changed. He had thought the government wouldn't release him, so they could make trouble and have the Kong family pressure Prince Qi.

But what was Prince Qi really playing at?

“What are you waiting for? Didn’t you want Dong Haoran? I just gave him back to you. Why are you standing there? Disperse, disperse!” Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness, even so, shouldn’t you say something about Doctor Sun’s death?” Xie Ziyun finally revealed his true intent.

Xiao Ming had been waiting for this. He said, “Step forward. I’ll explain to you.”

Xie Ziyun glanced back at the scholars, gathered courage, and stepped forward in front of Xiao Ming. Suddenly Xiao Ming’s mouth moved a few times, but no sound came out.

Before anyone could react, Xiao Ming said to the scholars, “I’ve said all I need to say. Ask him yourselves.” Then he entered the government office.

Hearing this, the scholars immediately clustered around Xie Ziyun, asking, “Xie Ziyun, what did His Highness say?”

“He didn’t say anything,” Xie Ziyun looked puzzled.

“That’s impossible. We clearly saw him open his mouth,” one scholar said.

"I saw it too, and he seemed very happy," another added.

Xie Ziyun was very frustrated. He explained again, "I swear His Highness really said nothing."

"Xie Ziyun, His Highness clearly moved his mouth. Why do you say he said nothing?" Dong Haoran asked sharply.

After that, many scholars grew even more angry. Several stormed off in rage. Xie Ziyun stood frozen, feeling very uneasy.

This feeling became reality the next day.

It was the day the reform exam list was published. Except for the Bowen Academy students, the only new name was Xie Ziyun.

"Well done, this Xie Ziyun tricked us all. He made us cause a scene at the government office, claiming the law wouldn't punish a crowd. It was all for himself. Now his name is on the list. What else can we say?"

In front of the list, a scholar who had participated in the protest shouted loudly.

“Shameless villain! His Highness must have told him beforehand. He played dumb afterward. No wonder he stopped causing trouble. We were all fooled.”

“Scoundrel! Let’s beat him to death, that despicable villain!”

“Beat him to death!” The crowd of scholars grew enraged.

Nearby, Xiao Ming watched this group of scholars from a corner. Pang Yukun stood beside him and laughed, “Your Highness, what a clever divide-and-conquer. First you released Dong Haoran to take away their excuse for trouble, then pretended to say a few words to dismiss Xie Ziyun, and finally arranged for Xie Ziyun’s name to appear on the exam list. Now Xie Ziyun can’t even explain himself.”

Xiao Ming smiled, “This is only the beginning. Using this matter, I will show the people their true faces.”

Chapter 475: Rising with the Momentum

The East Market was in chaos. The examinees were furious that Xie Ziyun’s name appeared on the exam list.

After extreme anger, they all headed to Xie Ziyun’s residence, their words full of grievance and resentment towards him.

“All the chaos in the world is for profit. If they truly understood justice, where were they when the principality was in danger? To deal with these hypocrites who are weak outside but preach morality inside, all it takes is to throw a bone and they will fight among themselves, divided and conquered,” Xiao Ming said lightly to Pang Yukun with a smile.

Pang Yukun nodded, "Your Highness speaks wisely. If the officialdom is filled with these people, our principality will soon be no different from other places in the Great Yu Empire. But will Doctor Sun's death end here?"

"Of course not. Whether for Doctor Sun or for Bowen Academy, we will use this opportunity to strike at the rotten thinking in the principality," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully. "Discuss with Fan Zeng in the next two days. Use the newspapers to harshly criticize Dong Haoran and Xie Ziyun — the incompetent doctors and corrupt Confucians. The harsher the better. Emphasize how serious this is for the people's interests. This way, these people will become outcasts, hated by all."

"Yes, Your Highness. I am very skilled at this," Pang Yukun said confidently. He used to be a censor and was excellent at criticizing without using vulgar language.

After making plans, the two returned to the government office. Pang Yukun called Fan Zeng to draft articles denouncing Dong Haoran and Xie Ziyun, clearly intending to throw them into the ocean of public wrath.

Meanwhile, Xie Ziyun was leisurely drinking tea in a teahouse when a group of angry scholars suddenly burst in. Before Xie Ziyun could defend himself, the scholars started beating him with fists and kicks.

While beating him, they shouted, "Traitor! Traitor!"

"Ouch!" Xie Ziyun lay on the ground, beaten all over, unable to understand what was happening or defend himself.

The usual constables did not appear today. Only after the scholars nearly beat him to death did they seem to stop.

The customers in the teahouse were shocked, whispering among themselves.

“What’s going on? Why is this man being beaten?” a merchant asked.

Qingzhou was small, and news traveled fast. Someone seemed to know the background and said, “Do you know about the scholars causing trouble at the government office yesterday?”

“Of course. These scholars have gone too far, demanding the release of a man from the government office. Who do they think they are? In other principalities, they’d be beheaded immediately. Only our prince is merciful, allowing these scholars to run wild.”

“That’s right. This man is Xie Ziyun, the ringleader of the trouble. He used Doctor Sun’s suicide to criticize the prince’s policies in Qingzhou. He demanded the prince shut down Bowen Academy and, it’s said, even wants the prince to declare us merchants as low class!” The merchant’s face flushed with anger.

“Serves him right to be beaten to death!” another merchant shouted. “Our prince is the wisest ruler I’ve seen, always considering the people. Merchants and craftsmen have gained status now. These stingy scholars want us back in hard times? I spit on that!”

The teahouse merchants erupted in cheers, “These Confucians are too much. Who wants to go finish him off?”

“I’ll go!”

“Me too!”

“...”

The merchants all stood and delivered a harsh beating to Xie Ziyun, who was barely getting up again.

One merchant shouted, “Friends, even if we kill this Xie Ziyun, there’ll be a second, a third. The real problem is these corrupt Confucians want Qingzhou back under the old rule of the aristocrats. We barely escaped those hard days. Who wants to go back? We merchants should unite under the guild to push these corrupt scholars out.”

“Exactly. Let’s go to the prince’s residence and ask him to punish these corrupt scholars severely. They’re treacherous and deserve a thousand cuts!”

“Let’s go, let’s go. We can’t let these bookworms trample us anymore. They must leave Qingzhou!”

“...”

One shouted and many responded. The merchants stopped drinking tea and gathered to march toward the prince’s residence. They spread the word and soon dozens became hundreds, hundreds became thousands.



At the governor's residence, Xiao Ming had already learned of the situation as it developed.

He was slightly surprised. To him, after the deeply rooted Confucian class, a new capitalist class seemed to be emerging in Qingzhou. Merchants would never have gathered like this before.

Now the Confucians had touched their fundamental interests, sparking their dissatisfaction.

"Your Highness, this is perfect. We can guide these merchants to vent their anger on the corrupt Confucians, crushing their arrogance and weakening Confucian prestige among the people. This will pave the way for a hundred schools of thought in Qingzhou," Pang Yukun said excitedly.

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded. A wave of relief washed over him. He had been too influenced by the aristocratic class and had taken this too seriously.

Unknowingly, he had already cultivated new interest groups in his territory. The first was the common people, the second merchants, the third craftsmen, and the fourth Bowen Academy students.

He said, "Then this time, let's make these Confucians afraid to mention the old system. Since their claims harm both merchants and the people, emphasize this in the newspapers."

Pang Yukun nodded thoughtfully.

Xiao Ming continued, "Take this chance to make it clear: anyone who hasn't studied in the public schools or Bowen Academy has no right to take any exams in the territory."

With that, Xiao Ming ordered Pang Yukun and Fan Zeng to continue drafting articles.

The next day, the Qingzhou newspaper's front page was entirely filled by an article titled "Whose Fault Is Doctor Sun's Death?"

In it, Pang Yukun harshly condemned Dong Haoran for selfishly pressuring Doctor Sun, causing his suicide. The article also listed and rebutted the claims made by Xie Ziyun and the other Confucians, emphasizing the harm these claims would bring to the territory.

Finally, it declared that from now on, anyone not studying in the public schools or Bowen Academy would be barred from all local exams.

Once published, the article caused an uproar throughout the territory.

Chapter 476: New System

Outside Qingzhou City, Taihe Village.

Over a hundred villagers were talking angrily after hearing the newspaper read out loud.

“These old scholars are so annoying. We’ve only just started living a peaceful life, and now they’re stirring things up again.”

“That’s right! If it weren’t for His Highness’s policies, how would we have good days like this? We absolutely can’t let these scholars fool His Highness with their nonsense.”

“Yeah! Kick them all out of the domain and let them cause trouble elsewhere! That Xie Ziyun’s family lives in our village—we should go ask his parents how they raised such an ungrateful son. If His Highness hadn’t given the powerful families’ land back to the Xie family, where would they have gotten the money for his education? Let’s go!”

“ ... ”

The villagers were getting more and more agitated with every word.

The leader was the village team leader. With a wave of his hand, the people of Taihe Village followed him to the Xie family home.

Yesterday, Xie Ziyun had been beaten nearly to death and brought back to the Xie home. Today, his father, Xie Dongyi, was staying home to take care of him and hadn’t gone to hear the newspaper reading.

Just as he was cursing the people who beat his son, the villagers stormed angrily into his house.

“Xie Dongyi, take your son and get out of this domain! Our village doesn’t accept people who bring us shame!” shouted one villager.

“Exactly! If people from other villages find out that Xie Ziyun is from here, they’ll curse our village to no end. This is so humiliating.”

“It’s more than just humiliating. This is betrayal! Eating from the Great Prince and then turning against him—disgusting. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“ ... ”

Xie Dongyi was stunned by the shouting. He shouted back, “What are you talking about? I don’t get it. My son was beaten and you’re not even sympathetic? Now you’re humiliating him too? You think I’m easy to bully?”

“Bah! He should’ve been beaten to death!” yelled one villager.

Xie Dongyi’s face turned red with anger. To him, Xie Ziyun was the family’s pride. Just last year he had met high-ranking officials in Chang’an, which had been something to brag about. Now that the villagers were saying these things, he was enraged. He grabbed a hoe and threatened, “Li Er, say one more word and see what happens!”

At that moment, a villager spoke up, “Xie Dongyi, you didn’t go hear the newspaper today, did you? Your son’s name is in it now. He actually led a bunch of scholars to cause trouble at the county office, going against His Highness publicly, and even demanded the shutdown of Bowen Academy and the return to the old feudal system.”

Hearing this, Xie Dongyi froze and said in disbelief, “You’re lying! You’re all jealous of my son. He’d never do that!”

“Why would we lie? The reporter is still at the village entrance. Go ask him yourself,” said another villager.

Xie Dongyi’s expression shifted. In the end, he decided to find out the truth. He dropped the hoe and ran to the village center. Not long after, he came back like a wooden statue.

“We didn’t lie, did we?” the village leader sighed. Judging by Xie Dongyi’s look, it was clear he hadn’t known what his son had been up to.

Xie Dongyi collapsed onto the ground and began crying loudly. “You little bastard! I worked day and night in the fields to pay for your schooling. You should’ve studied hard to serve His Highness. But instead, you shame him like this. Without His Highness, how would you even continue your studies? Waaaah...”

His crying moved some of the angry villagers. One tried to comfort him, “Xie Dongyi... it’s up to you now. But our village can’t keep him. He’s too dangerous. We don’t want to get dragged down by him one day.”

Hearing that, Xie Dongyi’s face turned pale. Looking at his second son, third son, and little daughter, he made a decision in his heart. He said, “Please allow him to heal first. Once he’s better, I will cut all ties with him. He will leave the domain. Whether he becomes successful or dies on the road, I will no longer care.”

The villagers fell silent and left after exchanging glances.

After everyone left, Xie Dongyi went back inside. Xie Ziyun was lying in bed. Although he had been beaten by many people, they had held back a little. His injuries weren't too severe.

Seeing his son awake, Xie Dongyi said, "You heard what they said outside. When you're better, leave. Our village won't tolerate someone ungrateful, and neither will our family."

Xie Ziyun's eyes showed both fear and anger. He said, "Father, this isn't my fault. I studied for so many years, yet in the domain I'm not even qualified to enter the official system. Why? In the end, the Great Prince is just a foolish ruler. He looks down on poor scholars like us and gives us no chance!"

"Nonsense!" Xie Dongyi snapped. "Everyone from Bowen Academy is allowed to take the exams. Why didn't you go to Bowen Academy? Isn't it because the chief examiner in Chang'an is Cui Hao, and you were afraid your connection with Bowen Academy would ruin your chances? Aren't you and your so-called scholar friends all arrogant snobs who look down on domain officials?"

Xie Ziyun was speechless. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

No one knows their son better than a father. To Xie Dongyi, becoming an official in the domain or the court was still a way forward. But what his son had done crossed his bottom line.

Everyone in the village knew that supporting the Great Prince was the only way to keep their good lives. They had seen the refugees from Jizhou—how pitiful they were. That memory was still fresh. No one wanted to end up like them.

After a pause, he said, "There's now a public school in the county town. The government says any child from any household can go. Once they finish, they can take the exam for Bowen Academy. If they get in, they'll become the pillars of the domain. I plan to send your second and third brothers to study."

"Father, can you really afford to send them both?" Xie Ziyun argued.

"Public school doesn't cost money," Xie Dongyi sighed. "His Highness is so generous, and you don't even want to serve him. What are you really thinking?"

Hearing this, Xie Ziyun fell silent.

While he was deep in thought, those scholars who followed him in causing trouble also faced similar outcomes. Many of them had just been blindly following the crowd. Once they realized the consequences, they quickly wrote apology letters to the government office and promised not to repeat their actions. Some even signed up for the Bowen Academy entrance exam.

This time, the unified action of merchants, civilians, and craftsmen completely scared the scholars, and no one opposed Xiao Ming's announced policies.

As the news continued to roll in, Xiao Ming was very pleased with how everyone reacted. He hadn't expected that this opportunity would allow him to fully establish his own talent development and selection system.

Just as he was feeling proud, craftsmen from the glass workshop arrived at the palace and handed him a telescope.

Chapter 477: Public School

“Your Highness, this is the telescope you asked for.”

The workshop supervisor held a stick-like object about 1.2 meters long and 4.5 centimeters in diameter as he spoke.

After the scholar protests, Xiao Ming had ordered the glass workshop to produce an astronomical telescope. Considering the current level of technology in Qingzhou, he ultimately chose the Keplerian telescope from the mid-17th century.

Compared to the Galilean type, which uses a plano-convex lens as the objective and a concave lens as the eyepiece, the Keplerian telescope uses two convex lenses for both the objective and eyepiece, greatly improving magnification.

And convex lenses like these were fully within the glass workshop’s capabilities—they were just outwardly curved on both sides, similar to modern magnifying glasses.

Receiving the Great Yu Empire’s first astronomical telescope, Xiao Ming raised it to the sky.

It was already evening, and a crescent moon hung above. Through the telescope, the craters on the moon were clearly visible. The moon’s surface showed a strong contrast between light and shadow.



Staring at the bright moon, Xiao Ming fell into deep thought. This event with the scholars had turned into a decisive victory thanks to his careful planning. The new interest groups in the domain had overwhelmingly defeated the old ones, which was a great encouragement to him.

But he knew that the real old power groups outside his domain hadn't launched their final attack yet—they were still lying low.

One massive threat, in particular, was watching over his land. He needed to prepare a sharp sword to deal with this giant beast at any moment—and that sword was astronomy.

Now that he had the telescope, the question was: who should he entrust to study this field?

Like in real-world feudal dynasties, astronomy—or astrology—was an imperial subject. In the Ming Dynasty, the general public was even banned from researching it. The idea of divine kingship made emperors extremely wary of such knowledge.

For the past two years, Xiao Ming had wanted to establish an astronomy academy, but in the end, he kept postponing it. Once word spread, people might accuse him of rebellion.

After all, why would a vassal prince order his people to study the stars? Was it to deny the emperor's divine right to rule or to establish his own kingdom?

Because of this, he could only research astronomy in secret and wait for the right moment to unleash this powerful weapon.

“Keep this matter quiet. Understand?” Xiao Ming said in a deep voice. He kept it secret to avoid causing unnecessary trouble, especially since the imperial court was still his backing.

After Xie Ziyun was beaten and driven out of his village, unrest in Qingzhou continued for another month before finally calming down. No one dared to speak against Xiao Ming’s policies anymore.

Soon after, private schools throughout the domain began to close, and all the children previously studying there flooded into the public school system.

A decree published in the newspaper made it clear: students in private schools could not participate in the selection of domain officials. They could only take the imperial exams. Meanwhile, students in public schools could take both the domain’s exams and the imperial ones. So why not choose public school?

Most importantly, studying at public school didn’t cost any silver at all.

“Your Highness, this is the Qingzhou Public School. As you requested, it has two sections. Children aged six to twelve study in the building on the left, and those aged thirteen to sixteen are placed in the building on the right. After passing exams here, they may qualify for admission to Bowen Academy.”

As they walked, Zhan Xingchang explained the Qingzhou Public School to Xiao Ming.

The school was located just about a hundred meters from Bowen Academy. It consisted of seventy-two traditional classrooms, lined up with green tiles and red bricks in neat rows.

Each classroom had a blackboard and a teaching platform, showing early signs of modern educational tools.

According to Zhan Xingchang's data, Qingzhou now had a population of 450,000. Around 6,000 children were eligible to attend public school.

The campus was lush with plants, featuring decorative rocks and ponds. There was also a sizeable sports field next to the classrooms. Overall, Xiao Ming was very satisfied with how it had turned out.

During the construction period, he hadn't visited much. But now that emotions in the domain were running high, he believed it was the right time to open the school. This marked the start of his plan to make education accessible to all.

Although Qingzhou's military industry was now close to matching Europe's, Xiao Ming still lagged far behind in terms of talent.

"Admitting 6,000 students at once will be a lot of pressure, but your office must hold strong. Also, I'm not afraid to spend money on education. Remember, teachers must be paid well and chosen carefully. I want teachers who are dedicated to teaching, not slackers. If someone can't even be a proper role model, don't even consider hiring them."

Xiao Ming spoke with a serious tone. What he hated most were teachers who ruined students' futures. He would rather offer high salaries to attract qualified ones.

Zhan Xingchang smiled. In the Great Yu Empire, it was rare for a vassal prince to value education so highly. Most lords and noble families preferred to keep the public uneducated—that made it easier to maintain their power. That mindset had never changed. But here, everything was different.

Just the Qingzhou Public School alone was educating 6,000 people. Across the entire domain, that number could grow to 40,000 or 50,000 at once. That was a staggering figure.

“Yes, Your Highness. I will fully support the public school system without hesitation,” Zhan Xingchang said firmly.

Xiao Ming nodded and added, “Also, don’t make public school too rigid. If students are ready for higher-level learning early, let them advance. That way, we can train useful people faster.”

This time, Xiao Ming didn’t simply copy modern education. In this era, boys could marry and have kids by thirteen, and noble youth could become officials by fifteen or sixteen.

Also, he didn’t need to follow the modern ideal of holistic education—it wasn’t practical for this world. The students just needed to master the knowledge of the 18th century.

That meant their education wouldn’t be as broad or slow as in modern times. By the time they turned eighteen or nineteen, they’d already be contributing to Qingzhou’s development.

Chapter 478: Japanese Uprising in Ryukyu

A gentle warm breeze fluttered the robes of Zhan Xingchang and Xiao Ming.

After inspecting the public school in Qingzhou, Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang continued on to check the construction progress of other public schools in the county outside Qingzhou City. With the school term approaching, Xiao Ming didn't want to delay things for another year.

After confirming that the public schools were ready for students, he ordered all prefectures and counties to start preparing for the opening of school.

At the same time, another farming season had arrived.

"Your Highness, the winter promotion last year was very effective. At the start of spring this year, many commoners came to the government office asking about how to grow potatoes. But we're not sure if we have enough potato sprouts," said Pang Yukun.

With the farming season starting soon, no one was more excited than Pang Yukun. For days, he had been waking up early and personally visiting villagers outside Qingzhou to ask about their farming.

To him, nothing was more important than farming.

"There won't be enough. The current sprouts are probably only enough for the people of Qingzhou. The other counties will have to wait. But I'll figure something out. If the harvest is good this year, I'll set up seed cultivation bases in the other prefectures next year," Xiao Ming said.

In his domain, potatoes could be planted twice a year. The first season was from March to April, with harvests in June or July. The second season was from August to September, with harvests in November or December.

This season was exactly the right time to plant spring potatoes. Starting last year, Xiao Ming had asked Kui Wu to cultivate potato sprouts. But since the initial stock was small, there still weren't many sprouts available.

Pang Yukun looked a bit regretful. He said, "What a pity. If the entire domain could plant this high-yield crop, the people's lives would improve quickly."

"We can't be too greedy. Even if just the people of Qingzhou plant them, the harvest will be substantial. Also, these potatoes were carefully managed by Kui Wu, so the high yield isn't guaranteed in the hands of regular farmers. If they can get three or four times the usual yield, that would already be good."

"Three or four times is already great," Pang Yukun said with satisfaction. Then he asked, "Your Highness, what about corn and chili peppers?"

"We won't give those to the commoners yet. First, we'll use them for the slave plantations. Later, we can promote them to the people. If they want to plant them, we'll give them seeds. If not, that's fine too," Xiao Ming said calmly.

Pang Yukun nodded. Corn and chili didn't produce high yields and were barely enough for the slave plantations anyway.

After a moment, he remembered something and asked, "Your Highness, didn't you say there's a crop even more productive than potatoes? When will we be able to plant that?"

Mentioning it brought a wave of frustration to Xiao Ming. During the last expedition, Yue Yun had risked his life at sea, but unfortunately, they had failed to bring back sweet potatoes.

Sweet potatoes were even more productive than potatoes and could be stored for longer periods.

When Xiao Ming was a child, he often ate sweet potatoes. The surplus would be sliced and dried to make sweet potato strips, which could last a long time.

Sweet potatoes could also be turned into vermicelli, spicy noodles, and other delicious foods.

“It won’t be long. I’ve already asked the Dutch to transport a batch of sweet potatoes to Dengzhou. It should be arriving soon,” Xiao Ming said.

Like potatoes, sweet potatoes originated in the Americas. To the Western powers who had colonized the region, sweet potatoes were nothing new.

So when Xiao Ming asked Claire to buy some, he readily agreed. In his eyes, this was a good start to trade with Dengzhou.

Pang Yukun grew even more excited. “In that case, I’ll be waiting for Your Highness’s good news.”

With that, Pang Yukun and the other officials prepared to go to the countryside to supervise farming.

At the same time, Xiao Ming's mind drifted to Ryukyu. After over a month of training, he thought Yue Yun might now be ready to lead a fleet to take control of the Ryukyu main island.

As he was thinking, the sound of horse hooves echoed outside the governor's office. A scout entered shortly after.

"Your Highness, urgent news from Dengzhou—Ryukyu's main island has been taken by Japanese pirates. Michira Castle has fallen!" the scout reported anxiously.

Xiao Ming frowned. Just when one problem was settled, another came up. He had thought the takeover of Ryukyu would go smoothly. Clearly, something had gone wrong.

"How did Yang Chengye receive this information?" Xiao Ming asked sharply.

The scout replied, "It came from the Dutchman Rhodes. His forces are mostly made up of Japanese mercenaries, and now all of them have betrayed him. Rhodes said if the Dutch fleet hadn't been stationed at Fort Zeelandia, it would've fallen too. Now the Dutch are asking Your Highness to send troops for assistance."

"This situation is getting interesting," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

The timing of the betrayal was too perfect. The only explanation was that Japan was unhappy with the Dutch alliance with Xiao Ming, so they moved first to take Ryukyu and claim it for themselves.



It seemed that the Japanese pirates were overly confident. They must believe they could easily defeat the Great Yu Empire. Otherwise, they wouldn't be planning to invade via Goryeo.

It wasn't confidence, it was arrogance.

After a moment of thought, he said to the scout, "Go back and tell Yue Yun to hold his position for now and wait for reinforcements from Qingzhou. Have Rhodes wait a few more days."

"Yes, Your Highness," the scout replied and quickly left.

Once the scout was gone, Xiao Ming began to think deeply. After spending so much time at the top, he no longer trusted anyone easily, especially when it came to fragile alliances like this one.

He couldn't be sure if Ryukyu's fall was a real Japanese plan or part of a Dutch scheme. If the two were working together to set him up, rushing to help could cost him dearly.

He had to investigate first.

With that in mind, he sent for Wang Xuan. The secret guards were already monitoring Fort Zeelandia. If anything suspicious was happening, Wang Xuan would know.

Soon, Wang Xuan arrived at the governor's office. He seemed unaware of Ryukyu's fall. "Your Highness, I haven't received any reports about Ryukyu yet. But news from that region is slow, it may take a few days."

Xiao Ming nodded. "Once you hear anything, report to Dengzhou immediately."

"Your Highness, are you going to Dengzhou?" Wang Xuan asked.

"Yes. Whether it's Japan's plan or the Dutch's trick, it seems war is unavoidable. The barbarian tribes are already restless. We can't afford any setbacks on our sea routes," Xiao Ming said worriedly.

With that, he set off for the Qingzhou military camp. This time, he had to show his claws.

Chapter 479: Troops March to Dengzhou

"Japanese uprising in Ryukyu?"

At the Qingzhou military camp, the generals, including Niu Ben, grew visibly excited upon hearing that Ryukyu's main island had been taken by Japanese pirates.

Lu Fei shouted, "Your Highness, what are we waiting for? Let's attack Ryukyu right now! I've been so bored these past six months. Nothing but training every day!"

"Without day-after-day training, how can soldiers win battles? You're too impatient," Niu Ben scolded Lu Fei.

Scratching his head, Lu Fei chuckled sheepishly.

Then he added, “Your Highness, the Dutch may not be trustworthy, and Ryukyu is unfamiliar to us. Launching a distant expedition without caution could be dangerous.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. That’s why I’ve ordered the secret guards to gather intelligence. If Ryukyu really has fallen to the Japanese, then we must support the Dutch. Doing so would make us their only ally in East Asia,” Xiao Ming said.

Luo Xin added, “Your Highness, whether it’s the Dutch or the Japanese, if they block our way, we eliminate them. The munitions workshop just delivered 24 field cannons to the artillery unit. We have everything we need.”

“Twenty-four field cannons?” Xiao Ming asked.

When field cannons were being produced, Xiao Ming had ordered Chen Qi to deliver them directly to the military. Apparently, that delivery had just been completed.

“Twelve are six-pound light cannons, the rest are twelve-pound siege cannons,” Luo Xin clarified.

Xiao Ming nodded. The Qingzhou army was now fully equipped with firearms. The 20,000-strong force had completed its firearm modernization.

Along with the newly delivered field cannons, they also had the Tiger Honor cannons. The army’s next task would be to help equip and train the other prefectures’ forces with firearms.

“Since that’s the case, you must be prepared. Unlike fighting the northern tribes, the pirates in Ryukyu are equipped with matchlock guns. You’ll likely face gun-on-gun combat,” Xiao Ming said.

“Yes, Your Highness! We are ready for war at any time!” the generals shouted in unison.

Before leaving, Xiao Ming inspected the field cannons delivered by Chen Qi. These cannons were nearly identical to those used by the Dutch—mounted on wheeled carriages and easily pulled by horses.

“Your Highness, the Qingzhou army now has six hundred war wagons. That’s enough to support the march of thirty thousand troops,” Niu Ben said excitedly. He believed these wagons were the key to dealing with the northern tribes.

With this many war wagons, they could build fortress lines across the grasslands—exactly the strategy Xiao Ming had planned for defending against the tribes.

“Once we take Ryukyu, we’ll head into the grasslands and build our first star-shaped fortress. We’ll call it Ningzhou Fortress,” Xiao Ming declared. He was done with passive defense. It was time to construct a chain of fortresses to push back and contain the enemy.

Sometimes, the best defense is a strong offense. Keeping the enemy outside the border was the true path. With the northern tribes stirring again, he wouldn’t give them the chance they had in Jizhou last time.

For Great Yu's generals, the tribes had always been the empire's greatest threat. That fact had never changed.

With Xiao Ming's promise, Niu Ben grinned. The Qingzhou army had endured tough training in hopes of one day crushing the threat from the north.

After discussing plans to reform the armies in Youzhou and Dengzhou first, Xiao Ming returned to the palace.

On the third day, the secret guard's intelligence arrived in Qingzhou. Wang Xuan appeared at the palace immediately.

"Your Highness, it seems the Dutch were telling the truth. The pirates attacked them. Over 300 Dutch soldiers were killed at Fort Zeelandia. The Japanese now occupy the opposing fortress and are getting constant reinforcements. It looks like they plan to take Fort Zeelandia too," Wang Xuan said gravely.

Upon hearing the report, Xiao Ming suddenly laughed. "These Dutch have truly trapped themselves. Japan is like an untrainable dog—now that it's bitten them, they'll finally learn their lesson."

"Your Highness, you seem... pleased about this?" Wang Xuan asked, confused.

"It's simple," Xiao Ming explained. "The Dutch have been trading with Japan for a long time. Now that the Japanese have attacked them, the Dutch will no longer trust them. That means we'll become their only trade partner. Isn't that a good thing?"

“In that sense, yes,” Wang Xuan realized.

After a brief pause, Xiao Ming instructed, “Keep monitoring Ryukyu and the Japanese movements. Report to me immediately with any updates.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Once Wang Xuan left, Xiao Ming officially ordered Niu Ben to send troops to Dengzhou and prepare for the Ryukyu campaign. Japanese piracy had long been a headache for the Great Yu Empire—since they were pirates, this campaign could rightfully be called a suppression of bandits.

After receiving the order, Niu Ben assigned Lu Fei and Luo Xin to lead 10,000 troops under Xiao Ming’s command for the Ryukyu campaign.

Xiao Ming was pleased with the arrangement. Among all his generals, these two were top-notch. In war, good leadership reduced casualties.

Rhodes was still waiting anxiously in Dengzhou. Once the army was gathered, Xiao Ming led half of Qingzhou’s troops toward Dengzhou City.

On March 16, Xiao Ming arrived in Dengzhou and saw Rhodes, who looked like an ant on a hot pan.

“Prince of Qi, please help us save Fort Zeelandia. We are allies now, please lend your aid in this critical moment!” Rhodes pleaded, grief-stricken.

Rhodes was a mess. his clothes disheveled, his face haggard, his expression filled with desperation. He was no longer the arrogant man he once was. They finally understood how vulnerable they were in East Asia.

“Ambassador Rhodes, calm down. I’ve already learned the situation. But I’ll need you to give us more details,” Xiao Ming replied. In modern history, the Dutch had once been driven out of Ryukyu by 20,000 troops under Zheng Chenggong, proving that even advanced weapons were useless when heavily outnumbered.

Now, the Dutch were experiencing something similar again—the number of Japanese pirates far exceeded their own.

As Qingzhou troops entered the city in neat formation, dressed in uniform and carrying flintlock rifles, followed by horse-drawn field cannons, Rhodes gradually calmed down.

A glimmer of hope rose in his heart. He believed that while Qingzhou’s army might not be superior to the Dutch, they definitely outclassed the Japanese in equipment.

And in numbers, they were sufficient to face the pirates head-on.

“First, three thousand mercenaries attacked Fort Zeelandia. Then five thousand pirates landed on the Ryukyu main island and seized Michira Fortress. More pirates keep arriving by sea—it’s like all the pirates in Japan are coming!” Rhodes said anxiously.

Hearing this, Xiao Ming frowned. “No, that’s only a small part. There are far more Japanese pirates out there.”

#### Chapter 480: Heading to Fort Zeelandia

The sound of ocean waves seemed to echo all the way into the Dengzhou governor’s office, a faint and rhythmic noise drifting in.

Rhodes face turned even paler after Xiao Ming’s words. The number of Japanese pirates already overwhelmed him, and now Xiao Ming was telling him that what they were facing was only a small part of the threat.

“In the coastal raids on the Great Yu Empire, the number of Japanese pirates could reach up to twenty thousand,” Xiao Ming said honestly.

Even for allies, there was no reason to send troops without benefit—especially when their alliance was so fragile. He had to make the threat sound serious to raise the value of their support.

“Twenty thousand...” Rhodes face went completely white. Hesitating for a moment, he said, “Count Claire instructed me to tell Your Highness that if you help us, the Dutch will surely repay you in the future.”

Xiao Ming nodded with satisfaction. That was enough. Saying more would seem like coercion. He replied, “We will head directly to Fort Zeelandia and drive the pirates out of Ryukyu together.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Rhodes said joyfully.



While they spoke, Lu Fei and Luo Xin were staring at Rhodes in a daze. If Xiao Ming hadn't been there, they probably would've blurted out "red-haired ghost" on the spot.

Once the matter was settled, Xiao Ming had Yang Chengye arrange for Rhodes to rest. After he left, Lu Fei let out a long breath. "Your Highness, why do Dutch people look so pale? its creepy"

"Yeah, scary as hell. If I ran into one at night, I'd think it was a ghost," Luo Xin added, still shaken.

"Cut it out, both of you. We're about to work together. You may even exchange training methods. So act respectfully. Don't cause any racial friction over something so petty," Xiao Ming said.

He knew Lu Fei's character—he couldn't keep his mouth shut. The last thing he wanted was a racial incident caused by nonsense like this.

"Hehe, got it," Lu Fei chuckled. "So when do we leave?"

"We'll rest for a few days. We still have to wait for Yue Yun's fleet and the supply convoy," Xiao Ming replied.

As they spoke, a familiar voice came from the door—Yue Yun entered and saluted Xiao Ming before turning to Lu Fei and Luo Xin. "Officers Lu and Officer Luo, now that you're in Dengzhou, you're on my turf. Come on, let me treat you to some seafood."

Lu Fei immediately got excited. “Yue Yun, you’re the real deal. Not stingy like Luo Xin.”

“Hey! You never said that back in Chang’an,” Luo Xin protested.

Lu Fei ignored him, saluted Xiao Ming, and ran off with Yue Yun. Luo Xin, grumbling, followed.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming shook his head. Those two hadn’t changed a bit.

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Ryukyu Main Island, Michira Fortress—a star-shaped fort across the sea from Fort Zeelandia. After the Dutch established Fort Zeelandia in Taiwan, they built Michira Fortress on Ryukyu’s main island to obtain rice and sugarcane.

With this fortress, they had control over the island’s natives.

But half a month ago, the fortress fell to the Japanese pirates. Over 7,000 of them now filled Michira, eating and drinking freely. More pirates continued to arrive by sea. It seemed they were turning it into a permanent pirate base.

On the coast outside the fortress, Sakai was using a telescope to observe Fort Zeelandia. In its bay, twelve Dutch warships formed a protective ring around the docks, leaving no chance for pirate ships to approach.

“Only 700 men? Hmph,” Sakai scoffed as he put away the telescope.

He had once warned the Dutch not to ally with the Prince of Qi, but Rhodes and Count Claire ignored him. When he snuck into Claire’s office and found the trade agreement, he flew into a rage.

To the Japanese, this was a betrayal of Lord Yamada. Once the news was sent back, Yamada ordered that the Dutch be brought under control.

They had underestimated the Dutch soldiers. After losing over a thousand men, the Japanese were forced to retreat. The Dutch fleet then launched a fierce counterattack, costing them another 500 men at sea.

Knowing they weren’t strong enough, Sakai requested more troops. Yamada ordered the pirates loyal to him to stop attacking for now.

So far, 8,000 pirates had arrived by sea. With fifty warships, Sakai was preparing a final assault on Fort Zeelandia.

“Once I gather twenty thousand men, we’ll see how you Dutch escape my grasp. And that damned Great Yu Empire—you’ll all be our slaves eventually,” he muttered.

While Sakai watched Fort Zeelandia, Claire was watching Michira Fortress.

The Dutch troops' morale was dangerously low. Fighting far from home often led to battle fatigue, and their clash with Japan had left many soldiers discouraged.

In Dengzhou, they had witnessed the Prince of Qi's strength. Now, they were under siege by pirates. To many, it seemed like it was time to leave.

Claire wanted to leave too, but as a count and a member of the parliament, he couldn't. He had risked offending Lord Yamada because he believed the Prince of Qi had more potential—and more profit.

Looking north, he frowned. He had no idea what had happened to Rhodes, or whether the Prince of Qi would actually send reinforcements. But he had no choice.

"May God help us," Claire prayed silently.

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Back in Dengzhou, after three days of preparation, Lu Fei and Luo Xin led Qingzhou soldiers onto the warships. Fifteen warships would carry the troops, while fifty large merchant ships were used for transporting supplies.

Moving 10,000 troops was a massive undertaking. Just the food and supplies alone took up enormous space.

This mission would be extremely expensive for Xiao Ming.

“Your Highness, please board,” the generals said.

Xiao Ming planned to go along—not to fight, but to establish coastal supply points. This had been part of his plan since returning from Dengzhou.

By making use of this trip to Fort Zeelandia, he could finally carry it out. Whether it was Prince Wei’s territory, Prince Chu’s, or coastal cities like Guangzhou or Quanzhou...

Maritime trade and naval patrols all required a complete network of supply stations.