

I. Dynasty 168

Chapter 168: The Militia Decree

A chorus of ghostly wails rang in his ears, and the memory of that explosion experiment came rushing back again.

‘What a familiar experience,’ Xiao Ming thought. As he stood and patted himself down, he was overcome with a surreal feeling — he was alive!

In front of him, Li San was straddling Li Kaiyuan, punching his face over and over again.

The dock was in chaos. Qin family’s merchant ship was slowly sinking in flames, and the violent explosion had affected nearby vessels as well.

From time to time, cries of agony echoed from within the ships.

“Qin Chuan Yun, the steppe tribes — you’ve succeeded in enraging this prince.” Xiao Ming’s eyes were hollow, and his quiet voice sounded as though it had risen from the abyss.

He kicked Li San. “Enough. Is this really the time for internal strife? I don’t care how you do it. You must bring Qin Chuan Yun back to me. I want his corpse hung from the gates of Cangzhou City!”

Li San got up, seething. Had it not been for Li Kaiyuan's words defending the Qin family, they never would have entered the ship in the first place.

Had Xiao Ming not been familiar with the scent of gunpowder, if it had been any other out-of-touch prince, the three of them would have perished aboard.

"Your Highness, I'll go now. If I can't catch Qin Chuan Yun, you can chop off my head and feed it to the dogs!"

Li San was nearly exploding with rage. This would ruin Xiao Ming's trust in him going forward.

He said nothing more, turning with the secret guards to rush back into the city.

Li Kaiyuan, his face battered and swollen like a pig's head, crawled over to grab Xiao Ming's leg and sobbed, "Your Highness, I really didn't know Qin Chuan Yun was so vicious! Your Highness!"

Xiao Ming gave him a cold stare. Dealing with such an idiotic ally was exhausting. He kicked Li Kaiyuan in the rear. "Don't blame me for not trusting you. Until this is all cleared up, you'll have to spend a few days in prison. It's not just Li San — even I can't help but suspect you."

He had to admit, it was Li Kaiyuan who had led him step by step into that ship's hold. It was difficult not to be suspicious.

"I'm innocent, Your Highness! I only wanted to make you happy..." Li Kaiyuan wailed.

Xiao Ming couldn't be bothered with him. The royal guards immediately took Li Kaiyuan away.

Recalling what had just happened, Xiao Ming still felt a lingering fear. On the adjacent ship, the explosion had shattered everything. It seemed the gunpowder had been ignited from that neighboring vessel.

That was why they hadn't noticed in time. If not for the faint scent of powder on that old steward's hands, he truly would have died there.

Back in the city.

Xiao Ming went straight to the prison. Li San had already arrested all the suspicious merchants and was subjecting them to intense interrogation.

The man in charge of extracting confessions was one of Li San's men, called Liuzi.

"Your Highness," Liuzi said, "they finally talked. These bastards really wouldn't admit anything until we started slicing skin. They've been carrying messages for the local gentry. The barbarians gave them plenty of benefits in exchange for information. They were instructed to sabotage Your Highness's supply lines and even assassinate you. Whoever did the most would be rewarded with land in Qingzhou once the barbarians took over."

He threw a bloodied knife on the ground, still clinging with bits of human flesh. This cruel punishment was one that Xiao Ming had personally taught Li San.

Clearly, Li San had been absolutely furious this time.

“Did you find out how Qin Chuan Yun got his gunpowder?” Xiao Ming’s face flickered in the firelight of the torches in the cell.

“Yes,” Liuzi answered. “The barbarians gave him the formula. Damn traitors, all of them.”

“Don’t let them die just yet,” Xiao Ming said with a chilly expression as he turned to leave the prison. “I still have use for them.”

‘Guard against all dangers, yet still fall to treachery from within.’

Xiao Ming had taken a heavy blow this time. But what enraged him the most wasn’t even the loss — it was the traitors willing to sell their souls for foreign gold.

These dogs, these traitors. They ate Da Yu’s rice, drank Da Yu’s water, walked on Da Yu’s land — and yet, just for a few scraps from foreigners, they were willing to see their people slaughtered and their homeland ruined.

He could endure many things — but not this.

The explosion at the dock had also alarmed Niu Ben and the others. They entered Qingzhou City on horseback at full speed.

In the Governor's Office, they saw Xiao Ming, looking worse for wear.

"Your Highness, what happened?" Lu Fei asked in shock.

Niu Ben, too, uncharacteristically showed concern. "Your Highness..."

Pang Yukun had already been briefed. He explained how Qin Chuan Yun had set a trap in an attempt to kill Xiao Ming.

"That bastard Li Kaiyuan!" Lu Fei shouted. "I'll go finish him right now!"

"Don't make trouble," Niu Ben said sternly. "This is the time for unity, not vengeance. That's exactly what the enemy wants. This whole thing just shows how deep Qin Chuan Yun's deceit runs — one step after another. No one could have seen it coming."

"Exactly," Luo Xin added. "First they burned the grain depot, then used Li Kaiyuan to lure His Highness into a trap. They knew how much hope His Highness had placed on the Qin family. Of course he would come personally — and they were waiting."

Xiao Ming, now calmer, said, "Enough with hindsight. Li San is already on his trail. The rest of you, don't sit idle. Bring Qin Chuan Yun back."

Niu Ben nodded. The three men saluted and left.

Pang Yukun turned to Xiao Ming. "Your Highness, the gentry will never stop. And with more traitors appearing by the day, we can't just keep reacting. We have to strike first."

"That's why I came to find you. Today, draft a decree to announce to all six prefectures: traitors will die."

"From this day forward, any suspicious individuals can be apprehended by the people and turned over to local authorities. Anyone found to be a spy for the barbarians — those who report them will be rewarded handsomely. Also, villages are permitted to form local militias to defend their land and keep order."

"Militias?" Pang Yukun's eyes lit up. "That's a new one. Brilliant. That way each village has its own self-defense force."

Xiao Ming sighed. This wasn't his preferred approach, but against those who would betray their country for glory, he had no choice but to involve the people.

He then explained how the militias would work.

In short, they were to be locally organized self-defense groups. In wartime, they'd repel invaders. In peacetime, they'd patrol and maintain order in their own areas.

"Think of it as a wartime strategy," Xiao Ming said. "We're mobilizing the strength of the people. With this, we'll have the support of all one million households across the six prefectures."

Pang Yukun nodded, eyes shining. "And it'll suppress those rebellious gentry as well. Truly killing two birds with one stone."