

## I. Dynasty 26

### Chapter 26: The Injured Qian Dafu

“Lieutenant Lu!”

Upon seeing him, the soldiers escorting Qian Dafu immediately dismounted and knelt on one knee, their faces filled with guilt. “Your Highness, Lieutenant, we failed to protect Steward Qian. Please punish us.”

“What happened?”

Xiao Ming’s anger flared. He had just survived an assassination attempt, and now Qian Dafu was injured.

The lead soldier explained, “Your Highness, we’ve been searching for mineral deposits for the past month as per your orders and have made significant discoveries. We were on our way back to report to you when we were ambushed by mountain bandits. Although we fought our way out, Steward Qian was hit by an arrow.”

“Mountain bandits?” Lu Fei frowned and said worriedly, “Your Highness, winter is approaching. Many starving commoners turn to banditry, relying on looting to survive. If they are now bold enough to attack government officials, this year’s bandit crisis is likely to be worse than ever.”

There was a peculiar look in Lu Fei’s eyes, as if blaming Xiao Ming. The implication was clear—though Xiao Ming hadn’t made any grave mistakes in the past five years, he hadn’t achieved much either. The chaos from the barbarian invasion three years ago had only worsened the poverty and disorder across the six prefectures.

“Take Steward Qian back for treatment first!” Xiao Ming ordered, ignoring Lu Fei’s subtle rebuke.

The lead soldier responded immediately, carrying the unconscious Qian Dafu back toward Qingzhou City at full speed.

Xiao Ming and his group quickly followed. Upon entering the city, Xiao Ming immediately summoned the governor’s medical officer to treat Qian Dafu.

The commotion in Qingzhou soon caught the attention of Pang Yukuan, who promptly arrived at Prince Qi’s residence.

After examining Qian Dafu, the medical officer reported, “Your Highness, the steward’s internal organs were not damaged. He merely lost too much blood and fainted. Once the arrow is removed and the wound bandaged, he will recover with rest.”

“Doctor Sun is skilled. If he says it’s not serious, then there’s no cause for concern,” Lu Fei remarked.

Xiao Ming sighed in relief. “Good. Then let’s leave and let Doctor Sun tend to him.”

Outside the room, Lu Fei fumed. “These bandits are too bold! Once the snow stops, I will lead the army to exterminate them!”

“Raiding them is only a temporary fix,” Pang Yukuan countered with a pointed tone. “If the people had enough food and stability, who would willingly turn to banditry?”

Lu Fei frowned. "Then what does Lord Pang propose?"

"Every year, you lead military campaigns against the bandits, yet they always return. His Highness has implemented land cultivation policies and tax reductions, which have earned the people's trust, but these reforms take time to show results. Rather than outright extermination, why not offer amnesty? These are starving commoners. If we offer them food and shelter, most will abandon their criminal ways and reintegrate into society," Pang Yukuan explained.

"What if they refuse?" Lu Fei questioned.

"Then we must use both force and diplomacy. Those who surrender should be treated fairly, while the true criminals must be eradicated. If we can endure this winter, the bandit problem will naturally disappear once the people reap their harvests next year," Pang Yukuan replied.

Xiao Ming nodded in agreement. "We will follow Lord Pang's strategy. The bandits are scattered, and heavy snowfall makes sieging them difficult. Starting today, we will distribute porridge at all city gates. However, those who ambushed Qian Dafu must not go unpunished. Otherwise, how can I face him and the soldiers?"

Lu Fei bowed. "Rest assured, Your Highness. I will see these criminals brought to justice."

Pang Yukuan interjected, "Your Highness, we must be cautious. Capturing the leader is key—if we go on a killing spree, who will surrender?"

Though furious, Xiao Ming knew Pang Yukuan was right. “Fine. Capture the leader first.”

Lu Fei acknowledged the command and left to prepare the troops.

Pang Yukuan then said, “Your Highness, I will make arrangements for the porridge distribution and issue notices to all prefectures. However, the governor’s treasury is running low. Might Your Highness transfer funds from the Engineering Department to purchase grain?”

Xiao Ming winced. The Engineering Department was currently the wealthiest department, but even its funds weren’t infinite.

Reluctantly, he agreed. “Fine. But will you also petition Father Emperor for additional funds to get us through this crisis?”

Pang Yukuan gave him a knowing look. “Your Highness, whether His Majesty provides funds depends entirely on how much he values you.”

Xiao Ming’s expression darkened. He had already sent a request for assistance to Xiao Wenxuan, but it had been ignored.

It was clear now—his father had no intention of financially supporting him.

“Fine, fine. You and Lu Fei just enjoy watching me struggle,” Xiao Ming grumbled, waving Pang Yukuan away.

Pang Yukuan smirked slightly and took his leave. He wasn’t unwilling to help, but imperial affairs were beyond his influence.

Watching him leave, Xiao Ming frowned. Misfortunes never came alone. Diverting funds from the Engineering Department would hinder its research and development—a consequence he desperately wanted to avoid.

He had no choice but to seek aid from Xiao Wenxuan.

Ordinarily, border lords received financial aid from the imperial treasury, even though Qingzhou wasn’t a primary target for barbarian raids.

“What to do?” Xiao Ming pondered.

He was in dire straits. His new policies had yet to yield results, and now the bandit crisis threatened to make things worse.

After much contemplation, he thought of Empress Zhao.

As the Crown Prince's mother, she was greatly favored by Xiao Wenxuan. Her influence was a major reason why the emperor refused to depose the incompetent Crown Prince.

More importantly, Empress Zhao was obsessed with fragrances—almost to an obsessive degree. Officials often curried favor by gifting her rare incense and perfumes.

A plan formed in Xiao Ming's mind.

If direct requests to Xiao Wenxuan had failed, perhaps an indirect approach through the empress would work.

Modern perfume-making was simple for him, and the necessary ingredients were readily available.

He would brew a batch as a gift to his mother, Consort Zhen, who could then subtly persuade Empress Zhao to speak on his behalf.

Even if this failed, he could still have Consort Zhen sell the perfumes in Chang'an for profit.

Feeling slightly relieved, Xiao Ming made up his mind.

Just then, Ziyuan emerged from Qian Dafu's room.

“Your Highness, Steward Qian is awake.”

Xiao Ming immediately entered. Inside, Doctor Sun was still bandaging Qian Dafu’s wound. The steward struggled to rise upon seeing Xiao Ming.

“Stay down,” Xiao Ming ordered.