

I. Dynasty 8

Chapter 8: The Land Problem

“Your Highness, the soldiers have been waiting for this day!”

Lu Fei laughed heartily. Today, the King of Qi was different from before—he felt much closer to the soldiers.

As a straightforward man, Lu Fei had only looked down on Xiao Ming because of the prince’s past arrogance and incompetence. Now, though he didn’t understand why Xiao Ming’s personality had changed, he saw it as a good thing—perhaps it was worth following the prince a while longer.

Li Kaiyuan, chewing on a bone, savored the unique taste of horse meat. Unable to resist, he asked hopefully, “Your Highness, I’ve heard that Chang’an is incredibly prosperous. Can all the commoners there eat steamed buns?”

Xiao Ming pondered for a moment before replying, “Not everyone, but life there is certainly more comfortable than ours.”

In his view, no place in the Da Yu Empire was truly prosperous for the lower classes. The kingdom’s Equal Field System had long since collapsed, with severe land monopolization leaving many commoners landless. Bandits roamed freely, and the entire kingdom reeked of decay, like an old man at death’s door.

Qian Dafu, reminiscing about life in Chang'an, added, "Chang'an is home to wealthy merchants and noble families—so yes, it's bustling. At least if you have silver, you can buy anything you want. Not like here in Qingzhou, where even money can't buy salt. We only managed to get some because Ziyuan went to Prince Wei's territory to procure it."

"Salt?" Xiao Ming suddenly realized why the horse meat had tasted so bland—it wasn't seasoned. "The eastern part of my fief borders the sea. Don't people here know how to boil seawater for salt?"

"Your Highness, it's not that they don't know how," Qian Dafu explained carefully, "but salt production has always been a state-controlled monopoly. Selling private salt is a crime punishable by death. And since Your Highness never paid much attention to the official salt bureau... well..."

Xiao Ming felt a wave of embarrassment. This was yet another disaster caused by the previous Xiao Ming's neglect.

For five years, the prince had ignored everything about his fief, never thinking to develop it. He had done nothing but indulge in pleasure, leaving many necessary institutions completely undeveloped.

With a long sigh, Xiao Ming declared, "Since that's the case, once Chancellor Pang returns, he will establish a Salt Bureau. We will produce official salt in Dengzhou and Laizhou."

"Your Highness is wise!" Qian Dafu's eyes lit up—finally, the prince was showing signs of competence.

As the sun set, Lu Fei and Li Kaiyuan led their soldiers back to their respective posts.

Nightfall in the Da Yu Kingdom meant curfew, and Qingzhou was no exception.

The royal estate was shrouded in darkness, with only two or three rooms dimly lit by candlelight. The lack of resources in the fief meant even the palace couldn't afford to illuminate every corner extravagantly.

In the servants' quarters, plumes of smoke rose as workers bustled in and out, carrying firewood.

Just as Xiao Ming rounded the front hall, Lu Luo suddenly appeared before him. In the pitch-black night, if not for her distinctive green dress, he might not have recognized her.

"Your Highness, the hot water is ready. You must be exhausted after capturing the barbarians today—please bathe and rest early," Lu Luo said softly.

It had been three days since Xiao Ming arrived in this unfamiliar world, and every night had been unbearably dull.

With no entertainment, the boredom was suffocating. One day was tolerable, but after three in a row, he was about to lose his mind.

He glanced at Lu Luo. No choice—if this continues, I'll go crazy. I might as well tease the maids for amusement.

The bathhouse was in a side chamber of the sleeping quarters, reserved solely for Xiao Ming's use. As he followed Lu Luo inside, he saw that a large wooden tub of steaming water had already been prepared. Ziyuan stood beside it, waiting.

After three days of living like a peasant, Xiao Ming finally felt a shred of comfort. At least I still have maids to attend to me. How many single men would envy this?

“Your Highness, allow me to remove your robes,” Ziyuan and Lu lu stepped forward.

Xiao Ming straightened his back and stretched out his arms. He didn’t bathe every day—in this wretched ancient era, even bathing was a luxury.

Fetching water from the well, heating it, preparing everything—it took multiple servants just to make a single bath possible.

Including Qian Dafu, the entire palace staff barely numbered ten people.

These ten servants handled all the cleaning, cooking, and miscellaneous duties for the estate.

And the estate itself was no small place—200 meters across in both directions, making it the grandest residence in Qingzhou.

With his eyes half-closed, Xiao Ming enjoyed the attentive service of Lu lu and Ziyuan. For the first time since transmigrating, he felt it was worth it.

Lu Luo and Ziyuan blushed deeply.

Previously, they had only served Consort Zhen—never had they seen a man's body before. Their emotions were a mix of embarrassment, fear, and curiosity.

But they knew that since Consort Zhen had gifted them to the King of Qi, they now belonged to him.

They could only suppress their emotions.

"Shall we bathe together?" Xiao Ming smirked wickedly.

Lu Luo lowered her head, too shy to respond.

Ziyuan, however, boldly replied, "Your Highness, no need to rush. Her Highness instructed that once you are married, Lüluo and I will be yours sooner or later."

Xiao Ming had only been joking to relieve his boredom.

Sitting in the hot water, he glanced at Ziyuan. She's bolder than Lu Luo.

Indeed, Consort Zhen had hinted at this in her letter.

“Just a joke, don’t take it seriously,” Xiao Ming said, continuing to bathe. He wasn’t some lust-driven fool—he knew what really mattered right now.

After a brief pause, he asked, “Ziyuan, tell me—if I want my fief to prosper, what is the most important thing I need to address?”

Ziyuan was surprised that the prince would ask her such a question. Instinctively, she replied, “I am but a mere woman—I wouldn’t know such things.”

“I order you to answer.” Xiao Ming frowned. Even now, women were still expected to be ignorant and submissive. He had expected her response.

After a moment of hesitation—worried that the prince might revert to his former temper—Ziyuan cautiously answered, “Land.”

Xiao Ming nodded.

The rising power of noble families, the looming barbarian threat, the scheming imperial princes—his time was limited.

Over the past few days, he had carefully analyzed everything. The first issue to address was land.

In any ancient dynasty, there was always an odd phenomenon—there were always more peasants than available farmland.

Whenever large-scale land monopolization occurred, it was usually a sign that the dynasty was nearing its end.

Currently, his fief was no different—vast tracts of fertile land were controlled by local aristocrats, leaving many commoners landless.

His first priority was to resolve this land issue.

His second priority was knowledge transmission.

Sitting on a technology library yet failing to use it? That would be the greatest waste of all.