

I. Dynasty 370

Chapter 370: Merchants Gather

In front of Prince Qi's residence, many merchants gathered, waiting eagerly for Xiao Ming's return from Shanhai Pass.

The news that the Qingzhou Army had captured Shanhai Pass had been published in the newspapers several days ago. The merchants who had funded the northern campaign were so excited they couldn't sleep.

At first, they had little hope that Xiao Ming would ever defeat the barbarians in Youzhou. Most of them had only invested money to flatter him and earn his favor. But to their surprise, in just three months, Xiao Ming had truly taken Shanhai Pass. The once-lost lands of the Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun now belonged to him.

Only now did the merchants remember their support and rush to Prince Qi's residence, holding the promissory notes from when they had provided funds and supplies.

They came every day, waiting faithfully. After all, Xiao Ming had promised them triple returns. If someone invested 100,000 taels, they would now receive land worth 300,000 taels.

Just thinking of the wide grasslands outside Cangzhou made their hearts race. It was prime land for raising horses. If they could raise horses there and sell them to the Great Yu Empire's vassal lords, the profits would be enormous.

“His Highness is back!”

As soon as Xiao Ming appeared, a merchant shouted, and everyone rushed toward him with flattery on their faces. Some looked ready to hug his legs just to stay close.

Ziyuan was already standing at the gates of the residence.

These merchants gathering every day had been a headache, but now that Xiao Ming was finally back, she let out a sigh of relief.

Still, her most important job was taking care of Xiao Ming’s health and well-being. She placed her hands on her hips and told the crowd, “Everyone, His Highness has just returned from a long journey and must be exhausted. It would be better to talk business tomorrow.”

Xiao Ming nodded at her words. He truly was tired and didn’t want to deal with business matters just yet—especially matters involving how to repay the promised profits. He needed to discuss it with Pang Yukun and get his advice.

Taking the opportunity, he addressed the crowd. “Everyone, I know why you’re here. The promise I made to you still stands, and it will not change. Please be patient. In a few days, I’ll invite you all to the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the matter in full.”

Among the merchants was Cao Zhengyang, who had invested the most and now looked the most pleased.

He said, “Your Highness has misunderstood. We’re not here to ask for repayment right away. We know you’ve been through a tough battle, so we’ve brought some gifts to help you recover.”

He signaled to his servants. Six attendants stepped forward carrying red sandalwood boxes. Inside were rare herbs like ginseng, snow orchid, and he shou wu.

The other merchants, seeing Cao Zhengyang so eager, quickly followed suit and began presenting their own gifts to Xiao Ming, begging him to accept them.

There were all kinds of items—fine porcelain, paintings and calligraphy, fur cloaks, and more. It dazzled Xiao Ming's eyes.

Ziyuan couldn't help but smile. She loved it when merchants sent gifts to the prince's residence. And knowing Xiao Ming's personality, there was no way he would refuse them.

Sure enough, Xiao Ming gave a polite bow to the merchants and signaled for Ziyuan to bring the gifts inside.

Cao Zhengyang then said, "Now that we've delivered our gifts, we won't disturb Your Highness further. We'll take our leave."

Since arriving in Qingzhou, Cao Zhengyang had been especially polite and considerate.

Xiao Ming nodded, looking relaxed.

These gifts—why not accept them? He was going to give the merchants their profits anyway. The gifts could just count as a little bonus for himself.

He said to Cao Zhengyang, “In that case, see you next time. Everyone, please head home for now.”

Although Xiao Ming was a little wary of the Cao family’s influence in Qingzhou’s financial sector, he couldn’t deny that Cao Zhengyang was clever, respectful, and always supported him completely—something Xiao Ming did find comforting.

Still, as someone from the modern world, Xiao Ming knew that capital always came with hidden agendas. Sweet words and gifts were often just a sugar-coated trap. Though he was pleased, he kept his guard up.

Once the gifts were accepted, the merchants finally began to disperse.

Xiao Ming let out a quiet sigh of relief, dismounted, and walked into the residence.

Ziyuan was excited, directing the servants to carry all the gifts inside, her face glowing with joy.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming shook his head. ‘This girl has really turned into a little money-lover,’ he thought.

Still, even in her excitement, Ziyuan didn't forget her duties. As Xiao Ming entered, she followed closely, asking about his health and ordering the kitchen to prepare food for him.

Inside the sleeping quarters, Ziyuan helped Xiao Ming remove his armor. Then she said, "Your Highness, the consort sent a message. Assistant Minister Feng has already set out for Qingzhou. She also asked me to help prepare for the royal wedding."

"Hmm, I figured the imperial decree would arrive soon. Did my mother mention anything about what's happening in court?"

As Ziyuan helped him into more comfortable clothes, Xiao Ming asked casually.

"The consort didn't say much, just that His Majesty is very pleased and the court officials are full of praise. She said Your Highness will surely be rewarded generously," Ziyuan replied with a smile.

Xiao Ming had achieved historic success. He had recovered Shanhai Pass, a stronghold lost for over a decade. In Ziyuan's eyes, his merits outshone all the other princes.

Xiao Ming nodded. Still, the silence from the court made him uneasy.

Storms always come after eerie calm.

This time was different. The war in Cangzhou had merely delayed the barbarians from invading Qi and Wei lands, but this time, Xiao Ming had completely changed the power dynamics within the Great Yu Empire.

The barbarians of the Sixteen Prefectures had been driven out. As long as Shanhai Pass stayed secure, the barbarians would never again be able to sneeze and make the entire country tremble.

Now that the blade was no longer at the empire's throat, no one could predict how the court would shift.

But Xiao Ming wasn't too worried. Controlling Shanhai Pass meant he had his hand on the throat of both the barbarians and the empire.

He understood the old saying:

"When the birds are gone, the bow is put away. When the rabbit is dead, the hunting dog is cooked."

Shanhai Pass was a fortress the Great Yu Empire couldn't afford to lose. Xiao Wenxuan had no choice but to rely on him. Once Xiao Ming arrived in Chang'an, his status would rise sharply, and he'd earn more honors and power.

His only real concern now was his older brothers, who definitely wouldn't like seeing him suddenly rise like a dark horse in the heart of political power.

But Xiao Ming didn't fear them. In his eyes, all their schemes would be shattered under the roar of his cannons.