

I. Dynasty 48

Chapter 48: The Return of Li San

“Any kind of edible oil will do.”

That was the last thing Xiao Ming said to Wang Shijie before sending him off.

Right now, he had no intention of wasting too much time on the four major families. The only reason he was sharing profits with them was to maintain the illusion that they were still allies.

In reality, Xiao Ming could not tolerate the existence of powerful aristocratic clans within his fiefdom. Such factions posed a severe threat to his rule.

The Great Yu Empire was already suffering under the unchecked power of noble families. He would not repeat that mistake.

After seeing Wang Shijie off, Xiao Ming ordered Qian Dafu to summon Pang Yukun. With the expansion of industrial technology, more and more products would soon be produced by Machinery Department and the Prince's Mansion.

Both Drunken Qingzhou wine and perfume were produced exclusively within the Prince's Mansion, with only trusted household guards involved in their manufacturing—strictly for security reasons.

Xiao Ming was well aware that others would not sit idly by. Spies were surely lurking, eager to steal the secrets of his factories and workshops. Thus, he was now formally establishing the Patent Bureau.

From now on, all technological innovations from Machinery Department would be registered under the Patent Bureau, with Chen Wenlong personally overseeing it. Any individual, merchant, or official caught stealing patents would be severely punished—and in extreme cases, executed.

Furthermore, anyone wishing to use a registered patent would have to pay a licensing fee.

For now, Xiao Ming had no intention of selling patents, but the legal framework had to be established early.

Additionally, he and Pang Yukun agreed to allow commoners to apply for patents on their own inventions, encouraging civilian innovation.

Alongside the Patent Bureau, Xiao Ming also established the Department of Minerals—a prelude to the construction of state-run mines. Controlling mineral resources meant controlling industrial power.

Pang Yukun had no objections to Xiao Ming's ever-expanding policies. As long as the Prince of Qi was actively working to govern properly, he saw no reason to challenge him. The burden of execution fell upon him anyway.

With the snow now melted, Qingzhou was once again bustling with life.

While Wang Shijie was busy purchasing edible oil, Xiao Ming organized his household guards to start producing lye. The method of boiling limestone and wood ash together was primitive, but for now, it was the most effective way available.

Days passed in busy preparation.

Then, one day, an unexpected visitor arrived at the Prince's Mansion, sending the entire household into an uproar.

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"Your Highness, Li San has returned!"

Xiao Ming, who had been engrossed in experimenting with soap production, was suddenly pulled from his thoughts by Lü Luo's excited voice.

Laughing, Xiao Ming put down his brush and said, "I figured he should be back around this time."

Just then, Li San appeared, carrying a bundle on his back. Upon seeing Xiao Ming, he bowed and said, "Your Highness, this lowly servant has returned."

"No need for formalities," Xiao Ming said, smiling broadly. He was eager to hear the details of Li San's trip to Chang'an. "Tell me—how did things go?"

Li San handed the bundle to Lü Luo and reported, “Concubine Zhen sent me with a message, saying that Her Majesty the Empress was very fond of Your Highness’s perfume. The palace concubines love it as well. As for Drunken Qingzhou, the Emperor himself got drunk on it while drinking with the Empress—he was so pleased that he wouldn’t put his cup down! He even praised Your Highness for brewing excellent wine.”

Lü Luo’s face lit up with excitement. “I knew the noble ladies would love it!”

Xiao Ming nodded. He had expected such a reaction. These luxury goods were so novel that it would have been strange if the imperial court hadn’t taken notice.

However, he raised an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Li San smirked knowingly. “His Majesty was so delighted that during a court session, he personally instructed Deputy Minister of Revenue Cui Zhang to allocate 200,000 taels of silver to Your Highness. He also said that if Your Highness continues to govern diligently, the court will gradually release the full 1 million taels allocated for Your Highness’s fief.”

Xiao Ming was speechless. “What a cheapskate.”

This 1 million taels was an inheritance fund that the imperial court traditionally granted to every royal prince upon taking control of a fief—essentially startup capital for a prince’s domain.

It was no different from a wealthy merchant funding his heir’s first business venture.

Despite a century of war in the north, the southern regions of the Great Yu Empire remained prosperous, with booming trade and industry. The empire's tax revenue was so high that it rivaled the peak of the Song Dynasty in Xiao Ming's view.

The imperial court was undoubtedly wealthy. Yet, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan was stingy even with his own sons.

Xiao Ming couldn't help looking down on him for it.

Just then, Qian Dafu arrived, having been drawn by the commotion. Hearing the news, he laughed. "Your Highness, 200,000 taels is still quite a sum. At least it can help ease urgent expenses. Why not allocate it to the Department of Minerals? Building mines requires silver."

Xiao Ming massaged his temples. "You haven't even officially taken office yet, and you're already asking for money?"

Then he sighed, "Fine. You can have half—100,000 taels."

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Qian Dafu grinned. Though 100,000 taels was a drop in the bucket, it was still better than nothing.

With the Department of Minerals now in operation, his responsibilities were immense—not just overseeing coal, iron, limestone, and graphite mines, but also the other mines Xiao Ming had designated.

Even with 100,000 taels, it would likely vanish like water into sand.

Just then, Li San added, “Your Highness, aside from the imperial grant, Concubine Zhen has personally sent 200,000 taels in banknotes for Your Highness.”

Xiao Ming was stunned. “Where did Mother get so much silver?”

Li San grinned. “It’s all thanks to Your Highness’s perfume! The palace concubines placed advance orders, paying deposits in gold and silver. Everything is detailed in this letter.”

Handing over a letter, Xiao Ming opened it and quickly frowned.

The money was indeed from perfume sales. However, that was not the main issue.

The letter mentioned both Empress Zhao and the Crown Prince. If it were just the Empress, it wouldn’t be concerning—but mentioning the Crown Prince made things complicated.

While Concubine Zhen only made brief remarks, Xiao Ming understood the implication—Empress Zhao was trying to pull him into the Crown Prince’s faction.

That would make him an enemy of all the other princes who wanted to overthrow the Crown Prince.

Qian Dafu noticed Xiao Ming's change in expression. "Your Highness, what's wrong?"

"This is troublesome." Xiao Ming sighed. "After I was framed by the Fourth Prince and nearly assassinated, Empress Zhao now sees me as a potential ally for the Crown Prince. This means I've just offended every single prince who wants to remove the Crown Prince."

Qian Dafu scanned the letter and nodded grimly. "Indeed. The letter states that Empress Zhao and the Crown Prince sympathize with Your Highness's struggles in Qingzhou and will add another 100,000 taels to the imperial grant. That alone makes their intentions obvious."

After a moment of thought, Xiao Ming shrugged lazily. "Well, since the money is already here, we might as well accept it. Right now, developing our fiefdom is what matters most. If I can maneuver between all the princes, that would be ideal."