

## I. Dynasty 248

### Chapter 248: A Beauty's Smile

The Commerce Hall was packed with people coming and going—it felt just like a New Year festival.

Hearing Pang Yukun's congratulations, Xiao Ming couldn't help but smile wryly. Only after taking charge did he truly realize how expensive it was to run a household—or in his case, a domain.

Now that he was a prince ruling a territory, he fully understood one thing: if the people were to live good lives, if the soldiers and officials were to get their salaries on time, if ships and cannons were to be built, and materials purchased—then almost everything came down to one thing: silver.

Without money, officials wouldn't do their jobs, soldiers wouldn't fight, and craftsmen would slack off. From a ruler's point of view, things like loyalty to the emperor or peace under heaven were noble ideas, but for the average person, it all boiled down to filling their stomachs.

Only now did Xiao Ming realize that money in your pocket is what lets you survive tough times. If he had only focused on building up his army without developing industry or making money, then when the barbarians came to attack Qingzhou, he would've had no public support, no cannons, and only a ragtag group of poorly armed conscripts ready to run at the first sign of trouble. By then, he might've already been six feet under.

That's why, in his heart, he never once loosened his grip on trade and commerce. With money came resources. And only with both could he afford to build a real army.

“That kind of congratulations is a bit expensive,” Xiao Ming replied with a smile.

Pang Yukun chuckled softly, then said seriously, “Your Highness, it’s all for attracting merchants to settle in Qingzhou and improve the city. We’re planning to pave all of Qingzhou with cement roads. That’s no small project. Without money, it’s impossible.”

Coming from the modern world, Xiao Ming naturally had a longer-term view. His urban planning for Qingzhou had started early—he didn’t wait for things to fall apart before trying to fix them.

As the saying goes, “If you want to get rich, build roads first.” Every time it rained, Qingzhou’s muddy streets left both merchants and locals miserable.

And for Xiao Ming, it was even worse. So he had decided—it was time to launch his first municipal engineering project since arriving in this era: build paved roads and beautify the city.

The goal wasn’t just to improve daily life, but also to attract more outside merchants to settle here long-term. After all, if you want to attract a phoenix, first build a nice nest.

Also, there was a simple truth: large-scale construction was the fastest way to stimulate the local economy. In the modern world, municipal projects and real estate had proven that time and again.

Throwing a lot of silver into this meant spending on materials and labor—money that would end up in the hands of the common people.

As they were talking, a disheveled Li Kaiyuan rushed in, sweat pouring down his face. His clothes were a mess, as if he’d just been wrestled to the ground.

“Oof, those money-hungry merchants!” he grumbled. “They act like I’m a thief! I nearly had my clothes torn off!”

He caught his breath and then asked, “Your Highness, all the merchants are asking when the auction will start. What should I tell them?”

“No rush,” Xiao Ming said calmly. “The real VIPs haven’t even arrived yet.” He waved the imperial fast letter from Emperor Xiao Wenxuan.

“So the news about the mirror just started spreading in Chang’an?” Li Kaiyuan asked.

Xiao Ming nodded. “And I want to delay things a bit so Lu Tong and the others can make more mirrors.”

“I agree completely,” Pang Yukun chimed in, now learning more every day by working closely with Xiao Ming.

Li Kaiyuan nodded too.

Xiao Ming added, “Oh right, send another merchant ship to Chang’an with ten more mirrors. Make sure one of them goes to Fei Yue’er.”

“Sending a gift already? The princess isn’t even married yet. Looks like Your Highness was quite impressed during your visit to Chang’an,” Pang Yukun said teasingly.

Xiao Ming tried to recall Fei Yue’er’s face, but the memory was already a bit fuzzy. Still, in the modern world, it was normal to send gifts to your fiancée—it was just good for married life later on.

“I only met her briefly,” he said, “Sending a mirror is just a nice gesture.”

Li Kaiyuan chimed in with a boot-licking grin, “Your Highness is achieving great success and winning the heart of a beauty. Truly enviable!”

Xiao Ming, while pleased, wasn’t one to get carried away. He shot him a look and said, “Less flattery, more work. Now get moving.”

Li Kaiyuan laughed and nodded before squeezing back out into the sea of merchants.

The imperial letter had asked about the mirrors specifically, with hints that the imperial concubines loved them. Xiao Wenxuan clearly wanted more sent over.

But unlike consumables like perfume or soap, Xiao Ming wasn’t going to hand out mirrors to every concubine. He decided to send more to the emperor and let him deal with the distribution. After all, the emperor had sent an urgent message—Xiao Ming had to show some respect. Otherwise, the impact of the first gift would be lost.

As for the concubines who didn't get one? They'd have to pay for it like everyone else.

The merchants outside still refused to leave, so Xiao Ming had someone announce that the auction would be delayed another ten days.

He himself headed to Bowen Academy. Even while preparing for the auction, he hadn't slacked off.

Over the past ten days, he had been teaching Luo Xin how to calculate cannonball trajectories, and giving Yue Yun and others basic navigation lessons. And he would keep going—there was still much more advanced material to cover.

While Qingzhou's merchants were going wild over the mirrors, another batch arrived in Chang'an. Nine went to Emperor Xiao Wenxuan, and one went to the Fei family's residence.

"Master, this is a gift from Prince Qi."

At the Fei residence, the steward brought in a large mirror covered in black cloth.

When Fei Ji saw it, he instantly understood. "Careful now! Don't drop it."

The man from Qingzhou set the mirror down and left. The steward, still puzzled, asked, "Master, what is it?"

Fei Ji stroked his beard and said, "It's probably a mirror."

He pulled the black cloth off—and sure enough, an elegant, stunning mirror appeared before him.

Looking at his reflection, Fei Ji smiled warmly. Prince Qi's thoughtfulness made him feel even more at ease about entrusting his daughter to him.

"Take this mirror to the young miss," he said.

The steward nodded and brought it to her room.

At that moment, Fei Yue'er was in her room sewing a pouch. When she heard the commotion outside, she had her maid Xiaohuan open the door.

Fei Ji stepped inside, followed by the steward.

"Father, what's this?" Fei Yue'er asked curiously.

The black cloth was still covering it. Fei Ji smiled and said, "Daughter, this is a mirror from Prince Qi."

“Ah!” Fei Yue’er gasped in surprise.