

## I. Dynasty 167

### Chapter 167: Trap

“Li San, I order you to immediately send people to monitor all medical clinics. Do not let anyone who buys medicine for bruises and injuries escape surveillance.”

In the Qi Prince’s residence, Xiao Ming spoke solemnly to Li San.

Li San had already learned about the burning of the government estate on his way back. At present, Wang Xuan was in Cangzhou City, responsible for gathering intelligence on the grasslands, while Li San handled affairs within the fiefdom.

This incident filled him with guilt because he had received no prior warning.

“Your subordinate has already arranged for a secret investigation upon arriving,” Li San hesitated before continuing, “By the way, Your Highness, these past few days, I’ve had the covert guards keep an eye on merchants returning from the grasslands. A few of them behaved suspiciously—after entering Qingzhou City, they snooped around everywhere and even lingered near the workshop district and the Machinery Department.”

“Are you saying these merchants are spies from the grasslands?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Wouldn’t that make sense? These smugglers only care about profit. They’ll take our silver to work for us, but they’ll just as easily take the barbarians’ silver to work for them,” Li San replied.

“They take our silver?” Xiao Ming frowned. “Do the covert guards also buy information about the grasslands from them?”

Li San nodded. “The grasslands are vast, and only these merchants can infiltrate the barbarian tribes. Recently, the barbarians have grown very wary of unfamiliar merchant groups. The covert guards I sent, disguised as merchants, were almost captured. It’s been difficult to gather intelligence, so we’ve had to resort to bribing these merchants for information.”

Double agents were not unheard of in reality, and Li San was right not to trust these merchants. Xiao Ming said, “In that case, secretly arrest those suspicious merchants immediately and interrogate them under torture. We don’t have time to play games with them. Right now, it’s better to kill a thousand by mistake than let one slip away.”

Li San nodded, his expression darkening.

As soon as Li San left, Xiao Ming was about to head out when Li Kaiyuan suddenly arrived, requesting an audience at the prince’s residence.

Recently preoccupied with preparing for war in Cangzhou, Xiao Ming had left the merchant association’s business to Li Kaiyuan.

“Your Highness.” In the main hall, Li Kaiyuan bowed respectfully.

“No need for formalities. As the merchant association’s deputy head, you’re quite busy. What brings you here?” Xiao Ming asked.

Li Kaiyuan grinned. "Your Highness, no matter how busy I am, I could never forget about you. Heh, Your Highness, I've come with great news!"

"What news?" Xiao Ming asked, his interest low. The recent events had left him irritable.

Noticing Xiao Ming's mood, Li Kaiyuan said, "Your Highness, this will definitely make you happy. I've brought you two shiploads of saltpeter."

"Two shiploads? Didn't Chen Wenlong say there's no saltpeter on the market now?" Xiao Ming asked, puzzled.

Li Kaiyuan explained, "For this, Your Highness should thank Merchant Qin. A few days ago, on my way back from Jinling City, I happened to run into the Qin family's merchant ships returning to Qingzhou. Unexpectedly, they were carrying saltpeter. Once back in the city and hearing of Your Highness's shortage, I remembered this and went to see Merchant Qin. He was very willing and said he had been planning to send the saltpeter to Your Highness."

"Oh?" Instead of being pleased, Xiao Ming frowned.

"Your Highness, what's wrong? Isn't this good news?" Li Kaiyuan asked.

"Good news? It certainly seems so. But why would Qin Chuanyun pass up the chance to take credit and instead let you deliver it?" Xiao Ming said.

Li Kaiyuan froze, suddenly realizing something. “You’re right... That guy used to be even more eager than me to please you. Your Highness, what are you implying?”

Instead of answering, Xiao Ming asked, “Where did you see Qin Chuanyun?”

“He was at the docks, seemingly preparing to leave town,” Li Kaiyuan said.

Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed. Connecting the two incidents, he grew increasingly suspicious of Qin Chuanyun.

“Go and call Li San back immediately,” Xiao Ming ordered urgently.

Seeing Xiao Ming’s grim expression, Li Kaiyuan didn’t dare ask further and rushed out. Soon, Li San was brought back.

After Xiao Ming explained the situation, they immediately headed to the Tuo River docks with the covert guards.

But by the time they arrived, Qin Chuanyun was nowhere to be seen.

Shortly after, the city guards reported that apart from a few servants and Qin Chuanyun's concubine, all important members of the Qin family had left the city.

"Qin Chuanyun! I treated you well!" Xiao Ming roared in anger.

Li San cautiously said, "Your Highness, Merchant Qin was still a nobleman at heart. I never expected him to be so patient—he deceived not only you but also lulled me into lowering my guard. I have failed you."

"This isn't your fault. It's mine. Nobles will always be nobles—how could they ever be content living as commoners?" Xiao Ming muttered to himself.

Li Kaiyuan interjected, "Your Highness, the situation isn't yet certain. Maybe Merchant Qin simply took his family on a trip. Look, the Qin family's merchant ships are still here, and these two ships are filled with saltpeter."

As they spoke, an old man suddenly emerged from one of the ships. Seeing Li Kaiyuan, the withered elder said, "Manager Li, Merchant Qin and his family have gone to visit relatives. Before leaving, he specifically instructed this old servant to deliver the goods on these ships to Your Highness to ease his urgent needs."

"Your Highness, see? Maybe you were overthinking this," Li Kaiyuan said.

The two docked merchant ships, each over thirty meters long, were standard Qin family vessels. If their cargo holds were indeed filled with saltpeter, Qingzhou would no longer need to worry about gunpowder supplies.

Frowning, Xiao Ming boarded the ship with Li San, beginning to wonder if he had been too paranoid.

After all, he couldn't accuse Qin Chuanyun based on mere suspicion.

"Your Highness, the saltpeter is right here," the old man said, leading them into the ship's hold, which was indeed packed with saltpeter.

Li Kaiyuan said, "Your Highness, see? Maybe Merchant Qin really did a good deed."

The old man added, "Merchant Qin bought this saltpeter at a high price from a merchant from Shu. I heard the Shu Prince has sealed the saltpeter caves there—no one can mine them without his permission."

As he spoke, the old man rubbed his eyes. Standing close to him, Xiao Ming caught a faint, familiar scent from the old man's hands.

His face paled in horror.

"Gunpowder! Get away from here—NOW!"

Li San reacted instantly. With a swift slash of his blade, the old man clutched his chest and collapsed with a groan.

The three of them rushed to escape. Before they could get twenty meters away, a deafening BOOM erupted. Xiao Ming shoved Li San and Li Kaiyuan to the ground as a shockwave blasted over them.

“Li Kaiyuan, you idiot! I’ll kill you!”

His body aching as if shattered, Li San scrambled up and punched the dazed Li Kaiyuan.