

I. Dynasty 163

Chapter 163: The Wheat is Ripe

Twenty fire lances were laid neatly on the ground.

After assigning the logistics to Pang Yukun, Xiao Ming turned his gaze toward the line of bronze tubes. Unlike the heavy cannons he'd developed, these fire lances were narrow at both ends and bulbous in the middle—primitive firearms, more like oversized metal muskets than true artillery.

The bore was tiny, and their effective range? Not worth mentioning.

Clearly, the recent insult from the barbarian envoys had stung Emperor Xiao Wenxuan—he'd been furious enough to actually send these over. But to Xiao Ming, the yellow-gold sheen of these fire lances didn't say "weapon." It said "coinage."

No wonder some emperors in history had melted them down into currency.

"Your Highness," Pang Yukun asked, "what should we do with these? Should we send them to Cangzhou?"

Xiao Ming smiled. "No need. Twenty fire lances... that's enough raw brass to cast a real cannon. Send them to the machinery department instead."

“As you command,” Pang replied.

He was never one to argue about matters he didn’t fully understand.

Xiao Ming was rather pleased with how the emperor had handled things this time. He’d expected a drawn-out affair—letters scolding Prince Shu, delays, more letters... and endless waiting.

But to his surprise, Xiao Wenxuan had acted swiftly—resolving the crisis first, and dealing with Prince Shu later. Apparently, getting humiliated by the barbarians really does light a fire under people.

Having inspected the newly arrived supplies, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun made their way outside the city.

For now, gunpowder and cannon production would be left to Chen Qi and Lu Tong. There was no point in hovering. But the grain fields—those were a different story.

It wasn’t just the peasants’ crops that needed harvesting. The government-run estate farms had fields too. Xiao Ming had once promised Lu Fei that all the yield from those lands would go directly to the Qingzhou Army.

Now it was time to make good on that promise.

By the Xiaoqing River, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun paused to take in the view. Across the river lay the army’s farmland—an ocean of golden wheat that swayed in the breeze like waves on a sea of gold.

Looking at the ripening grain, Xiao Ming felt even more joy than when he’d cast his first cannon.

“Food is the foundation of the people. Agriculture is the backbone of the nation.” If the people had enough to eat, they’d be content. If soldiers had food, they’d fight without fear. But if all a ruler did was wage war, the only thing he’d harvest was rebellion.

Because the harvest was close, Lu Fei had already posted guards to patrol the army fields—to prevent theft.

Most people were honest. But there were always a few who tried to cut corners.

Three days ago, someone had sneaked in at night and cut down a small corner of the crop. Lu Fei had gone ballistic. To him, the estate fields were more important than his own life—he and the soldiers had tilled the soil and pulled the weeds with their own hands.

He immediately dispatched guards to watch day and night, then went to the magistrate himself to demand a full investigation.

It only took two days before the thief was caught. Lu Fei gave the man a good beating himself.

But even so, petty theft from farmland was still fairly common in the people’s own fields.

“After this harvest,” Pang Yukun said with a smile, “the people should finally have some breathing room.”

Until now, Xiao Ming's industrial zones had mostly benefited merchants. The peasants, not so much.

After all, the factories were just a small pilot project in Qingzhou City. The other five prefectures hadn't seen much benefit yet.

"That's the idea," Xiao Ming said with a smile. "Three years of tax exemption—this harvest, the government won't take a single grain. The people should finally have surplus grain at home."

And when the people have grain to spare, they start selling.

With extra income, they start to spend. And once money starts circulating, economic activity across all six prefectures would pick up.

"Still," Pang said with a chuckle, "it'll fall to Your Highness to keep doing business and filling the treasury."

Everything Xiao Ming had done these past months—Pang Yukun had seen it all. He knew that no other vassal in Great Yu cared for the people quite like Prince Qi.

And the more time he spent with Xiao Ming, the more he sensed that this prince had ideas and values unlike anyone else. Ideas Pang couldn't even fully understand.

“Truth is, I just don’t want to die a miserable death here.”

That was Xiao Ming’s private thought.

Of course he wanted to live like a proper prince—enjoy a life of luxury. But just like farming, if you want a harvest, you’ve got to work the land. That was the only reason he toiled over agriculture and industry.

After all, in this world, all he had was technology. He didn’t have a powerful birth family like other princes.

And he was no schemer either—he was raised in the modern world, where he was taught that “love makes the world go round.”

So his path was clear from the beginning: win hearts, push tech, grow the economy.

Just then, hoofbeats echoed in the distance—Niu Ben rode up, with Lu Fei and Luo Xin in tow. All three looked relaxed and content.

“Your Highness!” Niu Ben called out cheerfully. “What a coincidence! You’re out here too?”

Lu Fei added, “The general wanted to see the army’s estate farms. So I brought him over.”

“We were just talking about the same thing,” Xiao Ming said. “The harvest is close. You can’t afford to get careless. Make sure it’s brought in before the rains hit.”

“Yes, Your Highness. That’s why we’re here,” Lu Fei replied.

Niu Ben looked over the fields and nodded approvingly. “Your Highness, not many rulers would give up their own land to feed the army. I’m impressed. Truly impressed.”

“You flatter me, General,” Xiao Ming said modestly. “I had little choice. Qingzhou is strapped for resources. At least this way, the troops won’t go hungry. Plus, farming in the off-season and training in the slow season doesn’t interfere with their drills.”

Niu Ben nodded. He understood the logic perfectly. Throughout history, border armies farming their own land was standard practice.

They crossed the stone bridge and walked into the wheat fields.

Niu Ben knelt, picked a stalk, rolled it between his fingers, then bit a kernel.

“Still a bit damp,” he said. “Give it two more days of sun. Then mobilize a thousand men—you’ll get it all in.”

Xiao Ming's estate covered one hundred qing, or ten thousand mu of land. In Great Yu, each mu yielded roughly three dan of grain.

With the harvests from other estate farms as well, this season alone would bring in about 300,000 dan.

The Qingzhou Army only numbered 20,000 troops. That was enough grain to feed them for over a year.

And that wasn't even counting the second harvest later in the year, or the newly cultivated fields in other areas.

Which meant one thing: the army's food problem was officially solved.