

I. Dynasty 711

Chapter 711

“Within three years, establish three large official steel workshops, including the Qingzhou Steel Workshop, Laiwu Steel Workshop, and Kaiping Steel Workshop, to achieve an annual steel output of three hundred thousand tons.”

Pang Yukun read out the content. The unit of weight “ton” was something he had learned at Bowen Academy, but he still had no real concept of three hundred thousand tons. So he muttered, “What is the current annual output of the Qingzhou Steel Workshop?”

“Less than twenty thousand tons,” Xiao Ming answered Pang Yukun’s question directly.

“So little?” Fei Ji frowned. “Your Majesty, if the Qingzhou Steel Workshop’s annual output is less than twenty thousand, how can it reach three hundred thousand tons in three years?”

Xiao Ming smiled. This three hundred thousand tons was certainly not something Xiao Ming fabricated. In fact, contemporary Britain’s annual steel output was around three hundred thousand tons.

With the Bessemer converter steelmaking method, he believed reaching this figure in three years was not a problem.

“Elder Fei need not worry. You just need to build the remaining two steel workshops, and the output will naturally reach that figure.”

Fei Ji did not know much about industry, so he said no more.

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming felt it was still necessary to explain this three-year plan, otherwise these officials would remain confused.

So he said, “This three-year plan primarily targets education, industry, commerce, government affairs, and the military. Among them, the most important reform in education is to popularize martial spirit and military training in schools. All enrolled students must receive military training in addition to their studies from a young age, such as bayonet combat training.”

Chao Zhengwen nodded, taking down Xiao Ming’s words. He said, “The reason barbarian soldiers are so brave and skilled in battle is because they have been practicing archery and horsemanship from a young age. This is something the Great Yu Empire cannot compare to.”

Xiao Ming showed an appreciative look towards Chao Zhengwen. This chief education official was chosen correctly; at least ideologically, Chao Zhengwen was on the same page as him.

The reason he formulated this plan was to foster a martial spirit throughout the Great Yu Empire.

In the Age of Sail, the world was essentially a stage for brigands. Without ruthlessness, how could one contend with Western armies?

After all, Westerners were tall and strong. In terms of physical strength, this was a disadvantage for the Great Yu Empire’s people. If they didn’t sharpen their bayonet fighting skills, a real bayonet charge could be very brutal.

After a pause, he then spoke of commerce, which was the formal establishment of the Ministry of Commerce. His order to Li Kaiyuan was to popularize commercial law in the six provinces within three years, and at the same time establish a governmental structure to supervise merchants and collect taxes.

In terms of industry, besides steel, textiles, etc., there was also the expansion of the military workshop. Currently, the military workshop's output could only cope with domestic rebellions, but it was still far from being able to step onto the international stage. So, within these three years, the military workshop would undergo another expansion, and Lu Tong's gunpowder workshop would also be merged into the military workshop.

As for government affairs, he further refined them. In addition to establishing the Ministry of Commerce, he also strengthened the Imperial Household Department, entrusting all industrial affairs of the six provinces to its management.

Furthermore, Xiao Ming abolished the traditional prefectural yamen runners. From then on, the six provinces would only have security bureaus, and the security forces would be responsible for public order in all prefectures, counties, and villages.

However, the deepest reform this time was the military. After discussing industry, commerce, and government affairs, Xiao Ming looked at Niu Ben and the other generals.

First, he had Qian Dafu read out the list of commendations for the generals. Then he said, "The army is a vital instrument of the state, and I must attach importance to it. From today, I have decided to establish the Grand Council. From now on, all military deployments will be decided by the Grand Council."

Xiao Ming had discussed this with Niu Ben long ago, so Niu Ben was not surprised. The Grand Council, simply put, was the highest military office responsible for formulating war plans and issuing military orders.

Officials of the Grand Council were directly responsible to Xiao Ming, and generals under the Grand Council were directly responsible to the Grand Council. This layered management system had a very simple purpose: to prevent generals from privatizing their armies.

Because the Grand Council was responsible for all military affairs, military provisions and salaries also had to pass through the Grand Council's review, thereby explicitly telling soldiers that they were eating imperial provisions and taking imperial silver, weakening the generals' private control over the army.

After an hour of explaining until his throat was dry, Xiao Ming had essentially clarified the matters. To help these officials understand and remember, he also utilized the technology crystal.

"Your Majesty, I understand."

Pang Yukun now had a clear direction. This three-year plan appealed to him, and he couldn't help but say happily.

"We, your humble servants, also understand," the ministers echoed.

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction, "Excellent. After this court session, all you beloved ministers will act according to the pamphlets I have given you. I do not wish to be disappointed after three years."

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the ministers’ voices were loud and clear.

Having launched the three-year plan, Xiao Ming felt a sense of relief. Today, he had laid out the agenda for the next three years. Now, he could immerse himself in the task of advancing technology, as the subordinate matters could proceed systematically enough.

Having said all he needed to say, Xiao Ming then signaled Qian Dafu to announce the adjournment of court.

The ministers cheered, “Long live!” and retreated. Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu left the council hall.

However, the two did not immediately return to the temporary palace but instead took a tour of the imperial palace under construction. In such cold weather, the artisans were still working, over twenty thousand people busily engaged.

Under the diligent labor of so many people, the imperial palace had already largely taken shape. At this rate, it was estimated that they could move in next year. After all, his imperial palace did not pursue the luxury of ancient emperors; it merely aimed for simplicity, generosity, and sufficiency.

After inspecting the imperial palace, the two returned to the temporary palace. After today’s court session, he was completely relaxed. He planned to spend more time on education and technology during this period, and incidentally, enjoy the pleasures of this ancient life.

It had been over five years since he came to this world, and he had always lived in fear, treading on thin ice, never having a single comfortable day.

Now that the dust had settled and his wings had gradually matured, he was finally qualified to balance work and leisure.

However, while he was idle, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun and the other officials began a three-year nightmare. After the court adjourned, they each returned to their offices, summoned officials for meetings with the three-year plan pamphlets, and assigned tasks.

First, they selected a group of excellent artisans from the currently mature workshops. Then Pang Yukun and Fei Ji jointly signed orders to recruit displaced people.

These recruited displaced people would travel with the artisans to the mines, where they would establish coal mines, iron mines, and steel workshops near the mines, ultimately forming a city with the mine as its core.

Besides the mines, a portion of the displaced people would be placed under the Railway Department. They would construct a railway network centered on Qingzhou Province under the Railway Department's command.

While the imperial court was extremely busy, the common people also became enthusiastic at this time. After the cruel war, a great development spanning the six prefecture was about to begin.

Chapter 712

In Zhu Family Village, Zhu Wuliu was surrounded by people, as if he were the moon among stars.

Yesterday, he lived up to expectations by acquiring a steam-powered textile production line, which truly excited the villagers of Zhu Family Village for an entire night.

“Brother Wuliu, when are the people from the steam engine workshop coming? We’ve already paid the silver, can’t they be a bit quicker?”

Shangguan Yong was a bit anxious. He wished he could get the textile workshop running right away.

Zhu Wuliu, hearing this, calmly said, “What’s the rush? The prefectural office’s land hasn’t come through yet. Even with a steam engine, it would just be for show.”

Shangguan Yong scratched his head. He changed the topic and asked, “Brother Wuliu, have you seen this steam engine? Can this thing really do textile work?”

“Of course I have. For this matter, I personally went to the textile workshop in Qingzhou Province. I’m not afraid to tell you, just one steam engine production line is worth a thousand people weaving cloth.”

Zhu Wuliu knew that the villagers putting up silver was a sign of their trust in him, so he dared not be careless about this matter.

“A thousand people.”

The villagers of Zhu Family Village looked at each other, and then their eyes revealed expressions of wild joy.

A group of people were discussing when Zhu Wuliu's father appeared at the village entrance. The villagers immediately ran over.

Zhu Wuliu ran the fastest. Upon reaching his father, Zhu Wuliu asked, "Father, what about the land for the workshop?"

Zhu Wuliu's father had a dark expression, appearing very angry. He said nothing, only let out a heavy sigh.

Zhu Wuliu's face turned pale at this sight. The reform was known throughout the six prefecture, and the decrees sent by the prefectural office to various prefectures and counties clearly stipulated the free lease of workshop land for five years to merchants who opened workshops.

It was precisely because of this decree that Zhu Wuliu had made up his mind to open another textile workshop.

"The prefectural office isn't giving us land?" A surge of anger suddenly filled Shangguan Yong's body. He roared, "What do we do now? We've bought the steam engine, and our silver is only enough for some cotton. Now the entire village is ruined!"

Zhu Wuliu was even more anxious than Shangguan Yong. He said in a panic, "I'll go see Senior Grand Secretary Pang! He's the one who said it! How can the prefectural office deceive people like this?"

“Pfft, hahaha...”

Just as the villagers were filled with righteous indignation, Zhu Wuliu’s father suddenly burst into laughter. He took out a contract from his bosom and said to Zhu Wuliu, “I tricked you! The prefectural office approved the land! It’s just outside Qingzhou City!”

“Father, at a time like this, you’re still playing tricks on us!” Zhu Wuliu rolled his eyes in exasperation. His father had always been fond of playing small tricks, and this time, he unexpectedly fell for his cunning scheme again.

The villagers of Zhu Family Village relaxed at this point.

Shangguan Yong’s expression changed from gloomy to bright. He said, “This reform was initiated by the Emperor. I told you no one would dare to mess around.”

Zhu Wuliu’s father stopped laughing. He said, “Don’t be happy too soon. The land is approved, but the workshop building requires the villagers to contribute labor to build it.”

“That’s easy! There’s nothing to do in winter anyway.”

“As long as we can earn silver next year, this little bit of effort is nothing.”

“...”

The villagers of Zhu Family Village eagerly spoke one after another.

Zhu Wuliu nodded. At this point, he began to assign tasks to the villagers: some to purchase cement and red bricks, others to clear the land for the workshop.

This time, the prefectural office had, like establishing an industrial park, separately demarcated a large area outside Qingzhou City for merchants, and his workshop land was located within it.

Upon receiving Zhu Wuliu's orders, the villagers immediately sprang into action, dedicating themselves to the construction of the workshop.

At the same time, Ding Wu, Dai Zixing, and other major Qingzhou Province merchants had already mobilized their servants and laborers on their own workshop lands.

"Brother Ding, I heard that you and Cao Zhengyang had a bit of a disagreement at the auction this time?" Dai Zixing said as he inspected the working laborers and servants.

Having started his fortune by manufacturing cement pipes, Dai Zixing had now clearly become one of the few prominent merchants in Qingzhou City.

"Indeed, good news never travels far, but bad news spreads quickly," Ding Wu gently snorted. His relationship with Dai Zixing had always been good.

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "This Cao Zhengyang is acting quite arrogant now, and I always feel he has ill intentions."

"Ill intentions? What do you mean by that?" Dai Zixing asked, dumbfounded.

Ding Wu thought for a moment. He said, "This Cao Zhengyang has too much ambition, and he often says shocking things. It's said that he has gathered a group of merchants and often discusses with them the matter of merchants participating in government affairs in the West."

Dai Zixing was so shocked he almost shouted. "Does this Cao Zhengyang want to die? The Emperor abolishing the four classes of society was already the greatest mercy to us; how dare he harbor such extravagant hopes?"

"Exactly, that's why I repeatedly refuted his improper remarks, and thus offended him," Ding Wu said.

Dai Zixing said, "If that's the case, I must also distance myself from him. Life has only just started to get better for a few years, and he's looking for trouble himself."

"Exactly! My father repeatedly warned me to strictly obey the decrees and never to be reckless, fearing that one day we might displease the Emperor, and we merchants would suffer again." Ding Wu sighed, then seemed to recall something. He whispered to Dai Zixing, "However, it's said that the Prince of Chu has recently reinstated the Cao family, and it's even rumored that the Cao family has been given a seat in the Prince of Chu's residence."

Dai Zixing was dumbfounded. "Could that rumor be true? So, the Cao family is now actually participating in government affairs in the Prince of Chu's territory?"

Ding Wu nodded, "This Prince of Chu fears dying at the hands of the Emperor like Prince Zhao and the others. Now, he's desperate and listens to whatever those Frenchmen say. However, his doing this has caused many merchants to flock to Lin'an."

Dai Zixing remained silent. He said, "Even so, the Prince of Chu is no match for the Emperor. Just consider something as miraculous as the steam engine. Does the Prince of Chu have it? So this Prince of Chu is nothing but a grasshopper in autumn; he won't be jumping around for much longer."

Ding Wu dusted off the dirt that had fallen on him. He said softly, "The Prince of Chu doesn't have it, but he can buy it, after all, the Prince of Chu is still a subject of the Emperor."

As the two spoke, more and more merchants appeared in the North City Industrial Zone. Acquaintances greeted each other, no longer discussing the previous topic, but instead talking about the business of running workshops.

Compared to the bustling scene in the North City Industrial Zone, the weather in Qingzhou Province was growing colder. Along with the cold current from the north, news of the six prefecture' reform also reached the south.

"Steam engine? How is that possible?" Richard looked incredulous.

The Prince of Chu looked puzzled. He asked, "What exactly is this steam engine?"

Richard's expression gradually grew serious. He said to the Prince of Chu, "The steam engine is a very powerful machine. With this machine, much labor can be saved. The British kept it a secret from us for a long time. We only recently learned that they have been using steam engines in industry."

Chapter 713

"British?"

The Prince of Chu was confused. He had heard bits and pieces about Europe from the Cao family, but now he realized he knew too little.

Richard did not hide anything from the Prince of Chu. After all, the Prince of Chu had given him a very generous salary during this period. So he explained, "Actually, there have long been talks of steam engines in Britain, but at that time, the steam engines were almost useless, and people in other European countries didn't care."

Recalling, he continued, "But no one expected that the British had secretly improved the steam engine long ago and used it in the textile industry. Whether it was the Dutch, the Spanish, or us French, we were all deceived by the British. It wasn't until recently when they sold steam engines at high prices to other countries that we realized, those cunning British fellows."

The Prince of Chu felt a little uneasy upon hearing this. He said, "But according to the information I've received, Xiao Ming's steam engines did not come from Britain; they manufactured them themselves."

"This is also what surprises me," Richard frowned. In his opinion, this matter was truly baffling.

If this had happened in Europe, he wouldn't be surprised, but it happened in the Great Yu Empire.

"Could it be people from a secret society?" Richard frowned.

The Prince of Chu grew more confused. He said, "What is this 'secret society'?"

Richard explained, "This secret society is an association in Britain. Initially, it was formed by several masons, with the aim of monopolizing the new technologies they discovered. Later, this association attracted more and more people who wanted to monopolize technology, and it also put forward the theory that science and technology represent productive forces. At the same time, they began to invite more and more elite scholars to join this association. Gradually, this association's influence grew, and even our French Revolution had their shadow."

The Prince of Chu was completely bewildered. He shook his head. "I don't care about that. Since the steam engine is so powerful, can you sell some to me?"

"Hahaha... Your Highness is jesting. Steam engines are in high demand even in Europe, and it's impossible to sell them to Your Highness given the vast distance from Europe to here," Richard denied the Prince of Chu's idea.

The Prince of Chu felt a little angry, but deep down, he felt more fear. Xiao Ming's position was becoming increasingly stable, and he was now pushing through reforms despite all opposition.

Now he had even developed steam engines. The Prince of Chu had thought he could surpass Xiao Ming with the help of the French, but now the gap between them was widening.

Snorting, the Prince of Chu turned and left, no longer speaking to Richard, but instead thinking about how to obtain steam engines from Xiao Ming.

After the Prince of Chu left, Richard's expression suddenly turned grim. In fact, he had always harbored hostility towards this British secret society, because technology was inherently the enemy of religion.

If this Xiao Ming was connected to this secret society, he would have to deal with it carefully, but this also explained why this Great Yu Empire's prince, starting from nothing, had mastered so many European technologies.

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In Qingzhou Province, Xiao Ming, while working on matters of the State of Shu, let out a big sneeze. Rubbing his nose, he muttered, "There are truly many people cursing me behind my back."

Half a month had passed since the last court session. As time went on, a large number of workshops began to be constructed throughout the six provinces. Every day, he received memorials from Pang Yukun and Fei Ji.

For him, everything was proceeding according to the predetermined plan.

As the age of steam arrived, administrative and military reforms in the six provinces were also progressing in parallel.

Especially the army. While establishing the Grand Council, Niu Ben, according to Xiao Ming's plan, carried out a major reorganization of the army.

Previously, his armies were all divided by prefecture, such as the Qingzhou Army, the Dengzhou Army, etc. Now, to achieve more unified command, he and Niu Ben decided to establish six standing armies using the names of former Great Yu Empire armies.

These six standing armies were the Left Martial Army, the Right Martial Army, the Qianniu Army, the Jinwu Army, the Yulin Army, and the Imperial Guard.

The Imperial Guard was responsible for guarding the capital, while the other five armies were stationed in one to two province each, responsible for border defense and foreign campaigns.

After this reform, his army would become more regularized. At the same time, he also promoted many generals, appointing them to the position of general.

For example, the current Luo Hong, as commander of the Jinwu Guard, was responsible for Chang'an Province and the former Zhao territory. Lu Fei was the commander of the Right Martial Army, stationed in Youzhou Province. Luo Xin, as commander of the Left Martial Army, was stationed in Jinling Province.

Qi Guangyi served as a general of the Qianniu Army, stationed in Liang Province to guard against barbarians. Lei Ming served as a general of the Yulin Army, stationed in Youzhou Province.

The Imperial Guard, which protected the capital, was personally commanded by Xiao Ming. Of course, he was merely nominally in charge; Niu Ben was truly responsible for its management.

Thus, he had completely reorganized the army. From now on, these six standing armies would be commanded by the Grand Council, and the Grand Council would be directly responsible to him.

Having put a checkmark on the memorial submitted by Niu Ben, Xiao Ming put down his pen.

The army was of utmost importance. After this reform, he believed his army's combat strength would become even stronger.

After all, each army now consisted of musketeers, artillery, cavalry, and chariot soldiers, meaning the overall combat strength of each army was very formidable.

As he was deep in thought, Qian Dafu's voice suddenly rang out, "Your Majesty, an urgent report from Dengzhou."

"Present it quickly," Xiao Ming frowned.

It was snowing heavily outside. At this time, Qian Dafu was covered in white. Shaking the snow off himself, Qian Dafu handed the memorial to Xiao Ming.

Opening the memorial, Xiao Ming scanned its contents, and a shadow suddenly fell over his heart.

This memorial was sent by Yue Yun. As Wang Xuan had reported, Goryeo had actually dispatched warships at this time of year, disguised as Japanese pirates, intending to plunder Dengzhou.

“Your Majesty, the courier outside is still waiting. General Yue Yun is awaiting Your Majesty’s decree,” Qian Dafu said.

After this northern war, Xiao Ming had followed a policy of recuperation, thus reducing foreign military engagements. Yue Yun naturally understood this point.

As the saying goes, “A single cannon shot costs ten thousand taels of gold.” If war broke out, it would be a matter of spending silver.

Picking up his pen, Xiao Ming unhesitatingly put a checkmark on the memorial. Dealing with Goryeo was already part of his plan, and this time, Goryeo had brought it upon itself.

In his opinion, Goryeo must have suffered heavy losses in its war with Japan, and thus thought of taking advantage of his territory.

However, Goryeo was clearly blinded by greed and had chosen the wrong place. In his strategy, he would eventually completely occupy Goryeo and designate it as a province.

Coming from modern times, he naturally knew how much trouble this place would cause him in the future. Rather than that, it was better to solve the problem once and for all.

Chapter 714

Outside the imperial study, goose-feather sized snowflakes danced wildly in the cold wind.

Waves of chill swept over, and Xiao Ming couldn't help but shiver. Every year at this time, he particularly missed the warmth of an air-conditioned room.

Here, the only ways to keep warm were burning charcoal braziers and hot water bottles.

After approving the memorial, Xiao Ming had Qian Dafu send it to the courier official. Now, both the army and navy had to receive his orders before taking an offensive stance.

Qian Dafu took the memorial but did not leave. Instead, he subtly said, "Your Majesty, it's truly very cold today. I wonder if Imperial Consort can endure this northern weather."

"Imperial Consort?" This term suddenly stirred a strange emotion in Xiao Ming's heart. He glanced at Qian Dafu, who merely lowered his head, smiling obsequiously, as if he had mentioned it unintentionally.

Looking at the falling snow, Xiao Ming mused, "Cui Xue'er? Why would a Southern woman have a name with 'snow' in it?"

"Your old servant is foolish; I cannot guess that. Perhaps Your Majesty should simply ask Imperial Consort herself," Qian Dafu looked around, as if worried about eavesdroppers. "Your Majesty, the Empress Dowager asks your old servant about this every day."

Xiao Ming nodded. He said, "I have my own plans. You may send the memorial to the courier official."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Qian Dafu replied and left.

Putting on a mink-lined cloak, Xiao Ming followed him out. For him, it was time to make contact with this Imperial Consort.

Previously, he deliberately showed indifference to Cui Xue'er simply to keep the Prince of Huainan engaged and fighting for him. Now that the overall situation was settled, if he continued this way, the Prince of Huainan might become discontent.

Although he was not afraid of the Prince of Huainan, he also did not want to continue internal strife at this moment. After all, the most urgent task now was to develop industry and recuperate.

As long as these people did not rebel, he would temporarily leave them be; he could easily deal with them in a few years.

Snowflakes, driven by the strong wind, beat against the ground with a "tata" sound. Xiao Ming went around three small paths and arrived at Cui Xue'er's courtyard.

The palace maids and eunuchs guarding the courtyard were shivering from the cold. Suddenly seeing Xiao Ming arrive, they were so startled they almost jumped.

Then, these palace maids and eunuchs' faces lit up with joy. One palace maid bowed to Xiao Ming and immediately ran into the courtyard, shouting as she ran, "Imperial Consort, His Majesty has arrived!"

Xiao Ming was somewhat surprised. He hadn't expected his arrival to cause such a commotion, but after a brief thought, he became relieved.

Sometimes, he always liked to view things of this era from a modern perspective, but sometimes, the customs of an era were not changed by individual will.

Cui Xue'er had been in the palace for at least two months, and in these two months, Xiao Ming had never once visited. The palace maids and eunuchs serving Cui Xue'er naturally couldn't hold their heads high.

Because in the palace, who was favored and who was influential, they probably didn't suffer much scorn from other palace maids on normal days.

As he was thinking, a beautiful lady appeared before him, surrounded by palace maids. Unlike Fei Yuer's heroic demeanor, this Imperial Consort was fair-skinned and beautiful, with a fresh, delicate charm typical of a Southern girl.

"I, your concubine, greet Your Majesty," Cui Xue'er curtsied, a slight unease on her face.

Since ascending the throne, Xiao Ming had grown accustomed to a self-centered life. He felt no shyness towards the unfamiliar Cui Xue'er; instead, he was calm and composed.

After observing Cui Xue'er for a moment, he said, "The Prince of Huainan's daughter is indeed a beauty."

With that, he walked directly into the courtyard.

Cui Xue'er's face immediately turned red. If it were an outsider, it would be tantamount to teasing her, but the person before her was her husband.

In the two months since entering the palace, she had gone from being afraid and expectant to now being calm and composed. Many times she thought she would end up like those consorts who lived out their lives in the palace, but she didn't expect this Emperor husband to come.

"Does Imperial Consort find living in this temporary palace comfortable?"

Sitting down in the bedchamber, Xiao Ming pondered for a long time before only managing to utter this sentence. In his previous life, he was not good at flirting with girls, and he was equally bad at it here.

"I wasn't very used to it when I first arrived, but I'm used to it now. And there are quite a few things in Qingzhou Province that Huainan doesn't have," Cui Xue'er's voice had a gentle quality.

Facing Xiao Ming's words, she did not appear timid but spoke gracefully and eloquently.

Cui Xue'er's composed answers somewhat surprised Xiao Ming. He said, "That's good. I have been busy with state affairs lately and haven't had time to visit you. Imperial Consort, please don't take offense."

"Your Majesty is burdened with myriad duties. State affairs are far more important than a humble woman like me," Cui Xue'er secretly glanced at Xiao Ming. Previously, she had only seen Xiao Ming from afar and not clearly. Now, upon closer inspection, she found this Emperor to be handsome and dashing.

Xiao Ming nodded slightly, then asked some questions about Huainan and shared some interesting anecdotes about Qingzhou Province.

In a blink of an eye, the sky outside darkened as the two chatted.

At this moment, Cui Xue'er had her personal maid, Mingyan, bring in the meal. Xiao Ming and Cui Xue'er had dinner together.

Outside the courtyard, Qian Dafu, who had gone out, had returned and was peeking inside, a smile on his face.

He said to the eunuch guarding the door, "At this hour, the Emperor isn't returning, it seems he's planning to stay here tonight."

The eunuchs at the door looked excited. One eunuch said, "These past two months, this place has been like a cold palace. We were so worried; now we can finally look forward to something."

Qian Dafu smiled. Like the Empress Dowager, he too had been worried for the past two months. After all, this red palace was nominally the residence of the Emperor and concubines, but it was also a barometer of politics.

Sometimes, the Emperor's sudden warmth towards a concubine was merely to balance the power behind that concubine.

"Even if the Emperor stays here tonight, you all must not get arrogant afterward. Otherwise, see how I'll deal with you. The Emperor is very strict; you must be careful," Qian Dafu warned.

He had lived in the palace before, and sometimes conflicts between concubines were caused by these people's gossiping.

After waiting for another hour, the candlelight in the bedchamber extinguished. Qian Dafu felt relieved; now he could finally give an explanation to the Empress Dowager.

The next day, Xiao Ming was woken by the sound of the wind rattling the windows. He glanced at Cui Xue'er, who was still sound asleep, and gently got up.

Last night, he had a few cups of white wine to warm himself. Then, he wasn't sure how their conversation led to them ending up in bed.

However, he knew very well that he must have initiated it. Every man's heart harbored a beast, and after an impulsive moment fueled by alcohol, it could very well turn into a beastly act.

Moreover, Cui Xue'er was a beauty, and she was his imperial consort. In this era, he had no moral hang-ups.

Nevertheless, since things had unexpectedly come to this, he felt somewhat relieved. After all, it wasn't right to keep an Imperial Consort neglected forever.

Chapter 715

The snow that had fallen all night stopped in the early morning, but the strong wind remained fierce. The cold in the wind felt like knives, making one's face ache.

Instructing the palace maids not to disturb Cui Xue'er, Xiao Ming walked alone through the thick snow back to his bedchamber.

Fei Yuer had just woken up at this time. Seeing Xiao Ming return, she smiled and said, "Has Your Majesty had breakfast?"

Xiao Ming shook his head. He found Fei Yuer's smile strange, as if she had perceived everything from last night. However, the temporary palace was so small, he knew he couldn't hide it.

Fei Yuer also seemed to tacitly avoid mentioning it. She had Xiaohuan inform the kitchen to prepare two servings of breakfast for the bedchamber. Then she said, "Your Majesty, I have recovered somewhat these past few days. I was thinking of taking a walk to the women's academy."

This women's academy was established by Fei Yuer herself, with the aim of cultivating talented women.

Ever since establishing the women's academy, Fei Yuer had been very dedicated, always hoping to produce some talented women who could rival men.

“How can that be? You shouldn’t be moving around freely for at least a month, let alone how cold it is outside,” Xiao Ming directly refused.

Fei Yuer said, “Your Majesty, I originally didn’t want to go, but someone sent this this morning.”

With that, Fei Yuer retrieved a model ship and handed it to Xiao Ming.

Taking the model ship, Xiao Ming examined it carefully. It was a purely wooden model ship, but unlike other vessels, this ship actually had a propeller, and there was a steam engine-like object inside the model.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming looked surprised, “Was this made by someone from your women’s academy?”

Fei Yuer shook her head. She said, “Your Majesty used to say that women are just as capable as men, but I think that’s false.”

Xiao Ming looked a bit awkward. He said, “What do you mean?”

“If it were a man, Your Majesty would surely laugh joyfully, instead of being so disbelieving now,” Fei Yuer said. “Your Majesty, don’t forget that everything in this women’s academy is directly copied from Bowen Academy.”

Xiao Ming was startled for a moment. He had to admit that he had never really paid much attention to this women’s academy. After all, for him, the current main force was still male students.

“That was my oversight then. It seems there are indeed exceptionally talented individuals in this women’s academy,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Fei Yuer chuckled softly, then said, “To be frank, Your Majesty, the person who made this thing is actually Zhang Liang’s daughter.”

“Zhang Liang’s daughter?” Xiao Ming immediately felt relieved. This Zhang Liang, besides having an eldest son, also had a daughter born to a concubine.

When Zhang Liang was framed, he had his concubine take their daughter and escape. Later, after he made his fortune in Dengzhou, he found his concubine and daughter.

“Both of Zhang Liang’s children seem to have some talent in shipbuilding,” Xiao Ming said.

Fei Yuer actually couldn’t understand this model, but seeing that it contained a steam engine, she found it quite unbelievable, which made her want to investigate further.

Fei Yuer nodded. She said, “Since Your Majesty won’t let me go, then I’ll leave this to Your Majesty.”

“Then the Empress should summon her to the prefectural office to inquire further, and also to avoid the Empress going out.” He found it inconvenient to intervene in the affairs of the women’s academy.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I will have someone call her over now.”

With that, Fei Yuer immediately sent for her.

At this time, Xiao Ming sat down with the steamship model. The advent of the steam engine led to changes in two modes of transportation: the steam locomotive and the steamboat.

For Xiao Ming, the appearance of these two things was natural once steam engine technology matured, so he was not surprised that Zhang Liang’s daughter had come up with this.

After all, many people had now seen steam engines and clearly understood that steam engines could make objects rotate.

After breakfast, half an hour later, an ordinary-looking woman arrived at the bedchamber, led by Xiaohuan.

“Your Majesty, this is Zhang Liang’s daughter, Zhang Qiyun,” Fei Yuer said.

Xiao Ming looked closely. This Zhang Qiyun was somewhat dark-skinned, like Zhang Liang, and their appearances were also somewhat similar.

As Fei Yuer's words fell, this Zhang Qiyun squinted and looked at Xiao Ming, then bowed and said, "This commoner greets Your Majesty."

Seeming to realize what Xiao Ming was thinking, Xiao Ming said, "Your Majesty, this Zhang Qiyun has some trouble seeing clearly. She always looks like this when she looks at people, and usually she has to hold books very close to read."

"Nearsighted, is it?" Xiao Ming almost blurted out. He himself had been nearsighted in modern times and had already noticed it.

Fei Yuer looked confused, while Zhang Qiyun looked at Xiao Ming with renewed curiosity.

Coughing twice to cover his embarrassment, Xiao Ming remembered that he had summoned Zhang Qiyun for the matter of the steamship. The issue of nearsightedness or farsightedness could be discussed later.

So he asked, "Did you make this ship model?"

"Replying to Your Majesty, this commoner did indeed make it," Zhang Qiyun's words were a bit stiff.

Xiao Ming nodded. This Zhang Qiyun gave him the impression of an ordinary-looking female academic genius from modern times. He said directly, "Can you make this kind of ship move in water?"

Zhang Qiyun calmly said, "If it couldn't move, this commoner wouldn't dare present it to Empress."

Fei Yuer looked pleased, seemingly happy to have such an excellent student.

After gazing at Zhang Qiyun for a while, Xiao Ming said, "If that's the case, I will give you a decree. This decree can even make your father cooperate with you in producing this kind of ship. How does that sound?"

Over the past five years, the number of naval warships had reached fifty-two, all of which were traditional sailing warships.

For him, these fifty-two warships were more than enough to fight Goryeo and Japan, but it might be difficult to contend for maritime hegemony with the West.

As the saying goes, "ten years for the army, a hundred years for the navy." The Great Yu Empire's navy, also commanding sailing warships, did not possess an advantage at sea and might even be defeated in large-scale naval battles due to a lack of combat experience.

Therefore, he had never considered sailing warships as the main force of the navy. He had always reserved the position of steam warships for the navy.

After the last court session, he was about to participate in the construction of these steam warships, but he didn't expect Zhang Liang's daughter to produce a model of a steamship.

"This commoner is merely a woman. How dare I participate in such military and national affairs?" Zhang Qiyun was a bit nervous at this moment. She was very afraid of her father.

Before Xiao Ming could speak, Fei Yuer said crisply, "Don't be afraid. Since His Majesty has chosen you, it means His Majesty values you greatly. Moreover, you are my student, and I will support you. I expect you to bring honor to the women's academy, so that the Confucian scholars of Qingzhou Province won't criticize the women's academy."

Zhang Qiyun looked at Xiao Ming, then at Fei Yuer, and her expression gradually became firm.

Chapter 716

The charcoal in the brazier crackled and popped.

Zhang Qiyun bit her lip, finally saying, "Allow this commoner to try."

Fei Yuer smiled upon hearing this. She said, "That's right. The maxim of our women's academy is that women are no less capable than men. This is what the Emperor himself had me write on the walls of the academy. Since His Majesty is backing us weak women, you just need to be bold and try. If you succeed, it will bring glory to our women's academy and to me."

"Yes, Empress," Zhang Qiyun responded.

Having settled this matter, Zhang Qiyun returned. Xiao Ming then said to Fei Yuer, "The Empress has indeed taught a good student."

“Your Majesty exaggerates. Rather than saying I teach well, it’s more accurate to say Your Majesty teaches well, after all, the little knowledge I have is all taught by Your Majesty,” Fei Yuer now resembled an Empress more and more, speaking with grace and composure.

Xiao Ming smiled upon hearing this. As Emperor, his greatest fear was trouble in the inner court. Therefore, a capable Empress was extremely important for the harem. This way, he could concentrate on state affairs instead of being disturbed by trivial matters.

The current Fei Yuer was not only able to get along well with Lu Luo and Ziyuan, but also capable of assisting him in internal affairs, which was truly rare.

“I do have some credit, but most importantly, the Empress is intelligent,” Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer teased each other. This was also a way for the couple to foster their affection.

With a slight smile, Fei Yuer brought the conversation back to the main topic. She said, “Your Majesty, recently I have increasingly felt that the women’s academy is very important. In warfare and farming, women may not be as good as men, but in learning and memory, they are no less than men.”

“The Empress is right. This is also why I had the Empress establish the women’s academy. Now that the women’s academy is showing initial results, it must continue to be run in the future,” Xiao Ming said.

Fei Yuer nodded. “Once my body recovers, I will keep a closer eye on the women’s academy.”

At this moment, breakfast was served, and the wet nurse brought over Xiao Yi as well.

The two ate while teasing the little imperial prince for a while. Looking at the plump, jade-like infant in swaddling clothes, Xiao Ming couldn’t help but feel a surge of emotion.

In a blink of an eye, five or six years had passed. From eighteen to his twenties, the empire he was determined to build was just beginning.

Now he could no longer wait but had to accelerate the process. After all, the technology crystal contained all-encompassing technology, and he still wanted to conquer the stars and the sea in his lifetime.

After the auspicious snow before the New Year, the festive atmosphere grew stronger. Having lived in Qingzhou Province for five or six years, he had grown accustomed to this lively environment.

A few days before the New Year, he had Fei Ji and Pang Yukun distribute some holiday gifts to officials according to regulations. However, compared to previous years, he was not as generous this year.

After all, he was now not only managing the six prefecture but also the entire northern prefectures and counties. The number of officials had directly increased from over three thousand to over thirty thousand.

After the New Year, Xiao Ming and the officials once again plunged into state affairs. This industrial revolution had just begun, and they could not afford to be idle.

In addition, he also issued a decree after the New Year's grand court assembly for a comprehensive reform throughout the Great Yu Empire.

Every year at this time, officials from various prefectures and counties would come to Qingzhou Province to wish him a happy New Year. This was the best time to popularize the reforms.

His implementation of reforms in the six prefecture did not mean that other parts of the Great Yu Empire could avoid participating in reforms. Rather, the current national treasury was limited, and he could only spend the silver where it was most effective, which led to the plan of prioritizing support for the six prefecture.

But in fact, this decree benefited the entire Great Yu Empire; all prefectures and counties could implement it.

“Your Majesty, many officials are full of praise for the changes in Qingzhou Province, saying they will imitate it when they return.”

In the imperial study, Pang Yukun spoke as if recounting an interesting anecdote.

“It’s easy to say, but difficult to do,” Xiao Ming frowned. The grand court assembly allowed officials to understand Qingzhou Province, and also allowed Xiao Ming to understand the situation in other provinces.

Unlike Qingzhou Province, the situation in both Jinling Province and Chang’an Province had not changed much. The common people still lived in the old social model. The Great Yu Empire was simply too vast. Even in contemporary times, there were some places that modern civilization could not reach. Therefore, he could only choose to focus on developing coastal port areas.

After all, commercial prosperity required these trade ports.

"I understand Your Majesty's meaning. This reform is not something that happens overnight. Although ministers and common people still have some resistance, if the six prefecture develop, I believe officials in other provinces will be much more proactive."

"Indeed, you can't get fat with one bite, so you must not slack off," Xiao Ming reminded them.

Pang Yukun nodded, then said seriously, "Your Majesty, I have something to report to Your Majesty. A Dutch delegation has landed in Dengzhou and wishes to come to Qingzhou to meet Your Majesty. I wonder if Your Majesty wishes to see them?"

"Dutch delegation? Is it Claire and his people?" Xiao Ming was a bit surprised. Ever since the Dengzhou port was opened for trade, Dutch merchants had flocked there. Now, Dengzhou even had a small settlement of Dutch merchants.

"No, the message was sent to the Grand Secretariat by Claire. According to his account, this Dutch delegation was dispatched by the Dutch Parliament, and the head of the delegation is an Earl named Branden."

Pang Yukun frowned as he spoke. In his opinion, these Western countries were all strange, and he still couldn't adapt to interacting with these Westerners.

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this. The Grand Secretariat now handled all the state affairs of the Great Yu Empire, and only matters that the Grand Secretariat could not decide would be reported to him.

This way, everyone could make the best use of their talents, and he could also spare time to cultivate talents and develop technology.

However, this was not a complete delegation of power; he had always been keeping a close eye on them.

“You are responsible for arranging it,” Xiao Ming intended to strengthen trade relations with the Dutch. Claire only represented the Dutch company, but this delegation represented the Dutch state.

The British were now extending their influence into East Asia, and he also felt it necessary to strengthen relations with the Dutch to jointly dismember this ‘empire on which the sun never sets’ at sea.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I will go and make the arrangements now,” Pang Yukun replied and turned to leave.

Watching Pang Yukun depart, Xiao Ming lowered his head to look at the new firearm structural drawing sent by Song Changping. Song Changping had named this model of firearm “Fierce Fire.”

This firearm abolished the previous flintlock firing mechanism and adopted percussion cap firing, and this firing characteristic would give his firearms an advantage on the battlefield.

Setting aside the firearm blueprint, Xiao Ming then looked at the memorial submitted by Fei Ji. On the memorial, Fei Ji provided information on the living conditions of the common people in various provinces, as well as the current state of handicrafts, mining, and salt industries in each province. In short, the current situation of the Great Yu Empire was very bad.

This northern war had devastated various provinces, the common people lived in hardship, and handicrafts and mining had suffered heavy losses.

The six prefecture, with Qingzhou at their core, also experienced massive consumption due to the war, coupled with post-war disaster relief. Now, the reserve grain in the treasuries of the six prefecture was dwindling.

Putting down the dismal data, Xiao Ming clenched his fist and slammed it heavily on the table, firming his resolve.

He was very clear that the industrial revolution in the West occurred on the basis of plundering the entire world. Abundant resources promoted the prosperity of Western industry, prosperous industry made the common people rich and strong, and stronger nations enabled them to seize more resources.

Therefore, the foundation of Western prosperity relied on the word “plunder.” Even in contemporary times, the West had merely replaced military colonization with economic colonization.

Having understood this, Xiao Ming deeply realized that without the support of vast resources, even with the technology crystal, he would constantly face obstacles. Given this, he naturally could not let the West monopolize the world’s resources.

Chapter 717

After the New Year, the weather gradually warmed, and the accumulated snow began to melt.

Faint distant light entered the imperial study, but it brought no warmth to Xiao Ming. In this era where nations collectively acted as pirates, why should he be a bleeding-heart?

Currently, the Great Yu Empire was poor, yet its technology and military were in no way inferior to the West, similar to Europe's past situation.

Back then, the poor Europeans with muskets landed on the American continent and found a group of natives wearing furs and holding spears, rich with oil. One could imagine what happened next.

As the saying goes, "the wheel of fortune turns," and it was time for him to step into this great era. Moreover, if every Great Yu Empire citizen were to live the affluent life of Western citizens, it seemed he would have to occupy quite a bit of territory.

With his hands clasped behind his back, looking at the map in the study, Xiao Ming drew circles on the maps of the Golden Tent Khanate, Goryeo, and Japan.

It was time to make them recall the fear of being ruled by the Great Yu Empire.

...

Dengzhou, Blackrock Village.

A fierce barking startled Zhang Dakang from his sleep. He shivered and immediately scrambled up, looking around.

At this moment, the distant horizon was already tinged with the white of a fish's belly, and the sky was dimly lit; it was precisely when night had not fully receded, and day had not yet arrived.

"Goryeo people."

Following the sound of the barking, Zhang Dakang broke into a sweat despite the cold weather. Not far away, a blurry group of figures, numbering around two hundred, was approaching the village. From hundreds of meters away, he vaguely saw weapons in their hands.

His heart felt as if it was being squeezed tightly, and Zhang Dakang was so nervous he could barely breathe.

Before the New Year, they had heard from the prefectural office that Goryeo people were impersonating pirates to attack fishing villages. For this, Yang Chengye, the Prefectural Governor of Dengzhou, had ordered all militia organizations to form patrol teams, to be vigilant day and night.

The militiamen of his village also sprang into action. Today was his turn to stand guard, but because he was too tired last night, he accidentally fell asleep.

Seeing the fully armed Goryeo soldiers drawing closer, Zhang Dakang could no longer worry about anything else. He grabbed the gong in his hand and beat it forcefully.

"The Goryeo people are coming! The Goryeo people are coming!"

The violent clang of the gong, accompanied by Zhang Dakang's shouts, immediately spread throughout the entire village.

Suddenly, Blackrock Village woke up. All the villagers rushed out, some without even having time to put on their clothes.

"Why are you only sounding the gong now!" The militia captain, Gao Shan, was both anxious and angry. Hearing the sound of the gong, they quickly scrambled up and looked up to see the Goryeo soldiers outside the village.

Zhang Dakang was filled with shame. He said, "Da Shan, I fell asleep."

Gao Shan grew even more enraged upon hearing this. He punched Zhang Dakang on the head, but Zhang Dakang was wearing a full suit of plate armor, so his fist only hurt him, while Zhang Dakang had no reaction.

At this time, other militiamen also gathered, all looking at Gao Shan, awaiting his orders.

Gao Shan knew that this was not the time to blame Zhang Dakang. He said to a villager, "You immediately take the villagers and flee. The rest of you, put on your plate armor, grab your weapons, and follow me."

The militiamen, upon hearing this, immediately ran to the village's militia warehouse. Two years ago, the Dengzhou army had given their retired plate armor and weapons to the militia teams in each village.

On normal days, they worked during the busy farming season and, during the off-season, they would put on their plate armor and train with their weapons.

Outside the village, the Goryeo soldiers also heard the gong. The leading Goryeo general, named Li Cheng-jae, immediately ordered his soldiers to run towards Blackrock Village.

Last year, Japan invaded Goryeo, causing Goryeo to lose half of its territory. To end the war, the Golden Tent Khanate forced the King of Goryeo to pay Japan a million taels of silver, thus ending the conflict.

However, the King of Goryeo and the Goryeo nobles naturally did not want to pay this million taels of silver themselves, so they forcibly levied heavy taxes on the common people, causing widespread resentment.

Seeing constant rebellions throughout Goryeo, the King of Goryeo and his ministers, after deliberation, ordered the plundering of Dengzhou. Firstly, this was to gather the reparations owed to Japan, and secondly, it was to incite hatred and make the common people resent the Great Yu Empire, thereby allowing them to evade responsibility.

For this purpose, the King of Goryeo and the nobles continuously spread rumors among the common people that the Great Yu Empire had instigated Japan's invasion of Goryeo, giving this plunder a legitimate reason.

Li Cheng-jae was aware of the King of Goryeo's and the powerful nobles' scheme, as his father was a military secretary in Goryeo. Looking at the increasingly close Blackrock Village, he drew his ceremonial sword. He was an illegitimate son, and illegitimate sons had no status in Goryeo, but if he could return with the heads of five hundred Great Yu Empire citizens this time, he could rise in status through military merit.

Therefore, after the King of Goryeo gave the order, he actively participated in the plunder of the Great Yu Empire.

At this moment, a warship was patrolling the sea. The warship seemed to have undergone many battles; arrows could still be seen embedded in its hull on both sides.

Besides arrows, some areas also appeared to have been pierced by sharp objects.

“These damned Goryeo people always attack villages when it’s still dark.” Sun Yidong wiped the blood from his hand. In yesterday’s battle, he was wounded by a Goryeo soldier’s arrow, and the wound was still bleeding intermittently.

Liu Chen stood at the bow, using his telescope to look at the distant sea. After receiving the replied memorial before the New Year, they had been patrolling the sea. During this time, they had sunk a total of fifty-three Goryeo warships.

However, this time, the Goryeo people seemed determined, like they had swallowed a weight. Even after suffering heavy losses, they continued to plunder Dengzhou.

“Such passive defense is not a solution,” Liu Chen concluded. Dengzhou’s coastline was long, and they couldn’t guard it hermetically. “The Great Yu Empire has been accustomed to meeting force with force and dealing with problems as they arise. Goryeo is fearless, believing we lack the courage to directly attack them.”

Sun Yidong, the second-in-command on the warship, complained, "Hasn't the Emperor's memorial been approved? But the General is making us act like cowards."

Liu Chen said, "You can't blame the General. Last year's war consumed most of our gunpowder and ammunition. The navy's ammunition isn't enough to subdue Goryeo, and the winter wind blows from the north, which is unfavorable for naval operations."

"I understand that, but isn't the south wind blowing now? I heard a batch of ammunition has also arrived. Can't we act now?" Sun Yidong complained.

Liu Chen was much calmer than Sun Yidong. He said, "The General's inaction is naturally to wait for the right moment. General Yue Yun comes from a fishing village; he hates these Goryeo people more than we do."

As the two were talking, they suddenly saw a long plume of black smoke rising in the distance.

"Damn it, another village has been attacked!" Sun Yidong said angrily. They had been at sea for half a month straight, precisely to provide timely reinforcement to attacked villages.

Liu Chen put away his telescope and ordered loudly, "Full speed ahead! All marines assemble, ready for battle at any moment!"

Chapter 718

As the Goryeo soldiers entered the village, Gao Shan and thirty militiamen had already put on their plate armor.

Twenty-five of them held longswords, and five were gathered with compound bows.

Zhang Dakang's warning was still too late; some of the elderly, weak, women, and children in the village did not have time to evacuate.

"Gao Shan, it's all my fault." Zhang Dakang's tears welled up in his eyes, filled with guilt.

Gao Shan glared at him fiercely. He roared, "What good is saying that now, you damn fool! Pick up your weapons! We can only fight the Goryeo soldiers!"

Blackrock Village was not large, with only five hundred people. The number of militiamen could not compare to other larger villages. Even so, this militia team was cobbled together.

Gao Shan was the oldest and a former veteran, making him the undisputed militia captain. The others varied in age, with the youngest boy being only sixteen years old.

"Uncle, I'm scared."

Gao Shan's young nephew was the youngest among them, and the heavy plate armor seemed a bit cumbersome on him.

Gently stroking his nephew's head, Gao Shan's voice was wild and deep. He said, "Don't be afraid. With your uncles here, anyone who wants to kill you will have to step over me."

Gao Shan's composure calmed the militiamen. Zhang Dakang picked up his longsword and was about to charge the Goryeo soldiers, but he was stopped by Gao Shan.

"How do I usually train you?" Gao Shan was no longer the gentle captain; he had transformed into a beast on the battlefield.

Scanning everyone, Gao Shan said, "Follow me! Form a circular formation, archers in the middle! The villagers can only rely on us now!"

With that, Gao Shan was the first to charge at the Goryeo soldiers.

The others, seeing Gao Shan leading the charge, immediately mustered their courage and shouted, "Kill!"

Over thirty people rushed towards more than two hundred Goryeo soldiers.

Li Cheng-jae watched in surprise as thirty soldiers in Great Yu Empire armor charged at them. They had seen many militiamen dressed like this during this period.

This was his first time in the Great Yu Empire. He had initially thought they would only face a group of unarmed common people, but the current situation clearly left him somewhat stunned.

However, his confusion lasted only a moment. With over two hundred soldiers behind him, he had no reason to fear thirty men, even if they wore strange armor.

A distance of several hundred meters vanished in an instant. The people of Blackrock Village screamed and cried. The Great Yu Empire's weakness had brought them too much suffering. Living on this land, they were always bullied by foreign enemies; their lives were as cheap as grass.

"Whoosh! Whoosh!"

As they fled, Gao Shan and the Goryeo soldiers had already fallen into a bitter struggle.

Five archers fired from the circular formation around Gao Shan, continuously shooting at the Goryeo soldiers. These bows were equipped with pulleys, which saved a great deal of effort, allowing these militiamen to shoot continuously without getting very tired.

Three Goryeo soldiers fell screaming as they charged. The militiamen were trained and would usually hunt wild rabbits with bows, so their archery skills were not bad.

Li Cheng-jae was immediately annoyed upon seeing this. He ordered his archers to return fire, and about thirty archers immediately shot arrows at Gao Shan and the others.

However, the arrows merely left dents as they struck their plate armor.

Li Cheng-jae became increasingly surprised and uncertain. However, they soon reached these soldiers, and over two hundred men completely surrounded the thirty.

The humiliation of failure made him temporarily forget the people of Blackrock Village. Now, their eyes were fixed only on these soldiers.

“Charge!” Li Cheng-jae roared.

The Goryeo soldiers, receiving the order, howled and lunged at Gao Shan and the others.

Facing the swarming Goryeo soldiers, Gao Shan showed no fear. The life-and-death struggle on the battlefield made him exceptionally calm. They stood back-to-back, forming a circle, their swords pointing outward like a hedgehog.

The Goryeo soldiers surrounded the thirty-odd men, hacking and slashing at Gao Shan and the others with their swords. Gao Shan and his group returned the blows, skillfully using their swords to counterattack.

“Thump, thump...” The sound of swords striking plate armor continuously rang out, accompanied by the screams of Goryeo soldiers.

The hedgehog formation formed by Gao Shan and his group prevented the Goryeo soldiers from gaining any advantage with their encircling tactics. Many Goryeo soldiers had to wait behind others, and only when those in front fell could they rush forward and directly engage Gao Shan.

Li Cheng-jae soon realized this problem. They were now in a stalemate with these thirty soldiers. Seeing the sun gradually rise, he became anxious. After all, this was a foreign country; sometimes, the fear of the unfamiliar triggered their wild killing instincts.

“Kill!”

Gao Shan roared, and with his roar, the militiamen fiercely thrust their swords into the Goryeo soldiers. Ten or so Goryeo soldiers had already fallen at their feet.

However, having learned their lesson, the Goryeo soldiers also became smarter. They no longer actively charged forward but instead teased them, trying to exhaust their strength.

Plate armor was inherently heavy, and if they continued to expend energy, they would eventually collapse from exhaustion.

“Gao Shan, have the villagers all fled?” Zhang Dakang panted. “Now, even if we die, it’s worth it.”

Gao Shan no longer blamed Zhang Dakang. In his view, they were going to die together this time.

He was about to speak when a “rumbling” sound suddenly echoed from the sea. The sound was like thunder. Turning his head, he saw a Great Yu Empire warship appear on the horizon.

"It's the Dengzhou warship!" Zhang Dakang also saw it, and he immediately cheered.

Gao Shan also showed a hint of a smile. He gripped his longsword tightly. If they could just hold on a little longer, they would be saved.

Compared to the excitement of Gao Shan and the others, Li Cheng-jae's face turned ashen. He then shouted, "Retreat!"

If the soldiers on that warship landed, they would not survive. These were Great Yu Empire regular soldiers; these soldiers were notoriously fierce.

A hint of panic appeared in the Goryeo soldiers' eyes. They immediately ran back in the direction they came from.

How could Gao Shan let these Goryeo soldiers escape so easily at this moment? He shouted, "Kill these Goryeo thieves!"

The arrival of the warship boosted the morale of the militiamen. It seemed as if new strength infused their bodies. Zhang Dakang chased after the Goryeo soldiers, hacking and slashing.

The Goryeo soldiers were in disarray, only able to run like madmen. After chasing for a while, Gao Shan and the others could no longer run and finally stopped.

By this time, the warship had stopped at sea, and a contingent of soldiers came ashore by boat towards Blackrock Village.

“Captain Liu, you’re late! We drove the Goryeo soldiers away!” When Liu Chen and the others came ashore, Gao Shan said with a hint of pride.

Liu Chen looked at Gao Shan, a slight smile on his lips. He knew Gao Shan, as his father and Gao Shan had once fought together.

He smiled, “It seems I should petition the Prefectural Office for Uncle Gao’s merits. Driving away the Goryeo people with just a militia team is rare in the fishing villages of Dengzhou.”

Gao Shan laughed heartily upon hearing this. He said, “I don’t need this merit, but when can we completely eliminate these Goryeo and Japanese pirates?”

Liu Chen’s gaze was firm. “Soon.”

Chapter 719

Yue Yun’s gaze roamed over the map before him.

This was a map encompassing Dengzhou and Goryeo. At this moment, many symbols had been marked on the map, and there were also two attack routes.

During the New Year, he had been planning the expedition to Goryeo. Xiao Ming's reply to his memorial was actually very simple: it was to let him do what the navy should do, which was to control the sea.

As long as the waters between Dengzhou and Goryeo, and Goryeo and Japan, were controlled, the Great Yu Empire would be invincible.

Because Japan needed ships to reach the Great Yu Empire, and Goryeo also needed ships to reach Dengzhou, as long as they gained control of the seas, they could easily manipulate Japan and Goryeo, instead of being threatened by them.

So, during this time, he had been waiting for Wang Xuan's intelligence. He needed to know the garrison locations of the Goryeo and Japanese navies.

For this operation, he had assembled forty-eight of all the Great Yu Empire's warships. A fleet of this size was enough to solve the navies of both countries once and for all.

He was deep in thought when a voice suddenly sounded from outside the door, "General Yue Yun."

Hearing this voice, Yue Yun was overjoyed. He immediately opened the door and saw Wang Xuan standing outside.

"Commander Wang, I was just thinking of you, and here you are. What a coincidence!" Yue Yun said in surprise, extending his hand as he spoke.

Wang Xuan had ridden hard all the way and was still a bit breathless. Seeing Yue Yun's outstretched hand, he smiled wryly, "General Yue, won't you first invite me to have some tea before we talk about Goryeo?"

Yue Yun was pleased. He personally brewed tea for Wang Xuan and brought it to him. "Here's the tea. Now, let's talk about Goryeo."

Wang Xuan took a sip of tea, moistening his throat. He said, "The location of the Goryeo navy has been found. It's within this Haigucheng port. The Goryeo navy suffered heavy losses in the naval battle with Japan. Now, only one hundred and twenty warships remain."

As he spoke, Wang Xuan took out a map of Haigucheng. This was something he had sent men to draw meticulously.

Yue Yun felt as if he had found a treasure. He said happily, "Excellent! Now we can finally make our move, otherwise the soldiers won't be able to wait any longer."

"It's not just you; the Emperor is also getting a bit impatient. This winter, many workshops have been built in Qingzhou Province. When spring arrives, these workshops will start producing goods. If we can't open up trade ports with Goryeo and Japan, these goods won't be able to sell."

Yue Yun nodded. He was well aware that Western merchants only purchased items like porcelain, raw silk, and tea from the Great Yu Empire and were not interested in goods like textiles.

So, these goods could only be sold to Goryeo and Japan.

"Is there no news of the Japanese navy?" Yue Yun asked again.

Wang Xuan frowned at this. "Japan is much more cunning than Goryeo. They have dispersed their navy to several different locations, and there are many Japanese pirates who can become part of the Japanese navy at any time. It's very difficult to wipe out the Japanese navy in one go. So, it's better to control the waters between Goryeo and Japan, forcing Japan to comply."

"That is indeed troublesome. It will require more effort from them. However, the immediate priority is to resolve the Goryeo's plundering," Yue Yun's gaze was stern.

Wang Xuan had said what needed to be said and given what needed to be given. He only provided intelligence and didn't care how Yue Yun dealt with Goryeo. He said, "It's not easy to come to Dengzhou. I heard the seafood here is good. General Yue, would you like to treat me?"

Yue Yun snapped back to reality. It was already noon, time for a meal. He said to Wang Xuan, "Of course. The seafood in Dengzhou is delicious. I'll take you to taste it."

In the official circles of the Great Yu Empire, he feared no one, except these secret guards. This was not only because the secret guards provided them with a lot of intelligence, but he also highly suspected that these secret guards even monitored generals like them.

Wang Xuan chuckled. Ever since his last taste of seafood, he couldn't stop. This time, since he was here on official business, he naturally couldn't miss it.

The two left the naval office and headed towards Dengzhou City. Now, this place had become a pure military port; other fishing boats were not allowed here.

Following Yue Yun, Wang Xuan first arrived at Dengzhou City. Inside the city, he occasionally saw yellow-haired and red-haired merchants. These merchants were not from the Great Yu Empire but from the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, France, and even Britain.

Although some of these countries were unfriendly to the Great Yu Empire, Xiao Ming had not prohibited private commercial dealings with them.

After all, a cold political relationship and a warm economic one were very common. While fighting wars, everyone still had to eat. Only items of strategic value were embargoed.

Passing through Dengzhou City, the two exited through the East Gate and arrived at another pier in Dengzhou. This was now Dengzhou's commercial port.

At this time, many residences had been built here, and merchants were constantly moving in and out of these residences.

Although Wang Xuan had learned from intelligence reports that Dengzhou had developed relatively quickly in the past two years, seeing it with his own eyes still surprised him greatly.

Besides foreign merchant ships, large fishing boats from Dengzhou were also docked at the pier. At a glance, the entire pier was filled with thousands of ships.

"Here we are. The seafood here has just been brought back from the sea," Yue Yun said to Wang Xuan.

Wang Xuan looked at the pier. Some fishermen were moving seafood from boats to the ground, and some fishermen were selling seafood directly on the pier.

In front of these fishermen, many merchant-like people were haggling, and boxes of seafood were being transported away.

"It's truly magnificent," Wang Xuan exclaimed. "Dengzhou City never had such a prosperous scene before."

Yue Yun smiled, "The Emperor is wise. By designating Dengzhou as a trade port, Dengzhou has undergone a great change in less than three years. I'm afraid in another two years, Dengzhou City's prosperity will be no less than Qingzhou Province."

"I didn't believe it before, but now I do," Wang Xuan shook his head. Because he collected intelligence and established secret guard branches, he had to travel all over the Great Yu Empire.

In the past two years, he had clearly felt that the six prefectures were getting richer day by day. He used to think that many of the policies Xiao Ming implemented were absurd, but now he felt that all these policies had their own profound wisdom.

With a slight smile, he no longer thought about this matter. He simply ate and drank heartily with Yue Yun there, and only returned to the naval office after they had enjoyed themselves enough.

At this moment, Liu Chen also returned from Blackrock Village. Seeing Yue Yun, he immediately stepped forward and said, "General, Georyo attacked Blackrock Village. If this continues, the common people will suffer even more casualties."

Yue Yun pointed at Wang Xuan and said, "The secret guard has arrived. They have provided the location of the Goryeo navy. You are to immediately assemble the fleet. In three days, destroy the Goryeo navy. At the same time, prepare the marines. If Goryeo does not submit, we will show the King of Goryeo what we are capable of."

Liu Chen was overjoyed upon hearing this. They had been feeling stifled all winter, and now they were finally going to act.

Chapter 720

Branden stared blankly at the Qingzhou City wall.

He had traveled a long way from the Netherlands, risking his life, to reach Qingzhou Province, and all his hardships finally ended at this moment.

"Earl Branden, welcome to Qingzhou Province." At the city gate stood a young man dressed as a scholar, who greeted Branden in fluent Dutch.

Rhodes was somewhat surprised. He smiled wryly, "It seems I can keep my mouth shut this time."

The young man's name was Qiao Chuan. He was a former student of Bowen Academy who had studied Western languages, and he had been prepared by Xiao Ming to receive foreign delegations.

“It’s an honor,” Branden smiled slightly. Then he looked at the cement road beneath his feet and asked, “Is this made of volcanic ash?”

Upon entering Qingzhou Province, he had been interested in this smooth road surface, but to him, it didn’t look like the pozzolana mortar used in Europe.

Qiao Chuan was stunned for a moment. He said, “My Lord Earl, this is paved with cement manufactured in Qingzhou Province.”

“Cement?” Branden silently noted it down. Now he was beginning to believe Black’s words.

Half a year ago, news of Black’s private signing of a contract with the Great Yu Empire reached the Dutch National Assembly, which greatly angered the Assembly.

When Europeans first set foot on the American continent and then went on to colonize Asia, no native people had ever made European nations yield. Members of the Assembly shouted that Black was a disgrace and demanded that he return to the Netherlands for questioning.

At the same time, the Dutch National Assembly, out of caution, dispatched a delegation to the Great Yu Empire to try and understand the truth of the matter.

After explaining, Qiao Chuan smiled and said, “His Majesty is waiting for the envoy in the council hall. Please follow me.”

Branden nodded. Actually, he wanted to learn more about this unfamiliar country. Clearly, this was the first unexpected development in the history of European colonization.

As far as he knew, for hundreds of years, Europe had never failed against people of color, which also led to the rise of Eurocentrism and white supremacy.

Some even more radical opinions suggested that all indigenous people outside Europe should become European slaves.

Before coming, he also held such ideas, but now he was somewhat shaken, for here he found a hint of technology.

After all, the entire Europe was now enthusiastic about various new inventions; from commoners to nobles, they all highly valued technological innovation.

Following Qiao Chuan into the city, Branden did not miss any opportunity to observe this city. When a squad of soldiers passed by, his eyes intently fixed on the flintlock guns in the soldiers' hands.

And when he saw a horse pulling a field cannon pass by, he was even more astonished beyond measure. Now he finally understood why Claire had chosen to compromise.

With his eyes wide with wonder all the way, Branden soon reached the council hall. At this point, Branden and the four people who came with him entered the council hall.

At this time, Xiao Ming and a group of ministers were waiting for Branden in the council hall. This was a custom for the Great Yu Empire to receive delegations.

The presence of the ministers showed respect for their delegation.

Upon entering the council hall, Branden first glanced at the young man seated on the dragon throne. He was somewhat surprised, as Claire had said, the Emperor of this Great Yu Empire was just a young man in his early twenties.

However, he also knew that these Eastern nations still retained backward state systems. So, he removed his hat with his right hand, bowed, and placed his hat over his chest, performing the noble's etiquette to Xiao Ming.

He spoke, "Dutch envoy Branden greets the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire."

Xiao Ming could understand Branden's words, but the ministers could not. Qiao Chuan then translated.

In the Great Yu Empire, there was no custom of kneeling, so no minister would question why the delegation did not kneel. At the same time, this custom of not kneeling prevented the common people and officials of the Great Yu Empire from developing a severe subservience.

It was precisely because of this that the resistance from the common people and officials to the ideologies he promoted was not very strong at times.

"Dispense with the formalities. Envoy from the Netherlands, having come from afar, what is the purpose of your visit?" After a simple exchange of pleasantries, Xiao Ming got straight to the point.

In fact, there was no need for formalities when meeting a delegation, as they surely had a request since they had come.

Before Branden departed, the parliament had prepared two plans for him. One was to overturn all contracts signed by Claire and demand the Great Yu Empire's army withdraw from Zeelandia.

Of course, this was based on the premise that the Great Yu Empire was not as formidable as it seemed. The second plan was to strengthen relations with the Great Yu Empire, use the Great Yu Empire's power in Asia to counter Britain at sea, expand trade in the Great Yu Empire, and establish a permanent negotiation team.

Now, a glimpse of Qingzhou Province's power had already made him uneasy, so he naturally dared not propose the first plan. So he said, "Your esteemed Majesty, Emperor of the Great Yu Empire, the purpose of dispatching this delegation to Qingzhou is to strengthen commercial and trade relations between our two nations, and we hope to establish a permanent negotiation team in Qingzhou Province."

"Permanent negotiation team?" Xiao Ming showed an interested expression. This permanent negotiation team was none other than the predecessor of an embassy; the members of the negotiation team were envoys.

"Yes, Your Majesty, the permanent negotiation team is to resolve trade disputes," Branden said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Because the Netherlands was too far from the Great Yu Empire, trade matters were indeed very troublesome at times. If there were Dutch envoys present, it could save a lot of trouble.

So he said, "This matter is excellent. I grant your request."

Branden rejoiced. He then said, "This delegation has also brought a large amount of tribute for Your Majesty. Please accept it, Your Majesty."

Xiao Ming showed an interested expression. He said, "Present it."

At this moment, Qian Dafu walked out. A short while later, he returned with eunuchs, and a large box was carried in.

Branden then opened the box, took out a round object from inside, and said to Xiao Ming, "Your esteemed Emperor of the Great Yu Empire, this item is called a pocket watch. It can record time. Please accept it, Your Majesty."

Then Branden took out a music box, turned a button, and the music box emitted melodious music. Branden said, "This is called a music box."

After putting down the music box, Branden took out exquisite glass crafts, and said seriously, "Your Majesty, this item is very expensive; it is the most precious item among this tribute."

After speaking, Branden carefully watched Xiao Ming, trying to find a different expression on Xiao Ming's face, but he was disappointed.

When the pocket watch and music box appeared, the Emperor showed some interest, but when it came to the glass, he had a calm expression.

Branden thought his explanation was wrong, and emphasized, "This is a treasure, worth countless gold."

Xiao Ming then finally burst into laughter. This Branden had certainly tried to fool the wrong person this time.