

I. Dynasty 491

Chapter 491: Success

From the top floor window of Michira Castle, one can see the entire view of Fort Zeelandia across.

At this moment, Xiao Ming and Claire simultaneously looked at the merchant ships shuttling in the port of Fort Zeelandia. These merchant ships came from Manila and, after being loaded with goods, departed again for the Dutch colony of Manila.

In Manila, the Dutch trading company would transship the goods back to their home country.

Ever since their relationship with the King of Chu deteriorated, and with Japan now attempting to invade Ryukyu, Claire had no choice but to do business with Xiao Ming. After all, Dutch merchants arriving at the port during this period had been complaining about a shortage of goods.

“Your Highness, we have been looking forward to this. Our merchant ships are now docked in the port, awaiting goods. We hope Your Highness can provide us with the goods.” Claire’s expression was solemn.

The recent turmoil in East Asia had severely affected trade.

“Since that is the case, you can now submit your list of required goods to me. I will have merchant ships transport the goods you need back from Dengzhou. Of course, you will have to pay for the goods.”

Claire looked at the calm sea and said, "That is natural. We always abide by business rules. Currently, Europe has a great demand for Great Yu Empire's porcelain, raw silk, silk, and tea leaves. These goods also have relatively high prices in Europe, which are our main trade commodities. We hope Your Highness can provide them to us as soon as possible."

"No problem, I will return to Dengzhou in the next two days, and then the goods will arrive." Xiao Ming smiled. Previously, maritime trade was almost monopolized by the King of Chu. Now, this lucrative business finally fell into his hands. However, remembering something, he asked curiously, "Forgive my presumption, Count Claire, could you tell me how much silver in total flowed into the King of Chu's hands?"

Upon hearing this, Claire frowned, but thinking that he would likely have no more dealings with the King of Chu in the future, he said to Rhodes, "Rhodes, you should know this better than I do."

"Over the past forty years, the silver we handed over to the King of Chu totaled three thousand tons. If calculated according to the Great Yu Empire's measurements, it would be sixty million taels of silver." Rhodes recalled the accounts from those years.

"Sixty million taels of silver!"

Xiao Ming almost jumped out of his chair. He finally understood why the Cao family was so wealthy and why the King of Chu was so fearless. It was all because of too much money.

Closing his eyes, Xiao Ming gently exhaled. He quickly searched for contemporary economic data in the technology crystal. His heart immediately surged with emotion.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, China's overseas trade had a long-term surplus, and for most of that time, the exchange rate of gold and silver was lower than in foreign countries. This made foreigners think they had a bargain, as it was like being able to buy one dollar's worth of goods with one yuan. Who wouldn't be happy about that?

Precisely because of this, Europeans extensively used silver as currency to purchase goods. Initially, this silver mainly flowed in from Spain and Portugal. Later, the Netherlands and England established their absolute dominance in silver export.

This large net inflow of silver generally lasted from the 1570s to the 1830s. Domestic and foreign scholars have made various estimates of the silver inflow into Ming and Qing China, concluding that in the 250 years before 1800, China received nearly 48,000 tons of silver from Europe and Japan, and possibly 10,000 tons or more from Manila. Including other sources, the total amounted to about 60,000 tons of silver, or 1.6 billion taels of silver.

“One point six billion taels of silver!” This figure continuously revolved in Xiao Ming’s mind. In fact, due to the lack of some data, Xiao Ming believed this figure was even severely underestimated, as there was also a lot of unregulated trade in that atmosphere.

Claire noticed Xiao Ming’s expression. He smiled, “This is indeed a considerable sum. However, if Your Highness can genuinely do business with us, I guarantee Your Highness will receive more than the King of Chu. Europe is not lacking in silver now. Besides having large open-pit silver mines in Mexico, the ‘Silver Country,’ Europeans have now discovered that the Peruvian silver mines in South America are even richer than those in Mexico. European countries are now extensively mining them. Oh, pardon me, Your Highness may not know about Mexico and Peru yet.”

When speaking of North and South America, which were dominated by Europe, Claire’s face once again showed the arrogance characteristic of Europeans during this period.

Xiao Ming curled his lips, too lazy to refute Claire, as he found it as uninteresting as a primary school student showing off that one plus one equals something in front of a university student.

“One day, my battleships will tell me where Mexico and Peru are.” Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

Claire and Rhodes exchanged glances, simultaneously suppressing their laughter. Although they admitted that Xiao Ming was powerful in this sea area, it was only in this sea area. In Europe, any country's fleet could easily defeat him.

So, in their view, Xiao Ming was merely telling a bad joke.

“Hmph.”

Xiao Ming discerned from their expressions that they didn't believe such a day would come, and he was too lazy to explain. For him, he preferred to prove himself through action rather than words. Now, he needed to enrich his territory and enhance his overall strength.

Seemingly feeling their behavior was inappropriate, the two men regained their solemn expressions. Claire said, “Your Highness, I hope the goods arrive soon.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Then he and Claire discussed the specific trade details and the establishment of a Dutch liaison office in Dengzhou.

At the same time, to prevent Dutch merchants from engaging in espionage in Dengzhou, Xiao Ming decided to establish trading houses. Dutch merchants could only reside in these trading houses during their stay at the port.

After settling these matters, Xiao Ming officially held a ceremony with Claire in Fort Zeelandia regarding Michira Castle, the main island of Ryukyu, and the stationing of troops in Fort Zeelandia.

According to the agreement, Xiao Ming would station two thousand troops in Michira Castle and two thousand troops in Fort Zeelandia. Six warships from the Qingzhou fleet, including second-class and third-class battleships, would be permanently moored in Fort Zeelandia port. They would also be responsible for escort and patrol missions within a thousand li radius of the Ryukyu waters, and this number would continue to increase.

Having completed all these matters, Xiao Ming had basically gained control over Ryukyu Island and the maritime trade routes. After two days of rest, he prepared to return to Dengzhou.

The sea route was only part of his trade strategy. He had more important matters to accomplish, which was to eliminate the threat from the north. Whether for the purpose of controlling Korea or for his own security, he had to deal with the barbarians.

Because in his view, as long as the barbarians were not destroyed, he would not be able to devote his full attention to solving the problems within the Great Yu Empire.

With a formidable enemy lurking outside, he could not act rashly. This was also why he diligently maintained the current state of the Great Yu Empire.

“Your Highness, in a few days I will personally visit Qingzhou City.”

Below the 'King Qi' ship, Claire, accompanied by officials from Fort Zeelandia, saw Xiao Ming off. Now that Qingzhou and the Netherlands were officially cooperating, he greatly looked forward to earning substantial profits.

Chapter 492: Battleships Launched Like Dumplings

The azure sky was clear, with only a scorching sun remaining, and the infinite sea shimmered with a layer of golden scales.

"Farewell, everyone!"

Facing Claire, Xiao Ming also waved goodbye. Perhaps he wouldn't come to Ryukyu for a long time, as it was only a small part of his strategy. In the next few years, Ryukyu's existence would only be to provide some raw materials for Qingzhou. After all, the population on Ryukyu Island was too small.

The battleship, propelled by the sea breeze, continuously headed north, and gradually Zeelandia narrowed into a vague skyline.

Lu Fei then said, "Your Highness, is Ryukyu ours now?"

"That goes without saying, our army is stationed on Ryukyu Island, but Your Highness, is leaving four thousand troops here too few? All twenty-four field guns are left on the island." Luo Xin felt a bit reluctant.

Xiao Ming shook his head. He understood that many generals, like the two of them, didn't understand why so much was invested in a remote small island. He said, "You won't understand if I tell you now. You will understand the important position of Ryukyu in ocean trade in the future. This is a battleship that will never sink!"

Yue Yun nodded slightly. He understood the value of Ryukyu better than Lu Fei and Luo Xin, as he had led a fleet south and understood Ryukyu's importance.

Seven days later, Xiao Ming and others, who were seasick from drifting on the sea, finally returned to Dengzhou. This expedition was the first overseas combat for Xiao Ming leading the soldiers of the Great Yu Empire. Although it was about reclaiming territory that was originally theirs, the great significance of this act would surely be recorded in history. For more chapters visit NOvelFire.net

After all, this was the first time the Great Yu Empire extended its reach overseas.

After docking properly in the military port, Xiao Ming then said to Yue Yun, "The patrolling of battleships cannot stop. From now on, you must completely control the sea trade routes and not let the Japanese pirates attack merchant ships on the routes."

"Yes, Your Highness, but what if we discover the merchant ships of Prince Chu and Prince Wei? Do we also need to escort them?" Yue Yun asked.

Xiao Ming glared at Yue Yun, "Are you stupid? I spent so much silver to build the Qingzhou Navy, and the soldiers bled and sacrificed to capture Ryukyu. Is it ultimately to serve them? Tell those merchant ships that if they want to engage in sea trade, they should come to Qingzhou to get permits, otherwise, they should go back where they came from. If they dare to disobey, force can be used for deterrence."

Yue Yun looked embarrassed. He said, "Your Highness is right to scold me. This route was snatched back from the Dutch by us, and now it should be ours. The profits generated by the route should also be ours."

"That's more like it." Xiao Ming nodded.

After disembarking from the battleship, Xiao Ming and his entourage did not immediately go to Dengzhou city, but went to the shipyard at the military port to find Zhang Liang and inquire about the construction of battleships.

At this time, on the beach of the military port, twelve third-class sailing battleships were under construction, six of which had basically taken shape. They met Zhang Liang on the beach.

“Your Highness.”

Seeing Xiao Ming and his entourage approaching, Zhang Liang immediately put down his work and came over.

“Not bad, when can these six battleships be delivered?” Xiao Ming said with a smile. He was very short of battleships now, and the current fifteen battleships could not meet the current operational requirements at all.

Moreover, in this battle of Ryukyu, he had completely laid his cards on the table with Japan. The conflicts at sea would only increase, and the coastline of the Great Yu Empire was long. Even for escorting, a large number of battleships would need to be commissioned.

“If there are no surprises, these six battleships can be launched in another three months, and there are eight more battleships in the other two shipyards that can also be launched. That is to say, a total of fourteen battleships will be launched by then.” Zhang Liang was triumphant.

Because of Xiao Ming's trade with Prince Chu and the imperial court, the shipyards in Dengzhou suddenly had many skilled craftsmen, and these people greatly accelerated the speed of shipbuilding.

And the three shipyards also increased the number of battleships launched in the same batch.

"Fourteen ships, well, that should be enough for at least this year." Xiao Ming looked at Yue Yun, "Do you have enough crew members to operate fourteen ships?"

Yue Yun immediately ran into difficulty. He said, "Your Highness, the speed of battleship launching is too fast, it's catching up with our training speed. Three months is really difficult."

Xiao Ming frowned. This was within his expectation. According to Claire, their merchant ship crew could be transformed into battleship sailors at any time. Over the years, they had unknowingly accumulated the backbone of a navy.

However, the Qingzhou Navy developed too late. If they proceeded step by step like this, they would not be able to keep up. He said, "We can't just recruit sailors in Dengzhou. After all, the fishing villages in Dengzhou are limited. You can try to attract fishermen from other places to settle in Dengzhou with generous treatment. In addition, coastal pirates are rampant, and these pirates are born sailors. When capturing them, you can also absorb some crew members from them."

"Your Highness, this is a good method. There are many pirates imprisoned in Dengzhou's great prison, many of whom are homeless and forced to join pirates. This subordinate will go and select some later." Yue Yun said.

Upon hearing this, Zhang Liang's face became even more triumphant. Before, it was Yue Yun urging them to speed up, and now it was finally his turn to lack manpower.

After inspecting the military port's shipyard, Xiao Ming, led by Zhang Liang, went to the second and third shipyards located at the north gate of Dengzhou. Now, these shipyards were under his unified management.

In the past, he only managed a small Qingzhou shipyard, which was incomparable to now, as he was now quite comfortable and satisfied.

The second and third shipyards were not far from the military port, also for unified scheduling. As Zhang Liang said, there were four nearly completed battleships in both shipyards.

After inspecting the shipyards, Xiao Ming and Lu Fei and others headed towards Dengzhou city. On the way, they could occasionally see Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce carriages transporting salt, and even some carriages transporting dried sea fish. These two were the main profitable goods in Dengzhou.

In Dengzhou city, Xiao Ming met Yang Chengye. He originally wanted to return directly to Qingzhou, but thinking of the importance of maritime trade, he decided to instruct him further, reminding him to pay attention to the construction of merchant houses and foreign affairs offices.

"The most important thing is the construction of the port. In the future, Dengzhou Port will become the port with the largest throughput. From now on, you must build a large number of warehouses near the port to store goods," Xiao Ming instructed. "Moreover, you must also produce wooden boxes, which can then be sold to merchants, and warehouses can be rented to sea merchants. In addition, docking at the port requires fees. This one port alone will be enough to make Dengzhou immensely wealthy."

Chapter 493: Amazing Motivation

“Hahahaha...”

In the government office, Yang Chengye’s laughter was unrestrained and filled with excitement. Under Xiao Ming’s description, he was full of aspirations for the future, and even his desire to enter the cabinet had decreased.

“Your Highness, this official represents the people of Dengzhou to thank Your Highness.” Yang Chengye stopped smiling, his expression devout.

“There’s no need for thanks. I have created the conditions for you, but if you cannot fully utilize them to develop Dengzhou, I will not forgive you then,” Xiao Ming said with a warning in his joking tone.

Yang Chengye nodded, “Your Highness, rest assured, this official guarantees that no officials in Dengzhou’s official circles will take advantage of the situation to seek personal gain or oppress merchants.”

“Hmm, I trust you,” Xiao Ming said lightly. Official source is novel-fire.net

After instructing Yang Chengye, Xiao Ming’s trip to Dengzhou was basically complete. He did not stay long in Dengzhou and returned to Qingzhou with the Qingzhou army the next day.

The battle of Ryukyu made him realize that his military strength was still too weak. Although the battle of Ryukyu was victorious, in his opinion, Japan alone could tie up most of his troops.

This time he dispatched half of the Qingzhou army, but the Japanese pirates were just a ragtag group of pirates, which could not reflect Japan's true fighting power.

Moreover, the barbarians he faced were much harder to deal with than Japan. A full-scale war might severely weaken him, so, in addition to the Qingzhou army, he had to arm the armies of other prefectures.

From now on, the armies of various prefectures would be responsible for different battle zones.

After three more days on the road, Xiao Ming returned to Qingzhou City. This time, he had been away for almost a month again.

Although he was very busy, the achievements he made were also good. From then on, Qingzhou would have a continuous source of wealth, which would provide support for him to continue strengthening the army.

The news of Xiao Ming's return quickly alarmed Pang Yukun. As the chief minister of the enfeoffed state, he was responsible for managing all matters big and small in the state when Xiao Ming was not present.

Despite this, he still had to ask Xiao Ming for instructions on some major issues.

So, before Xiao Ming even returned to the Prince's Mansion, he was stopped by Pang Yukun on the way. Xiao Ming, helpless, had no choice but to go to the government office with him for a discussion.

“Your Highness, the first round of examinations at Bowen Academy has ended. A total of two hundred and thirty-seven students passed the examination. How should these people’s positions be arranged? Please instruct, Your Highness.”

Pang Yukun was having a headache over this issue. The examination questions were all set by Xiao Ming, with different subjects for different positions. Now, students in political affairs, law, and commerce had all achieved excellent results.

“Two hundred and thirty-seven people?” Xiao Ming was a little surprised. These students of the political affairs academy were really working hard. It seemed that the Great Yu Empire’s emphasis on official positions had not diminished at all for these students. After pondering for a moment, he said, “First, draft a list for me, and also provide me with a copy of the identities and backgrounds of these students.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Pang Yukun breathed a sigh of relief. Appointing officials was a major matter, and he had always been cautious in his work, not wanting to arouse Xiao Ming’s suspicion in this sensitive matter.

After discussing the Qingzhou examination, Pang Yukun continued, “Your Highness, there is also news from Chang’an. Empress Zhao has given birth to a little prince, and the Emperor is greatly pleased and has declared a general amnesty. It is said that the Second Prince is also within the scope of the amnesty. Although his princely status is not guaranteed, he has been allowed to return to the capital.”

Zhan Xingchang was also in the government office. He observed Xiao Ming’s expression and, seeing that Xiao Ming’s expression was calm, asked, “Your Highness, aren’t you angry at all?”

“What’s there to be angry about? Father Emperor originally didn’t want to deal with the Second Prince like this, but the evidence was conclusive. He only demoted the Second Prince to Bazhou to appease me.

Now that Empress Zhao has given birth to a dragon son, he has a good reason to summon the Second Prince back,” Xiao Ming said.

“The Emperor is ultimately the Emperor. His doing this is also to tell Your Highness who is the master of the Great Yu Empire,” Pang Yukun said, narrowing his eyes slightly.

Xiao Ming smiled wryly and shook his head. Pang Yukun saw it very clearly. Emperor Xiaowenxuan was unwilling to demote the Second Prince in the first place. If he had really ruined another prince because of Xiao Ming, his position as Emperor would have been disgraceful.

So, this amnesty for the Second Prince was also to establish his authority before the ministers, telling the court officials that his, Emperor Xiaowenxuan’s, majesty was still inviolable.

“You are very right, but I am not interested in court affairs now. Now that I have opened up the sea routes, the priority is to make the people of the enfeoffed territory prosperous,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Upon learning that the sea routes had been opened, Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang both smiled. Pang Yukun said, “Since the sea routes are open, this official looks forward to counting silver every day.”

At this point, the three of them laughed simultaneously, full of longing for the future.

As they were talking, someone suddenly walked in from outside. Seeing Xiao Ming, the person hurriedly said, “Your Highness, you’re back.”

“Lin Wentao.” Seeing the person, Xiao Ming smiled.

Pang Yukun then said, “Your Highness, while you were away, this fellow came to the government office every day, asking when Your Highness would return. I don’t know what treasure he has created.”

“This is definitely a treasure. Now the steam engine workshop has produced five steam engines, two of which we have combined with drilling machines, and three have been combined with boring machines, turning into steam drilling machines and steam boring machines,” Lin Wentao said excitedly.

“Steam drilling machine?” Xiao Ming was surprised to hear this. The power of a water-powered drilling machine and a steam-powered drilling machine were not on the same level. He said, “Not bad, not bad. Your steam engine workshop’s efficiency is quite good.”

Lin Wentao immediately smiled and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, would you like to visit the lathe workshop now?”

“Let’s go. This is such a big matter, I naturally want to observe it.” Xiao Ming turned to Pang Yukun and said, “You, as the chief minister, also need to understand what a steam engine is. Let’s go together.”

Pang Yukun was originally not interested in these machines, but ever since he learned that these machines could increase production by hundreds of times, he had no choice but to take them seriously.

Following Lin Wentao to the lathe workshop, at this time, three lathes in the workshop had been replaced by steam engine power, instead of the original water power.

At the connection points of the three drilling machines, there was a small steam engine. One craftsman was responsible for adding fuel to the steam engine, and another craftsman was responsible for constantly monitoring the work of the drilling machine.

Compared to the slow water-powered drilling machine, the steam-powered drilling machine was very fast, and the drill bit rotated at a very even speed.

Xiao Ming asked, “How long does it take for such a drilling machine to drill a gun barrel?”

“It only takes one shichen,” the craftsman replied.

“One shichen per gun barrel, that’s twelve gun barrels a day. Five hundred machines would be six thousand gun barrels a day.” Xiao Ming was shocked in his heart. This was the difference in power.

*In traditional Chinese timekeeping, a “shichen” (时辰) is a period of time, typically two hours long, within a day.

Chapter 494: Ideological Shifts

The roar of the machines was as pleasant as beautiful music.

The combination of the steam engine and the drilling machine was a huge power revolution for the Great Yu Empire, but for Xiao Ming, this was not enough, because a single steam engine driving only one drilling machine was a huge waste of mechanical power.

In fact, in the Industrial Revolution, one steam engine was meant to drive multiple machines, which was the true value of the steam engine. And to make one machine drive several lathes required the perfect application of connecting rods and crankshafts.

So, he said, “Lin Wentao, for Qingzhou, this is a great step forward, but have you ever thought about having one steam engine drive multiple machine tools? I remember telling you about the problem of connecting rods and crankshafts. One connecting rod, one crankshaft, might be able to drive two, three, or even four drilling machines. In this way, a workshop might only need four or five steam engines to drive hundreds of lathes, and this will greatly improve the utilization efficiency of the steam engine.”

“Your Highness, Zhang Liu and I are considering this problem. Zhang Liu is currently researching how to make one crankshaft drive five drilling machines simultaneously. If successful, we will continue to consider driving more machinery. After all, Your Highness has instructed us to produce a considerable number of Jenny looms. If each machine requires a steam engine, our steam engine workshop will not be able to handle it,” Lin Wentao said seriously.

Xiao Ming nodded. He was relieved that Lin Wentao was already working on this. He didn’t want Europe to surpass them in industry in this era either, at least in some areas, he wanted to be ahead.

This time, he had an in-depth conversation with Claire in Zeelandia, and Claire was full of confidence in Europe’s development, which meant that at least for now, Claire believed they were still in the lead.

“That sets me at ease. You and Zhang Liu must speed up and get the steam engines to drive the spinning machines as soon as possible,” Xiao Ming instructed. “Qingzhou’s textile industry depends on you.”

Upon hearing this, Lin Wentao immediately felt the burden on his shoulders increase, but restoring magical machines from books was his only interest at the moment, and he was full of enthusiasm.

After observing the drilling machines driven by steam engines, Xiao Ming and his entourage left the workshop. The steam engine had just been invented, and further research was still needed. He was still counting on using steam locomotives to connect the enfeoffed territory into a whole.

Moreover, to truly suppress the barbarians, steam locomotives were also essential, because in this way, he could transport troops and supplies to the grasslands via steam locomotives. The barbarians, losing their cavalry mobility advantage, would forever submit at his feet.

However, these scenes he could only imagine for now. After all, just building steam locomotives and railway tracks was a huge project. For this, he needed a large number of slaves as laborers.

“This steam engine has truly opened my eyes. It is indeed as remarkable as Your Highness said. If the steam engine is popularized in the enfeoffed state, it will increase the productivity of the enfeoffed state by a hundredfold.”

The group walked leisurely along the Xiaoqing River outside the workshop, and Pang Yukun let out a sigh of admiration.

Zhan Xingchang was also speechless. The rapid changes in Qingzhou had caught him a bit off guard as well. Now, he and Pang Yukun often went to the Bowen Academy library to read.

These books were all written by Xiao Ming stroke by stroke and then published by the newspaper office. From these political affairs books, they seemed to have entered a whole new world.

Especially the world geography knowledge in the library, he learned for the first time that there were such dangerous and powerful countries outside the Great Yu Empire. On the entire world map, the Great Yu Empire was just a small corner, and their enfeoffed state was just a small dot on the map.

Today, Xiao Ming was very happy because of the steam engine. He said, "Now you should understand how much the Great Yu Empire has fallen behind, right? Many Western countries are still ahead of us. If we don't strive to catch up, we will be beaten sooner or later."

Pang Yukun's expression became solemn. He had also seen the world map in the library, which even marked the colonial territories of Western countries worldwide.

He said, "Before, I didn't understand Your Highness's painstaking efforts, always thinking that the Great Yu Empire was a celestial kingdom, destined for a magnificent scene where all nations came to pay tribute. But now I finally understand that I was merely a frog in a well. From now on, I will fully cooperate with Your Highness."

"I as well," Zhan Xingchang said.

Xiao Ming smiled. Pang Yukun was the chief minister of the enfeoffed state, and it was rare for him to change his way of thinking. With the explosion of technology in Qingzhou, the political system of the enfeoffed state must also adapt to the times.

Now that Pang Yukun had expressed his stance like this, he felt at ease.

"Not bad, you haven't become completely ossified," Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

Pang Yukun gave an embarrassed smile and said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, I wonder what you saw and heard during your trip to Ryukyu. Could you tell this official about it?"

Ever since he came into contact with the Dutch, Xiao Ming felt it was necessary to popularize current world knowledge in official circles to cope with the enfeoffed state's overseas trade. So, by the river, while admiring the spring water, he told Pang Yukun and others about the Dutch in Zeelandia and the war with Japan.

Everyone listened, frequently expressing exclamations of surprise. Their eyes had truly been opened.

After chatting by the river for a while, seeing that it was getting late, he and the others returned to the city and went their separate ways.

In the Prince's Mansion, Fei Yuer had been waiting for Xiao Ming all afternoon.

She learned that Xiao Ming had entered the city at noon, but she waited and waited and still didn't see Xiao Ming return until evening.

"Your Highness, you must have been stopped by Chief Minister Pang on the way again," Fei Yuer said, looking at Xiao Ming reproachfully, while dusting off his cloak.

A short separation is better than a new marriage. Seeing Fei Yuer, Xiao Ming felt warm inside. The feeling of having a virtuous wife waiting at home while he was away was subtle. He grabbed Fei Yuer's small hand and said, "Princess, did you miss me?"

Fei Yuer said with a mix of coquetry and annoyance, “No, it would be good if Your Highness stayed away for two months.”

“Hahahaha...” Xiao Ming was amused by Fei Yuer’s womanly demeanor. He pulled Fei Yuer into his arms and said, “My trip to Ryukyu was not in vain. This time I brought back a lot of sugarcane. In the next two days, I will have the craftsmen refine white sugar. With white sugar, I can make hard candy for you.”

“White sugar? What’s hard candy?” Fei Yuer looked surprised.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Princess, don’t worry, you’ll know in a couple of days. This thing is very delicious.”

“Alright, Your Highness must not deceive your humble wife,” Fei Yuer said.

Xiao Ming nodded lightly. Another gain from his return from Ryukyu this time was white sugar.

Chapter 495: Fanatical Merchants

After a night of tenderness, Xiao Ming woke up lazily at noon the next day.

The month of travel had exhausted him, and having been separated from Fei Yuer for a month, they spent time frolicking and whispering sweet nothings in bed.

Moreover, for Xiao Ming, reports from Pang Yukun and others were one thing, but Fei Yuer's personal account was another.

"The Confucians have truly become 'rats crossing the street' as Your Highness calls them, with everyone shouting to beat them," Fei Yuer told Xiao Ming about the changes after the last Confucian disturbance. "However, my father sent a letter from Chang'an, saying that there is much criticism in the court regarding this matter. Officials led by Cui Hao even publicly denounced Your Highness in court for defying Confucian classics and disrespecting Confucianism, even demanding that the Emperor strip Your Highness of the title of two-pearl prince."

"Hmph, these petty individuals."

Xiao Ming showed disdain. It was precisely because of these treacherous individuals in court, who only attacked their colleagues, that the court affairs were increasingly neglected.

"What else did Chancellor Fei say?" Xiao Ming asked, as Fei Ji generally wouldn't write to him unless it was a major matter.

"Father also said that the Emperor suddenly fainted some days ago and has not been as healthy since waking up. He also misses morning court every now and then," Fei Yuer's expression grew serious as she spoke.

"If I'm not mistaken, Father Emperor is fifty-nine years old today, right?" Xiao Ming pondered.

Fei Yuer nodded, "Father said the same in his letter."

Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. Fei Ji mentioning this in his letter must have a deeper meaning, perhaps he believed that Emperor Xiaowenxuan truly didn't have many years left to live.

And for Xiao Ming, it was already not easy for Emperor Xiaowenxuan to live to this age. After all, Emperor Wu of Han only lived to sixty-nine, and the average lifespan of emperors in contemporary history was only around thirty-nine.

"Hmm, I understand."

Xiao Ming frowned. Emperor Xiaowenxuan was currently the balancing point of the Great Yu Empire. He didn't wish for Emperor Xiaowenxuan to fall so soon, as he didn't want to lose a stable environment for development.

However, if it truly happened, he could only adapt to the circumstances. Fei Ji mentioning this was merely a reminder to him to be prepared.

After all, the ministers were all aware that Emperor Xiaowenxuan was ill, but perhaps not many knew about his fainting, otherwise, it would have caused a huge stir in the court and among the public.

After some small talk, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer washed up, dressed, and had a simple meal before he headed to the industrial district.

Xiao Ming had given instructions regarding white sugar upon his return to Qingzhou. The sugarcane he had transported back from Ryukyu was also shipped to Qingzhou upon his return, along with the craftsmen from the white sugar workshop on Ryukyu Island.

These craftsmen would be responsible for helping Xiao Ming establish a white sugar workshop in Qingzhou and train a group of sugar-making craftsmen. As for the sulfurous acid needed for refining white sugar, he had also sent someone to inform Lu Tong upon his return.

“Your Highness, we officials have brought the sulfurous acid.” Lu Tong was already waiting for Xiao Ming in the industrial district. In his hand was a glass bottle containing sulfurous acid solution.

The manufacturing process of sulfurous acid is actually very simple: high-temperature calcination of sulfur to obtain sulfur dioxide, which is then passed into water to obtain sulfurous acid. This process was not a problem for Lu Tong and others, as they were already capable of preparing sulfuric acid.

“From now on, your chemistry workshop will be responsible for providing sulfurous acid solution to the white sugar workshop. I hope to see clean white sugar within these two days,” Xiao Ming said.

The significance of white sugar to him was not just about consumption, but more importantly, it would provide another industrial category for Qingzhou, moving him further towards a complete industrial system.

Lu Tong had already learned Xiao Ming’s purpose for the sulfurous acid. He nodded at this point, also very interested in white sugar. In his opinion, this was also a wonderful chemical reaction.

At this time, the craftsmen from Ryukyu, with the cooperation of the craftsmen from the machinery department, were already producing the equipment needed for the white sugar workshop, and Chen Wenlong had selected an empty house from the industrial district and handed it over to these craftsmen.

After inspecting the preliminary preparations for the white sugar workshop, Xiao Ming had a plan in mind. In his opinion, formal production would take at least seven days.

While he was instructing the craftsmen, a sudden clamor came. Xiao Ming looked towards the source of the sound and saw Li Kaiyuan almost being pushed towards him by merchants. The leading merchants were Cao Zhengyang, Ding Wu, and Dai Zixing.

Upon reaching him, Li Kaiyuan looked helpless. He said, “Your Highness, this official couldn’t help it. I originally intended to come and find Your Highness in a couple of days, as Your Highness needs time to rest after a long journey. But the merchants of the chamber of commerce are all like ants on a hot pan right now, and this official really couldn’t stop them.”

“What’s going on, why are you all so excited?” Xiao Ming’s eyes swept across the faces of the merchants.

These merchants all looked excited, their mouths agape, revealing their teeth, as if they had encountered a great joyous event.

Cao Zhengyang had now become the representative of the merchants. He said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, it is said that the Qingzhou Navy went south this time to reclaim Ryukyu, and reached an agreement with the Dutch. From now on, the sea trade routes will belong to Your Highness.”

As Cao Zhengyang spoke, the other merchants all eagerly waited for Xiao Ming to confirm the news.

“As expected of the Cao family, your news is very well-informed. That’s right, I have reclaimed Ryukyu, and have stationed troops in Zeelandia. From now on, the coastal routes are under my control.”

As soon as Xiao Ming finished speaking, the merchants suddenly fell silent.

Then, a huge cheer suddenly erupted.

“Your Highness has great talent and strategy, and will surely be remembered in history!”

“This is a great achievement that will benefit generations!”

“Wise, Your Highness!”

“ ... ”

The merchants were all overjoyed beyond measure. They had long coveted maritime trade, and now knowing that the right to maritime trade was in Xiao Ming’s hands, how could they not be excited?

Among them, Cao Zhengyang was the most excited. Ever since the relationship between Prince Chu and the Dutch broke down, the Cao family’s maritime trade plummeted. Now, he had finally found an opportunity to revitalize the Cao family.

“Your Highness, does this mean that from now on, we can sell goods through maritime trade?” Cao Zhengyang asked expectantly.

“Of course not.” Xiao Ming’s words were like a bucket of cold water poured on the merchants’ heads, but his next sentence gave them hope again, “Only merchants under the unified jurisdiction of the Chamber of Commerce can conduct maritime trade, and all merchant ships engaged in maritime trade must pay taxes. If anyone dares to evade taxes in my enfeoffed territory, they will forever lose the right to maritime trade.”

“Your Highness, paying taxes is a matter of course. We will certainly not engage in fraud,” Ding Wu guaranteed.

“Your Highness, rest assured, we absolutely dare not.”

“...”

The merchants spoke one after another, patting their chests in assurance.

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Noisy and enthusiastic sounds kept coming from among the merchants.

Looking at these merchants, Xiao Ming couldn’t help but shake his head. Only a ghost would believe a merchant’s promise. However, now that the maritime trade routes were open, Xiao Ming also wanted to profit from maritime trade as soon as possible.

And for him, the most direct way to profit was through commercial taxes. After all, he couldn't undertake all maritime trade by himself, and most importantly, he didn't have enough manpower.

So he wanted to establish a maritime trading company with the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce as its core and other merchants as its appendages. This company would be similar to the contemporary Dutch East India Company.

Surrounded by the merchants, Xiao Ming naturally couldn't continue to dwell on the white sugar matter. Now that the merchants had learned about the maritime trade routes, he needed to carefully consider how to maximize profits.

He asked the merchants to leave first, and he returned to the Chamber of Commerce with Li Kaiyuan.

For the past two years, Xiao Ming had been teaching Li Kaiyuan business knowledge beyond this era. On this matter, he tentatively asked Li Kaiyuan, "How do you think we should handle the maritime trade routes?"

After a moment of contemplation, Li Kaiyuan said, "Your Highness, I believe that the right to maritime trade should be opened to merchants. However, any merchant wishing to engage in maritime trade must obtain a permit from the Chamber of Commerce, otherwise, it will easily lead to chaos in maritime trade, and these permits will also be the proof of merchants paying taxes."

"Hmm, anything else?"

“While opening up maritime trade rights to merchants, the Chamber of Commerce must play a leading role in maritime trade. We eat the meat, and let the merchants eat the scraps. This way, we can maximize profits,” Li Kaiyuan said.

Xiao Ming looked at Li Kaiyuan in surprise. This fellow had made great progress. He was right, the plate of maritime trade was huge, and the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce couldn’t eat all of it. At this time, merchants were needed to eat some of the scraps, while they would eat the most abundant parts.

In terms of trade, this meant that the Chamber of Commerce would take the most profitable businesses, leaving the less profitable ones to the merchants, and he could also collect taxes from the merchants.

“You’ve made rapid progress in the past two years. It seems I was right to choose you as the vice-president of this Chamber of Commerce,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Li Kaiyuan chuckled and said, “It’s still Your Highness’s sharp eye that can turn this small fish like me into a carp.”

“Don’t be modest. Since we’re talking about commerce, do you have any other ideas?”

“Yes,” Li Kaiyuan said solemnly, “Your Highness, ninety percent of the merchants in the Chamber of Commerce are from out of town, and there has been almost no growth in local merchants. I believe that we should support local people to become merchants. After all, the merchants in the Chamber of Commerce are quite mixed now, and their backgrounds are not simple.”

“You are right, this is also a problem that I am pondering.” Xiao Ming’s expression became serious, “Continue.”

Li Kaiyuan cleared his throat and said, "Your Highness, some production technologies should be opened to the common people, just like building roads last time. The government office can lend silver to the common people, allowing them to pay patent fees to open private workshops. In this way, our slaves can be freed from some low-profit industries to do more important things."

"Yes, you are right. This time, I am going to promote the development of private capital and activate the capital within the enfeoffed state," Xiao Ming said, tapping the table. "And I also have a few technologies that I plan to open up. As for the matter of loans, I think the banks in various prefectures should also start operating."

"Exactly, we've been preparing these banks for quite some time. Cao family's money house has taken advantage of this period, and now we need to reclaim it," Li Kaiyuan smiled wickedly.

Mentioning the banks, the two went together to find Pang Yukun. The matter of the six prefectural banks had always been handled by him, and he was the one who knew the situation best.

Upon arriving at the government office, Xiao Ming spoke to Pang Yukun about the banks. He immediately led Xiao Ming and Li Kaiyuan to the East Market, and in a row of shops along the street in the East Market, he saw the official bank with the plaque "Qingzhou Bank".

"Your Highness, this is it. The bank has been open to the public for a month now, but there are very few people coming to the bank, even less lively than the Cao family's money house," Pang Yukun sighed.

Li Kaiyuan hurriedly explained, "However, Your Highness, the Cao family's money house is lively because of the merchants. Common people rarely go to the Cao family's money house."

Whether it was a bank or a money house, it was an unfamiliar concept to the people of the enfeoffed state. They would rather hide their silver at home than deposit it in a bank.

Even though Xiao Ming was very popular, the common people had their own small calculations.

The facade of Qingzhou Bank was almost identical to that of Cao family's money house, both resembling a prison, with the accountants enclosed inside and the public conducting deposits and withdrawals from outside.

Xiao Ming glanced at the plaque and walked in with Pang Yukun.

This plot of land was bought by the government office from a merchant, valuing the pedestrian traffic of the East Market, but now this place had become the quietest area.

The three young accountants in Qingzhou Bank, seeing Pang Yukun and Xiao Ming enter, immediately straightened up from their languid state, sitting upright and attentive.

"Your Highness, this Qingzhou Bank is just like this now, neither alive nor dead. This official has no other way," Pang Yukun, after all, was not proficient in finance and was at a loss.

For me, the bank was an important means to stimulate the development of private capital in the next step. I asked one of the accountants, "How exactly do you handle the public's deposit and withdrawal services?"

“Same as the Cao family’s money house, we collect some silver to help the common people deposit their silver in the bank, and at the same time, we issue them bank drafts,” the accountant said.

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming’s face immediately turned green. This was exactly what he expected when he hadn’t instructed Pang Yukun on how to operate the bank.

He sighed and said to Pang Yukun, “From now on, no silver shall be collected for deposits and withdrawals from the common people. Furthermore, tell them that their silver can even earn interest in the bank.”

“Earn interest! Your Highness, wouldn’t we lose money for nothing?” Pang Yukun asked, confused.

Xiao Ming said, “How would we lose? The bank collects silver, then lends this silver to the common people to open workshops. A portion of interest can be collected from these lent silver. We are the ones making something out of nothing.”

Pang Yukun didn’t react immediately. After pondering for a while, he suddenly realized, “Your Highness, how clever, truly clever! This means we use other people’s silver to make money, and then give a portion of that earned money to the common people.”

“Exactly. For example, if the common people deposit silver, they can get an interest of three per thousand per month. When we lend silver, we can collect five per thousand. In any case, the government office will not suffer a loss. This is banking finance, Chief Minister Pang, you should learn from Li Kaiyuan on this point,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

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“Your Highness is making fun of me. As Your Highness said, indeed, learning has no end.”

In the bank, Pang Yukun repeatedly waved his hand, looking ashamed.

“Chief Minister Pang, there’s no need to blame yourself. Ultimately, this was also my mistake. I should have told you these things in advance. How about this, when I return, I will compile the key points of bank operations into a book,” Xiao Ming said.

Not to mention in the Great Yu Empire, even in Europe, the banking industry was just starting. However, for me, I could quickly catch up because I possessed comprehensive knowledge of the financial industry.

Li Kaiyuan added, “Your Highness, besides the specific banking services, the government office should also promote this matter to the common people. After all, most of the common people do not know about this. At the same time, in order to compete with the Cao family’s money house for merchants, I believe that the location for merchants to pay taxes can be set in the banks of various prefectures. In this way, carrying the permit issued by the Chamber of Commerce to the bank to pay silver, the merchants will take the banks of various prefectures seriously.”

This was exactly what Xiao Ming was planning next. He gave Li Kaiyuan a thumbs up. This guy was very flexible.

He said, “The matter of merchants will be left to you. The matter of promotion will be left to me and Chief Minister Pang. I will be responsible for the newspaper’s promotion of Qingzhou Bank, and Chief Minister Pang will arrange for officials from various prefectures to be responsible for promoting the bank in various counties. This matter cannot be delayed, because I am still counting on the bank to stimulate the common people to open workshops.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Pang Yukun said.

Having settled this matter, the three returned to handle their respective duties. Xiao Ming went directly to the newspaper office, instructing Fan Zeng to publish articles explaining what a bank is, its function, and how to conduct deposits and withdrawals at the bank. He also asked Fan Zeng to have reporters emphasize this matter.

After settling the draft with Fan Zeng at the newspaper office, Fan Zeng printed the newspaper overnight, and the next day, the newspaper began to circulate throughout the enfeoffed state.

“Bank? Isn’t that the Qingzhou Bank in the East Market?” Three merchants gathered around, looking at the newspaper, and one of them said.

“No, I remember every prefecture has one,” another merchant said.

“Where the bank is isn’t the point. The key is that depositing silver in this bank can earn interest,” said the merchant holding the newspaper. “And you can also borrow silver from the bank, which is much more affordable than the Cao family’s money house.”

“It’s affordable, but what if the government office defaults on the debt? We can’t do anything to the government office. If the Cao family owes money, we can at least make a fuss.”

“That’s not right. This is a draft personally written by His Highness. Should we not trust His Highness, but trust the Cao family instead?”

“True, but the Cao family will probably have a hard time. With this bank, what do we need their money house for?”

“ ...”

At Cao family's money house, Cao Zhengyang's face was extremely ugly. Ever since he lived in Qingzhou, reading the Qingzhou newspaper every day had been his habit, but the news published in the newspaper today was undoubtedly a rude awakening for him.

Xiao Ming had discussed the matter of Qingzhou Bank with him before, and at that time, Xiao Ming clearly stated that the two would not interfere with each other, which was an agreement reached through an exchange of interests.

Despite this, he had always been very fearful of the official opening of Qingzhou Bank, because it meant that Cao family's money house would no longer be the only place merchants could go in Qingzhou.

Once this happened, the Cao family's standing in the merchants' minds would decrease, and the Cao family's status in Qingzhou would also decrease.

Over the years, the Cao family had deep contacts with the Dutch. He knew that the Dutch banking industry was controlled by big merchants, and precisely because of this, these merchant families were highly respected in the Netherlands, because the money of the state and the common people were all in the banks.

Inspired by this, the Cao family diligently built the Cao family's money house, and over the years, they had indeed benefited greatly from it. Many people thought that the Cao family only earned a lot of silver from the sea, but they did not know that they also accumulated a large amount of wealth through the money house.

The Cao family's emblem was a ship with the pattern of the Cao family's money house.

"Second Young Master, should we send this news back?" The manager of the money house also read the newspaper, and was equally worried at this time.

Cao Zhengyang sighed, "Of course we have to send it back. We underestimated Prince Qi. Maritime trade, banking, the two carriages that the Cao family started with are firmly in his hands. He is different from any other powerful noble in the Great Yu Empire. It seems we need to be more low-key."

"Are we just going to watch Qingzhou Bank crush the Cao family's money house?" The manager was a little unwilling.

In other parts of the Great Yu Empire, any official would have to give the Cao family's money house some face, but here, he felt uneasy.

"Of course not. Since His Highness said fair competition, we don't have to worry. You send someone back immediately to ask for instructions. I think these services of Qingzhou Bank are also suitable for our money house. Why not implement them in the future as well?"

"Yes, Second Young Master." The manager nodded and turned to leave.

Watching the manager leave, Cao Zhengyang frowned. The title "Second Young Master" made him a bit annoyed. No matter what, he was still a concubine's son of the Cao family.

Even if he worried himself sick, this Cao family's money house would still belong to his elder brother in the future, and had nothing to do with him.

'From beginning to end, I am just a servant,' Cao Zhengyang thought somewhat painfully. Last time his elder brother arrived in Qingzhou, he immediately became an dispensable figure, which made him very frustrated during that period.

'Why can't I start anew? If I just pledge allegiance to His Highness, perhaps I can gain an advantage by being close.' While he was troubled, a terrible thought sounded in his mind. He was so frightened that he immediately shook the thought out of his head.

However, this thought stuck in his mind like glue, lingering persistently.

While Cao Zhengyang was struggling, the newspaper, following the footsteps of the reporters, also reached the villages outside Qingzhou City.

Under the thorough explanation of the reporters, the common people gradually understood what a bank was.

"Zhu Wuliu, was that how you borrowed money from the government office last time?"

In Zhu family village, after the reporter's explanation, the common people immediately looked at Zhu Wuliu, who was cracking melon seeds.

Zhu Wuliu was quite impressive in the village now. The matter of contracting the Qingzhou city roads last time had increased his prestige in the village by a lot. He spit out a melon seed and said, "Is that even a question? When has His Highness ever cheated us? I didn't know the bank was open, otherwise I would have deposited three hundred taels of silver long ago."

"Three hundred taels!" The surrounding villagers gasped. They all knew that Zhu Wuliu had earned a lot of silver last time, but they didn't expect it to be that much.

The young people who followed Zhu Wuliu to work in Qingzhou city said, "Wuliu, if you go, we'll go too. If there's work next time, His Highness will think of us, won't he?"

"Hehe, you guys are getting smarter. Tomorrow, let's go support His Highness," Zhu Sansi laughed loudly.

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Outside the Prince Qi's mansion.

Wang Xuan instinctively looked around vigilantly before hurriedly turning to enter.

In the main hall, Xiao Ming stood with his hands behind his back, waiting for him.

"Your Highness."

Standing still in the main hall, Wang Xuan looked at Xiao Ming, and suddenly felt that Xiao Ming today was somewhat different from usual.

Hearing Wang Xuan's voice, Xiao Ming turned around. Yesterday he was busy with bank propaganda, and only today did he have time to summon Wang Xuan. Emperor Xiaowenxuan's serious illness was definitely not good news for him.

Because once Emperor Xiaowenxuan falls, it means that the current balance of the Great Yu Empire will be completely disrupted, and the most serious consequence could be that the Great Yu Empire falls into complete civil strife.

Although he did not admit that Emperor Xiaowenxuan was an enlightened monarch, Emperor Xiaowenxuan became emperor through military achievements after all, and the Crown Prince, a good-for-nothing, would not be able to suppress the chaotic situation in the country upon succeeding to the throne.

In troubled times, even an enlightened monarch finds himself in a difficult situation, let alone a monarch like the Crown Prince.

Facing a potentially very chaotic situation in the future, he outwardly pretended to be indifferent, but in secret, he had to start preparing now to be able to respond in time to unfavorable domestic situations.

Therefore, he must continue to strengthen the deployment of the Chang'an intelligence network and the infiltration of Chang'an officials.

"Do you know about the Emperor fainting?" Xiao Ming looked at Wang Xuan.

Startled, Wang Xuan said, "Your Majesty, I did not know about this, only that the Emperor's health was slightly unwell and he had not been able to attend court normally for some days."

"Hmm, in that case, the palace is indeed concealing this matter." Xiao Ming's brows furrowed. Such a major event being strictly kept secret could only be done by Empress Zhao in the palace at present.

Wang Xuan asked, puzzled, "How did Your Highness know that the Emperor fainted?"

"Chancellor Fei mentioned it in his letter to the Princess Consort," Xiao Ming said. He then asked, "Besides that, have there been any other unusual changes in Chang'an?"

"Yes, I was about to report this to Your Highness. After the Emperor stopped attending court, Yang Zhen, the commander of the Lijing Gate, once entered and exited the East Palace," Wang Xuan said with a solemn expression.

"Yang Zhen entered and exited the East Palace?" Xiao Ming was surprised.

The Lijing Gate has only obeyed the emperor's command throughout history. Now that Emperor Xiaowenxuan has not yet passed away, Yang Zhen is entering and exiting the East Palace, which clearly shows that he is wagging his tail in front of the new master in advance.

Moreover, from this point, one can also see the severity of Emperor Xiaowenxuan's illness. Perhaps, as Fei Ji said, even with careful recuperation, he can only drag on for a few more years.

If Empress Zhao and the Crown Prince secretly delayed the treatment, Emperor Xiaowenxuan would have no chance of survival, after all, the struggle for imperial power has always been cruel, and any means are not surprising.

Wang Xuan noticed Xiao Ming's expression and said, "Your Highness, Yang Zhen is extremely greedy for power. He is clearly seeking a new master. What I worry about is the Empress and Crown Prince seizing control of the government. It is said that many decrees are now being issued by Eunuch Wang Xi, who is by the Empress's side. Now, the court is also discussing this heatedly. Many ministers demand to see the Emperor, but they are all turned away on the grounds that the Emperor needs rest."

Xiao Ming's brows furrowed deeper and deeper. Fei Ji's letter contained only a few words, which prevented Xiao Ming from fully judging the current situation in Chang'an.

And now, the news brought by Wang Xuan completely put him on alert. He had read enough history books, and the current situation was clearly the initial stage of foreign relatives interfering in government and eunuchs abusing their power.

After pondering for a while, he said, "From now on, expand the number of secret guards in Chang'an. I want to receive news from Chang'an at any time. In addition, you must design a plan to transfer important figures from Chang'an. Once there is a change in Chang'an, you must ensure that my imperial concubine, Chancellor Fei, and others are brought back."

"Yes, Your Highness," Wang Xuan said in a deep voice. The former was simple, but the latter was very difficult.

"Since that's the case, you should go and prepare now," Xiao Ming said.

Wang Xuan bowed and turned to leave.

After Wang Xuan left, Xiao Ming sent someone to call Pang Yukun and Niu Ben to the Prince's Mansion. The former was in charge of political affairs, and the latter was in charge of the army. Now that there was a change in Chang'an, he felt it necessary to inform them of the news and discuss how to proceed.

"If it is truly as Your Highness says, then from now on we should strengthen the training and equipment of the armies of various prefectures to prepare for unforeseen circumstances. A pledge of allegiance is merely a piece of paper, and there is no guarantee that the Crown Prince will not be detrimental to Your Highness," Niu Ben said loudly.

"Your Highness, what the Grand Commander said is correct. The death of Prince Ning is still fresh in our minds. Your Highness must not be careless. If you ask who among the princes is most feared today, it is none other than Your Highness. If the Crown Prince ascends the throne, he will certainly regard Your Highness as a major threat. In my opinion, we must not only strengthen the army now, but also expand the recruitment of students for the political affairs academy of Bowen Academy to cope with future changes."

After a pause, Pang Yukun reminded again, "Your Highness, if the Crown Prince revokes Your Highness's titles and enfeoffment after ascending the throne, I do not wish to see the people of the enfeoffed state return to their former lives."

"I also do not wish to see my soldiers bleed for nothing these past two years," Niu Ben's eyes were wide. Xiao Ming rarely saw such an impulsive side of Niu Ben.

"I understand what you mean. If things remain peaceful, so be it. But if they go too far, I will not follow in Prince Ning's footsteps," Xiao Ming said slowly.

Pang Yukun nodded, then he cautiously said, "Your Highness, the Great Yu Empire is currently in such a state of decay, a great chaos demands a great rectification. Furthermore, with petty individuals eyeing from all sides, only someone who can turn the tide can save the Great Yu Empire from danger. I believe that the Crown Prince is not the one to turn the tide."

Niu Ben suddenly looked up at Pang Yukun. His eyes darted around, and he suddenly had a flicker of understanding. He said, "Your Highness, I only listen to Your Highness."

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming gradually stopped smiling. What the two said was clear enough: they wanted him to be emperor. Previously, they might not have dared to have this thought, but ever since the Qingzhou army captured Shanhai Pass, the officials of the enfeoffed state probably had some hidden agendas, and now with Emperor Xiaowenxuan seriously ill, their ambitions grew even stronger.

As for him, it wasn't that he didn't want to be emperor; he just didn't want to be the first to stick his neck out and become a target for everyone. After all, he was an anomaly, and no one in the Great Yu Empire liked him. He didn't want to be ganged up on.

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The atmosphere in the main hall was somewhat solemn.

Pang Yukun and Niu Ben's gazes moved with Xiao Ming's figure.

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming said, "I understand your thoughts, but the court situation is ever-changing, and we should seize the opportunity to act."

“Yes, Your Highness.” Pang Yukun and Niu Ben were overjoyed. This sentence was enough to excite them, because it meant Xiao Ming indirectly acknowledged some future possibility.

Seeing their excitement, Xiao Ming couldn’t help but shake his head. He said, “One must be strong to strike iron. I don’t want you to put too much energy into this matter, but rather to gradually make the enfeoffed state stronger, understand?”

Pang Yukun and Niu Ben both nodded upon hearing this.

After discussing this matter, Pang Yukun remembered something and said, “Your Highness, just now I passed through the East Market and found many common people depositing silver at the Qingzhou Bank. Among them, I also saw Zhu Wuliu, which shows that the propaganda is effective.”

“Zhu Wuliu? Isn’t that Zhu Sansi’s younger brother?” Niu Ben asked with interest.

Xiao Ming nodded, “That’s right, it’s Zhu Sansi’s younger brother. Now that Zhu Sansi is in charge of the Ryukyu garrison, and Zhu Wuliu is also actively responding to the government office, this family is a model for the enfeoffed state and should be strongly supported.”

“Indeed, Zhu family village outside Qingzhou city is the most supportive of Your Highness. I believe that Zhu family village should be strongly supported to set an example for the enfeoffed state. What do you think?” Pang Yukun said with a smile.

Xiao Ming nodded. He was currently promoting the development of private capital, which would revitalize the economy of the enfeoffed state. After all, the more prosperous the commerce, the more commercial taxes there would be.

“Since that’s the case, let’s go to Qingzhou to take a look, and also talk to the people of Zhu family village about this matter.” The haze in Xiao Ming’s heart dissipated somewhat; scheming was very tiring.

Comparatively, he still preferred to slowly build his own enfeoffed territory.

Having decided on this, the three headed to the East Market. When they arrived, the villagers of Zhu family village had not yet finished their transactions, and those who had already finished had not left, but were waiting for their fellow villagers.

Xiao Ming’s arrival immediately attracted the attention of the villagers, and Zhu Wuliu was pushed to the front by the villagers.

“Your... Your Highness!”

Zhu Wuliu stammered, still very nervous when he saw Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and said, “I am very happy that you can come to Qingzhou Bank to deposit silver. It shows that you trust me very much.”

“Your Highness wholeheartedly acts for us common people. Whom else would we trust if not Your Highness? Besides, if it weren’t for Your Highness, we wouldn’t have been able to contract the roads in the city,” Zhu Wuliu scratched his head and chuckled foolishly.

“Since that’s the case, I have another way to earn silver. Are you willing to continue?”

“A new way?” Zhu Wuliu’s eyes lit up. He had been thinking about using his three hundred taels of silver for something else, so he said, “Of course we are willing. As long as Your Highness gives us a chance, we will not disappoint Your Highness.”

The other villagers of Zhu family village also echoed, once life becomes prosperous, who would be willing to return to hardship? They all wanted to earn more silver.

“Good, I have a white sugar production process that can be handed over to you. If you wish, you can go back to the village and build a white sugar workshop. The specific process can be learned in the industrial district, how about that?”

“White sugar?” The villagers looked at each other, none of them knowing what Xiao Ming was talking about.

Seeing their confused expressions, Xiao Ming immediately understood. He said, “How about this, six days from now, you go to the Qingzhou workshop, and I will have the craftsmen waiting for you.”

Zhu Wuliu smiled shyly, bowed ninety degrees, and loudly said, “Yes.”

At this time, the bank’s operations were basically finished. Zhu Wuliu and the young people from the village playfully went back to the village.

Seeing the villagers of Zhu family village leave, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun entered Qingzhou Bank. The common people's deposits were the best way to understand the current livelihood of the enfeoffed state. He asked the bank manager, "How much silver did they deposit in total this time?"

"Reporting to Your Highness, this time, three hundred households from Zhu family village came, depositing a total of two thousand taels of silver. Among them, Zhu Wuliu's deposit was the most, a total of three hundred and fifty-three taels, and the others were around five taels each."

Pang Yukun immediately felt proud. In his opinion, the common people of the enfeoffed state had indeed become much richer in the past two years. Five taels of silver was simply unimaginable in the past.

"Your Highness, even one Zhu family village is like this. If all the common people in the entire enfeoffed state come to deposit silver, this is indeed a considerable amount. This official finally understands the importance of Qingzhou Bank now," Pang Yukun said with a smile.

Xiao Ming was equally satisfied. He said, "Continue to promote it during this period. We need to let every common person understand what a bank is. Only then can the bank play its true role."

As the two were talking, another common person wanted to enter the bank to inquire about depositing silver, but upon seeing Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun, the common person immediately ran away. Helpless, the two had no choice but to return, so as not to affect the bank's official duties.

And in the following days, Xiao Ming continued to use various methods to promote Qingzhou Bank.

With hot air balloons, painted characters on village walls, and newspapers, the continuous promotion of Qingzhou Bank gradually made it known to the common people, and more and more common people came to the bank to deposit silver.

At the same time, the production of white sugar did not stop. As expected, after seven days, the first batch of white sugar was produced in the workshop.

“Is this white sugar? It’s really white, like snow.” Zhu Wuliu, as promised, brought three young men to the industrial district. When a batch of white sugar was refined, he exclaimed in surprise.

Xiao Ming also felt a surge of emotion as he picked up a handful of fine white sugar like sand. It had been two years, and he finally saw white sugar almost identical to modern times.

With this, he could produce more food items.

“Your Highness, this is rock candy.” Before Xiao Ming could react, the craftsman brought out a basket of rock candy the size of peanuts.

This rock candy was something he had taught these craftsmen to make. It was very simple, just melting and recrystallizing white sugar to form rock candy.

He took a piece of rock candy and put it in his mouth. Immediately, a sweet sensation arose in his mouth. This feeling was very enjoyable, truly refreshing and sweet.

“Gulp.” Looking at Xiao Ming’s enjoying expression, Zhu Wuliu swallowed hard. The freshly refined sugar had a rich sugary aroma; it was too tempting.

Hearing this sound, Xiao Ming smiled knowingly, “Don’t be shy, you try it too.”

“Aye.” Zhu Wuliu responded and eagerly picked up a piece of rock candy from the basket and put it in his mouth.

As it dissolved in their saliva, the rock candy began to melt. Zhu Wuliu and the three young men’s eyes widened, and the four of them exclaimed in unison, “So sweet!”

Chapter 500

“Everyone, come and try it, come and try it.”

This was the first time white sugar appeared in the Great Yu Empire, and this new item naturally attracted many people, including Lu Tong, who came to see what was going on, as the production of white sugar still required his sulfite.

As soon as Xiao Ming finished speaking, the workshop supervisors in the industrial district were not polite, each picking up rock candy and eating it.

Words like “too delicious,” “so sweet,” and “magical” kept coming.

In modern times, rock candy could be said to be the most ordinary among various sugars, but here it immediately became a high-end commodity, and the rich sweetness of white sugar completely conquered everyone who tasted it.

After finishing the white sugar in his mouth, Xiao Ming looked at Zhu Wuliu and asked, "How is it? Do you want this white sugar and rock candy production technology?"

"Yes!" Zhu Wuliu was so excited that his hair stood on end. The malt sugar sold in the East Market was nothing compared to white sugar. Even if he was dumber, he understood that this white sugar would make him and even Zhu family village earn a lot of silver from now on.

Xiao Ming said solemnly, "Since that's the case, you can stay here and learn from the craftsmen for a few days, but you'll have to figure out how to build the workshop and buy sugarcane yourselves."

"I understand. It is already a great honor for Your Highness to entrust the white sugar technology to me," Zhu Wuliu's face was flushed.

Nodding, Xiao Ming still wanted to make some things clear. He said, "Besides you, I will also put the white sugar technology in the Chamber of Commerce. You won't be the only ones who can make white sugar, so if you want to make money, you have to use your real skills and control the quality of white sugar, understand?"

These words put some pressure on Zhu Wuliu, but recalling his elder brother, a surge of impulse rose in his heart, and he nodded vigorously.

After instructing Zhu Wuliu, Xiao Ming had Zhao Long and Zhao Hu carry the rock candy and follow him back to the Prince's Mansion.

Lu Tong was on the same path as Xiao Ming because he had to return to Bowen Academy. While savoring the rock candy, he said, "Your Highness, this white sugar is truly amazing. It can become very pure simply by adding this sulfite. I am becoming more and more interested in chemistry."

“Is that so? So you weren’t interested in chemistry at all before,” Xiao Ming glared at him.

“Hehe, Your Highness, I didn’t even know what chemistry was before, so naturally, I didn’t understand its power. But now I understand more and more, and many students in the chemistry academy have also changed their minds. Now they are not just dealing with it, but it has become an interest,” Lu Tong said.

Xiao Ming smiled. What he liked to see most was this kind of change. True science is driven by those who are passionate about science. He said, “This is a good phenomenon. In the future, we need to guide students to turn tasks into interests.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Lu Tong replied.

The two chatted along the way and soon reached the fork in the road between Bowen Academy and the Prince’s Mansion. At this time, Xiao Ming returned to the Prince’s Mansion with the rock candy.

He had promised Fei Yuer hard candy that day, and this rock candy could be considered hard candy.

Zhao Long and Zhao Hu carried the baskets and followed Xiao Ming into the Prince’s Mansion. Along the way, they were eating as they carried, and their mouths were now full of syrup.

The three entered the Prince's Mansion and headed towards the sleeping quarters. Soon, they heard the lively chatter of women. It turned out that Fei Yuer, Xiao huan, Lu Luo, and Ziyuan were laughing and talking in the pavilion in front of the main hall.

Moreover, Xiao Ming had told them about the white sugar before he left, so Fei Yuer seemed to have specially called them all back.

"Your Highness, did you bring the candy back?"

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, Fei Yuer stood up and asked.

The three maids also looked expectant, especially Lu Luo, whose mouth was watering. She loved candy the most, and every time malt sugar was brought back from Chang'an, she would eat the most.

"Of course I brought it back. Look, this is rock candy." Xiao Ming had Zhao Long and Zhao Hu place the bamboo basket in the middle of the pavilion.

As soon as the bamboo basket was put down, Lu Luo's saliva almost dripped out. Ziyuan patted her, and only then did she realize and quickly wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

Fei Yuer gently said, "Lu Luo loves candy the most, Lu Luo, you try one first."

Although she really wanted to be the first to eat, Lu Luo still remembered the hierarchy. Although Fei Yuer treated them both well, maids always had their rules. She softly said, "Princess Consort, Lu Luo dares not. Please be the first to taste it."

"It's fine. In this Prince's Mansion, only the three of you can talk intimately with me. Don't worry about these small details. Ziyuan, you try it too."

Ziyuan and Lu Luo exchanged glances, still hesitant.

"Don't push and shove each other. I will feed each of you," Xiao Ming suddenly joked, looking left and right, seeing that the pushing and pulling was endless.

Upon hearing this, the four immediately blushed crimson.

Xiao Ming then picked up a piece of rock candy and first fed it to Fei Yuer's mouth, and then placed pieces of rock candy one by one into the palms of the three maids. He only said it, but he didn't actually feed the three maids, otherwise, it would be too improper.

Seeing this, Fei Yuer glared at Xiao Ming, implying that he hadn't gone too far.

However, the four soon forgot about Xiao Ming's joke, because the sweet taste of the rock candy made them unable to stop. They all kept savoring the rock candy.

“So sweet, so delicious,” Lu Luo ate the fastest. A piece of rock candy was quickly devoured by her. She asked, “Your Highness, what is this rock candy made of?”

“Sugarcane,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

“No wonder the sweetness is so special,” Lu Luo said excitedly, picking up another piece of rock candy and putting it into her mouth again.

Fei Yuer also tasted rock candy for the first time and was also impressed by its sweetness. She exclaimed, “Your Highness, this white sugar will definitely sell well.”

The four of them ate and laughed, their faces full of enjoyment.

However, for Xiao Ming, white sugar was not just limited to eating rock candy. After all, in modern times, almost all sweets require white sugar.

While Fei Yuer and the three were eating rock candy, Xiao Ming called the chef from the kitchen and asked him to prepare a special dish for that night, which was modern-style candied sweet potatoes.

But while he was excited about white sugar as a trophy, the battle of Ryukyu had already caused a stir in Japan.

The defeated Sakai and Makino Haruaki returned to Japan with their remaining troops. The heavy losses shocked the Japanese daimyo and made them extremely angry. In their eyes, the Great Yu Empire had been left far behind by their firearms. In their eyes, the Great Yu Empire was just a piece of meat waiting for them to share.

But the battle of Ryukyu was like a slap in the face. How could they not be enraged and humiliated?

“This is a disgrace, a warrior’s disgrace.”

Sakai and Makino Haruaki knelt in the great hall, surrounded by renowned Japanese daimyo, whose angry gazes seemed capable of killing them at any moment.