

I. Dynasty 218

Chapter 218: Preparing to Depart

Soft sunlight streamed in, yet the atmosphere in the Fei family's main hall remained heavy.

Xiao Ming felt deeply frustrated. With the barbarians included, the empire now faced four major threats—and two were already at his doorstep.

"The third threat, apart from the barbarians, is the non-imperial feudal lords," Fei Ji suddenly whispered after a long silence, as if afraid of being overheard.

Xiao Ming stiffened. This was an issue no court official dared mention openly—an unspoken truth everyone understood yet avoided.

Even the powerful Fei family couldn't withstand the chaos these non-imperial lords might unleash.

"Grand Secretary Fei's insight is truly exceptional. This humble prince admires your foresight," Xiao Ming said sincerely.

Fei Ji's analysis was razor-sharp, pinpointing the empire's core crisis—internal strife compounded by external threats.

Fei Ji sighed again. “Your Highness flatters me. With your wisdom, you’d have realized it eventually. The external threats are beyond our reach for now, so let me instead explain the factions at court.”

Xiao Ming nodded.

These external problems were currently unsolvable. With his own domain still unstable, tackling them was impossible. Focused development remained his priority.

Fei Ji continued, “The court appears divided between war and peace factions, but the reality is far more complex. The princes each represent different feudal interests. The civil officials led by Cui Hao abet these schemes, seeking to control the court. Even the military faction under Luo Quan isn’t united. Meanwhile, Princess Pingyang stirs unrest in Chang’an.”

“Currently, Your Highness can ally with the Imperial Guard commanders under Luo Quan. As for civil officials, your old friends need no introduction. Regarding Princess Pingyang—be cautious. Cooperate when necessary, but never fully trust her.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang had predicted this accurately.

“However, above all others, Your Highness must win over His Majesty. The rest are merely temporary shelters from storms—the Emperor alone is the towering tree that can truly protect you,” Fei Ji concluded.

Xiao Ming clasped his hands. “My gratitude for Grand Secretary’s guidance.”

After a pause, Fei Ji added, “There are also several ministers I suggest Your Highness visit.”

“Are these the ones?” Xiao Ming produced the list Zhan Xingchang had prepared.

Fei Ji glanced at it and laughed. “With such advisors, my concerns were unnecessary. Yes, these are the officials.”

He then detailed the three names, He Zhong, Vice Minister of War, Yu Ming, Minister of Ceremonies and Chao Jun, Chancellor of the Imperial Academy

After thorough explanations and further discussion, Xiao Ming noted the sun’s position. Seizing the opportunity, he said, “Grand Secretary, while it’s still a rest day, I’ll visit them now. I take my leave.”

Fei Ji nodded approvingly. “In that case, I won’t detain you.”

He escorted Xiao Ming to the gate, watching him depart with a sigh. “The Fei family has never taken such risks before. I pray this choice is correct.”

Leaving the Fei residence, Xiao Ming had his servants deliver gifts to the three officials. Unlike most, these men owed their positions to merit rather than aristocratic connections.

Their surprise at Xiao Ming’s visits was palpable. Following Fei Ji’s advice, Xiao Ming discussed state affairs without overt recruitment—keeping conversations casual yet meaningful.

This was the art of subtlety. Even unspoken, the lavish gifts conveyed his intent clearly enough for these astute men to discern.

Whether they'd later align with Qingzhou depended on their choices.

After a busy day, Xiao Ming had accomplished nearly everything. Tomorrow's court session would finalize his mission—delivering Emperor Xiao Wenzuan's gifts before returning to Qingzhou after a brief rest.

This wasn't the modern era where a phone call could resolve matters. Each trip wasted precious time.

With this in mind, he prepared the gifts at dawn.

Unlike last time, neither Luo Xin nor Lu Fei accompanied him to court—this was a routine session beyond their rank.

At Chengguang Hall, after the ceremonial greetings, all eyes locked onto the large chest beside Xiao Ming.

"Prince of Qi, are these the gifts you promised?" Emperor Xiao Wenzuan had waited eagerly, now barely containing his excitement.

"Indeed, Father. These are two gifts you'll surely cherish." Xiao Ming radiated confidence.

The Emperor leaned forward. “Open them at once!”

No official dared protest gifts to the throne. Instead, they watched intently, curiosity mingled with envy—many had heard of Xiao Ming’s generosity to Fei Ji and others.

At Xiao Ming’s signal, guards unsealed the first chest, revealing a cloth-draped object about a meter tall. With a flourish, Xiao Ming pulled the covering away, exposing a breathtaking glass sculpture—a mountain landscape inscribed “Unified Realm.”

Gasps filled the hall. Even the Emperor descended from his throne for a closer look. “This is entirely glass?”

“Every inch, Father.”

Xiao Ming smiled as the Emperor circled the masterpiece, his delight unmistakable. The princes’ eyes gleamed with longing—especially the Prince of Shu, whose jealousy burned visibly.

Finally, the Emperor turned to the smaller box. “And this?”

“Father, this rivals the sculpture.” Xiao Ming opened the case, withdrawing a tubular object. “This is called a telescope.”

“A telescope?” The Emperor frowned. “What does it do? It’s just a rod.”

The Prince of Shu nearly scoffed but bit his tongue, remembering his humiliation at the poetry contest.

Xiao Ming demonstrated. “Father, look through it toward the distance!”