

I. Dynasty 319

Chapter 319: Natural Disasters Cannot Be Stopped

In the glow of sunset, Zhao Long's profile was lit in red by the lingering twilight.

On their way back from Bowen Academy, he grinned and said to Xiao Ming,

"Your Highness, many students were inspired by the reward notice.

Some even said they're determined to surpass Lu Tong!"

"Good. These students really needed some motivation," Xiao Ming nodded.

"Here, take this and post it in each department tomorrow."

Having followed Xiao Ming around every day, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu had become informal students. Over time, they had even learned to read.

Zhao Long glanced at the new document Xiao Ming handed over.

It listed detailed reward categories, including; Scholarships, Scientific Innovation Awards, Progress Awards, Special Contribution Prizes

Each award came with specific prizes.

What stunned Zhao Long the most was the Special Contribution Prize:

A house in Qingzhou City and 3,000 taels of gold.

Heart pounding, he bowed and left.

This wasn't just for Bowen Academy—it applied to everyone in the territory.

Anyone who submitted a scientific or technical breakthrough to the government would be evaluated—and rewarded.

"If I win that prize, even ten wives wouldn't be a problem!"

He drooled at the fantasy.

But then he remembered how Prince Qi had looked out at the sunset earlier...

Even though the sky was beautiful, he hadn't seemed happy.

The sunset was indeed stunning—like colored glass painted across the sky.

But to Xiao Ming, this beauty was dangerous.

There's an old saying:

“Morning glow brings rain, evening glow means drought.”

Right now, Qingzhou was filled with sunsets.

That meant exactly what Pang Yukun had warned about: drought was likely on the way.

Historically, Henan, Hebei, and Shandong were hotspots for droughts and locust plagues.

There had been many disasters and uprisings in these regions.

In the 1942–1943 Henan Famine, under the Nationalist government, severe drought hit in July, followed by a locust plague, leading to a massive famine.

The entire province starved. Countless people died.

Worse, the drought happened while China was at war with Japan, making things even more devastating.

Now, the Blood Wolf Tribe was watching hungrily from the north.

If drought led to chaos in Bingzhou or Jizhou, all the progress Xiao Ming had made might fall apart overnight.

But he was only human.

He couldn't stop natural disasters or change the politics of other princes' territories.

Bingzhou was controlled by Prince Liang, Jizhou by Prince Yong. Xiao Ming couldn't interfere even if he wanted to.

All he could do was protect his own land.

"Let it rain.

A beautiful sunset won't fill anyone's stomach," Xiao Ming muttered.

Troubled all night by the thought, Xiao Ming went straight to the Chamber of Commerce the next morning to personally oversee grain purchases.

"Your Highness, I've already ordered barter-based trade.

We're preparing to buy grain in large quantities," said Li Kaiyuan as he explained the preparations.

"It's not enough," Xiao Ming replied.

"Send all the merchant ships to the south and buy grain there.

The north has never produced enough. We have to rely on the south."

After a sleepless night of planning, Xiao Ming had decided:

buy surplus southern grain while they still could.

Li Kaiyuan now understood Xiao Ming's urgency.

"Your Highness, there's someone you may want to meet.

If he agrees to help, grain won't be a problem."

"Who?" Xiao Ming asked.

"A man from the Cao family—the richest clan in Jiangnan.

They came to the Chamber of Commerce to buy glass mirrors, and plan to visit you next.

Why not meet them now?"

"Cao family?" Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow.

He'd been producing valuable goods for over a year now, but the Cao family had remained passive, never showing interest.

"They've finally taken the bait?" he murmured.

After a pause, he said,

“Fine. Let them in.”

Soon, Li Kaiyuan returned with a man in white silk robes.

“Cao Zhengyang greets Your Highness.”

The man was well-mannered, confident, and composed.

“Cao Zhengyang? A concubine-born son?”

Xiao Ming’s voice turned cold.

“Sending a secondary son to see me?”

Seems the Cao family still doesn’t take me seriously.”

He was clearly testing the visitor.

Cao Zhengyang, who had left Lin'an seven days ago, was sent directly by the family to Qingzhou.

Without flinching, he replied:

"They say Your Highness is a man of vision—a model for the entire Great Yu Empire.

I didn't expect you to care about birth status.

Pity—I thought you were different."

"How dare you!"

Li Kaiyuan snapped.

"How can you speak to His Highness like that?

If I had known, we'd never have sold you the mirrors!"

Xiao Ming raised a hand to stop him.

“In Qingzhou, I don’t care about status.

But in the Great Yu Empire, noble families only respect the legitimate sons.

You think flattery will trick me?”

Cao Zhengyang hesitated briefly, then explained:

“It’s not that the Cao family looks down on you.

My father admires Your Highness’s wisdom.

My older brother is sick in bed, so I was sent in his place.”

“Why didn’t you say so to begin with?”

Xiao Ming stood up.

“I don’t like games. Tell me straight—what do you want?”

“Very well,” Cao said.

“As Your Highness knows, the Cao family has long supported Prince Chu.”

“Isn’t that still the case?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Your Highness, merchants have no borders.

We don’t serve kings—we follow profit.

Please don’t treat us like Prince Chu’s lapdogs.”

That response made Xiao Ming frown.

A merchant of the Great Yu Empire wasn’t supposed to talk like that.

“In this empire, merchants are servants of the nobility. What else could they be?”

“True,” Cao admitted.

“But Your Highness is different.

You want to rebuild the country through commerce.

Maybe you can create a land where merchants are free.”