

I. Dynasty 46

Chapter 46: The Fisherman Gains Benefit

Qin Chuanyun and Xiao Ming were both taken aback.

They had expected Wang Chengchou's first words to be a defense of himself, yet he had unexpectedly confessed right away.

Xiao Ming looked at Wang Chengchou with interest and chuckled. "Master Wang, I haven't even questioned you yet. Why are you already admitting guilt?"

"Your Highness, some days ago, I inspected my estates in the various prefectures and discovered that my nephew, Wang Xuan, had been hoarding plow oxen and selling them at exorbitant prices to the common folk. I have always been devoted to assisting Your Highness since the implementation of the Land Cultivation Decree, but alas, I have failed in my judgment of people and allowed such a grave mistake to occur. I implore Your Highness to punish me!" Wang Chengchou wiped the cold sweat from his forehead while kowtowing.

Qin Chuanyun sneered, "Master Wang, you're truly calculating. In such a short time, you've already found yourself a scapegoat. You've never liked Wang Xuan, and now you've killed two birds with one stone—clearing yourself of guilt while eliminating Wang Xuan."

"What do you mean by that, Master Qin? The Wang and Qin families have always coexisted peacefully. Why must you be so venomous and seek to destroy my Wang family?" Wang Chengchou growled.

It was true that Wang Shijie had mentioned the illegal salt trade in front of Xiao Ming under Wang Chengchou's instructions. In the past, Xiao Ming had always favored the Wang family, allowing them to navigate Qingzhou effortlessly. There were even times when Wang Chengchou had treated Xiao Ming with condescension.

Back then, Xiao Ming had indeed been an incompetent fool, living lavishly off the Wang family's silver. But times had changed—after his severe illness, he had undergone a drastic transformation overnight. Not only was he now a shrewd ruler, but he also keenly adopted the strategies of Pang Yukun. Wang Chengchou was no fool; he knew Pang Yukun was no ordinary man, and it was likely that many of Xiao Ming's actions were influenced by him.

Now, the Qin family was growing wealthy under Xiao Ming's patronage. If this continued, in just a few years, they would surpass the Wang family. At that point, the Qin family would wield power just as the Wang family once had, using Xiao Ming's influence to suppress them.

This was something Wang Chengchou could never allow. That was why he devised this ruthless plan—to drive a wedge between the Qin family and Xiao Ming.

"Hahaha! Master Wang, you're truly shameless, like a turtle without teeth. Who was the one who slandered my Qin family before His Highness, falsely accusing us of trading illegal salt?" Qin Chuanyun's beard trembled with anger.

Had Xiao Ming not been present, the two men would likely have come to blows.

"Hmph! Whether or not the Qin family traded illegal salt, you know better than I do," Wang Chengchou scoffed before turning to Xiao Ming with a bow. "Your Highness, please investigate thoroughly!"

Xiao Ming's gaze flickered between the two.

Both the Wang and Qin families held significant influence across the six prefectures. Many local officials were either related to or closely tied to them. Their vast estates housed not only private soldiers and retainers but also countless tenant farmers and servants.

If he were to take sides and wipe out one family entirely, the other might act out of desperation, which would be disastrous. Right now, his domain was still in the early stages of recovery—stability was what he needed most.

If these disputes dragged on for years, it would only hinder his progress. Instead of taking a definitive stance, why not strike both sides and extract benefits from them?

He could continue to manipulate their rivalry, ensuring they remained at odds while he reaped the rewards. Once he had built his new army and fully consolidated control over the six prefectures, these aristocratic families would no longer be a threat. By then, he could deal with them however he pleased.

Having made up his mind, Xiao Ming said, “Enough. There’s no need to argue further. You may both leave. Since the issue of the plow oxen stems from Master Wang’s nephew, it remains an internal family matter—how you handle it is up to you. However, regarding the oxen...”

Wang Chengchou’s heart lifted—Xiao Ming was letting the matter go! He quickly responded, “Your Highness, I will ensure that the surplus plow oxen in my estates are sent to the local prefectures for allocation. Your Highness need only provide a small rental fee each year.”

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. At least Wang Chengchou knew how to be flexible. This arrangement would significantly ease the shortage of plow oxen in the collective farms. He then turned to Qin Chuanyun. “As for Master Qin, I will personally investigate the matter of illegal salt trading. Until a verdict is reached, there must be no further spreading of accusations.”

Qin Chuanyun's heart clenched—Xiao Ming's words implied that the matter was far from settled.

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Both men rose, throwing each other a hateful glare before turning to leave.

Once they were gone, Qian Dafu chuckled. "Your Highness, your tactics are becoming more refined. You just granted the Qin family a boon, only to immediately tighten the leash. And by not punishing Wang Chengchou, he's been forced to surrender his oxen. As for the illegal salt matter, Your Highness now has a blade hanging over the Qin family's neck."

"Exactly," Xiao Ming laughed. "Qin Chuanyun surely understands this too. In the future, he will be even more obedient than the Wang family."

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Meanwhile, outside the Wang estate...

"Wang Chengchou, you're ruthless! Just you wait!" Qin Chuanyun spat. The Qin family had clearly suffered a loss—illegal salt trading was an offense that could be as minor or as severe as Xiao Ming decided.

Wang Chengchou smirked. "Ruthless? You're no better, Master Qin. Hmph!"

With that, the two men stormed off in opposite directions.

Back at the Qin estate, Qin Chuanyun remained uneasy. After careful consideration, he realized Xiao Ming had let the Wang family off lightly due to the oxen issue. With this in mind, he immediately paid a visit to the Wei family. Ever since his daughter had married Wei Qing, their two families had formed an alliance, growing increasingly close.

At the Wei estate, Qin Chuanyun recounted the entire incident.

“You’re suggesting that we donate all our surplus oxen?” Wei Hong’s face twitched in reluctance.

“This is a long-term strategy,” Qin Chuanyun explained. “A single plow ox is worth no more than ten taels of silver. But now, a single jar of Drunken Qingzhou wine earns us more than that. With production expanding, our annual profits will reach tens of thousands of taels. We must weigh the costs and benefits.”

Wei Hong grumbled sourly, “No matter how much you earn, it’s still your money, Master Qin. All I can do is envy you.”

Qin Chuanyun chuckled. “Come now, let’s not be petty. Your family is the largest grain merchant in the six prefectures, with the most farmland and oxen. Giving up a thousand oxen is hardly an issue. If need be, I’ll compensate you in silver.”

Wei Hong sighed. “Since you put it that way, I have no choice but to help.”

Though reluctant, he knew that with Qin Chuanyun offering compensation, he wouldn't be losing much. He then added, "However, Master Qin, you must put in a good word for me with His Highness."

Qin Chuanyun hesitated for a moment before laughing. He patted Wei Hong's hand. "Rest assured. I will make sure His Highness hears of your generosity. If we can win his favor, both our families will prosper. Times have changed, Wang Chengchou once seemed like an ally, but now his true ambitions are clear. Our families are still relatively new among the aristocracy; we must rely on His Highness to withstand the Wang and Sun families."

Wei Hong nodded. "You're right, Master Qin."