

I. Dynasty 87

Chapter 87: New Developments

That evening, Fan Zeng submitted his daily observations to the prince's residence. After reading them, Xiao Ming became even more certain of the current situation.

The village elders, often the most respected figures in their communities, were typically elected as village heads. However, the reality was that many of these village heads colluded with powerful local families for money, oppressing the common people. They were the claws and fangs of these powerful families. Fan Zeng also mentioned the reactions of these village heads, noting that they had likely already reported the impact of the newspaper to their masters.

For Xiao Ming, this was a serious issue. Although village heads held the lowest official rank, they were the foundation of governance. Their actions directly affected his ability to win over the people.

After all, village heads held significant influence in their communities. With the support of powerful families, they also wielded considerable power within their villages.

"Your Highness, are you worrying about governance again?" Luluo entered, carrying a bowl of lotus seed porridge.

By now, both she and Zihuan had grown accustomed to their interactions with Xiao Ming. While they respected him, their relationship also carried a sense of the master-servant bond they had shared with Empress Zhen.

Xiao Ming nodded. "Yes, the newspaper has been distributed, but if a village is controlled by a village head who serves the powerful families, the people remain under their tight surveillance. It's quite frustrating."

Luluo and Zihuan were well aware of what Xiao Ming was doing. As his influence grew, his next step was to eliminate the influence of local powerful families in the fief and fully consolidate his control over all aspects of governance.

"Isn't this like a single piece of rotten meat spoiling the whole pot? If we can just remove that piece, wouldn't that solve the problem?" Luluo asked, puzzled.

"Easier said than done. The tradition of villagers electing their own village heads has persisted for over a thousand years. If I were to break this tradition now, it would cause an uproar. Moreover, I don't have suitable candidates to send down to the villages as village heads," Xiao Ming explained.

Luluo said, "Your Highness, you haven't lived in a village, so you might not understand. Just like in Qingzhou City, there are conflicts between people in the villages. When it comes to electing a village head, there are often different candidates. Since Your Highness knows how to pit the Qin and Wang families against each other, why not let the villagers do the same?"

Xiao Ming's eyes lit up, feeling as though a cloud had been lifted. He praised her, "Well said! Spending so much time with Zihuan has taught you how to think critically."

Luluo blushed and said, "Your Highness, don't praise me too much. I was just sharing what I remember from my village."

"No, you deserve a reward. Tell me, what would you like?" Xiao Ming smiled.

Luluo hesitated for a moment, not wanting to dampen his mood, so she shyly said, “I’d like to eat clay pot chicken.”

Xiao Ming laughed heartily. “No problem! Not only will you get clay pot chicken, but I’ll also let you try braised pork.”

“Braised pork? Just the name sounds delicious,” Luluo said, her mouth watering.

Xiao Ming replied, “Once I settle the matter of the village heads, I’ll have the chef prepare it for you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Luluo left, beaming with joy.

Xiao Ming paced excitedly. Luluo’s words had reminded him that he could simply split the role of village head into two positions—one primary and one deputy—to dilute the power of the village heads. Then, using his secret agents to sow discord, he could promote village heads who aligned with his interests.

Of course, his current headache stemmed from the fact that the powerful families still held significant influence. Once he had weakened them, he would deal with these scheming village heads.

As he pondered this, Xiao Ming picked up the bowl of lotus seed porridge and began to drink. At that moment, Li San appeared at the door and said, “Your Highness, village heads from various villages have entered the city and gone to the mansions of local powerful families.”

“So quickly?” Xiao Ming was surprised. These village heads were indeed eager to curry favor.

“Record the information of these village heads and bring it to me,” Xiao Ming said, his anger burning. The fact that the village heads in his fief were reporting to the powerful families was a blatant disregard for his authority.

Li San replied, “Your Highness, I’ve already gathered the information on these village heads.”

With that, he handed a piece of paper to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming glanced at it. Qingzhou City had twelve subordinate counties and hundreds of villages. The paper was densely filled with the names, villages, and backgrounds of thirty village heads.

Li San had undergone specialized training in intelligence systems under Xiao Ming, and his professionalism was beginning to show.

“Your Highness, these village heads eat the grain provided by the government but collude with powerful families. They’re truly traitors. In my opinion, we should make an example of them to warn others,” Li San suggested.

Xiao Ming glared at him. “Don’t think that just because you have a few skilled men, you can act recklessly. You’re still far from building a secret service that satisfies me.”

Li San immediately lowered his head.

“If we kill people now, wouldn’t that clearly tell the powerful families, led by the Wang and Qin families, that I’m feeling insecure?” Xiao Ming said coldly.

“Then how does Your Highness plan to break this deadlock? Do you need the secret service to assist?” Li San asked.

Xiao Ming pondered for a moment and said, “That’s why your timing is perfect. There’s something I need you to do...”

Xiao Ming instructed him to gather evidence of collusion between the village heads and the powerful families and to incite the villagers to elect new village heads. At the same time, he decided to slow down his efforts.

The publication of the newspaper, which exposed the Wang and Qin families, had been a test to gauge the depth of the powerful families’ influence. Now, it was clear that their roots ran deep.

These village heads were obstructing his ability to establish direct connections with the people. Only by gaining the support of the people could he ensure a steady supply of soldiers and grain.

Having settled on this plan, Xiao Ming began his preparations. As for the village heads seeking favor with the powerful families, he wasn’t worried. He had struck both the Wang and Qin families equally, focusing only on the facts without implicating other powerful families.

Even if they were dissatisfied, it would only be the Wang and Qin families who were upset. The other powerful families would simply watch from the sidelines.

Moreover, the dissatisfaction of these two families would be directed at the newspaper's public exposure of their misdeeds, not at Xiao Ming's true goal of inciting long-standing grievances among the people.

The next day, he only needed to publish another article, offering some mild praise to the Wang and Qin families to placate them.

As Xiao Ming had anticipated, Qin Chuanyun and Wang Chengchou were both extremely angry upon learning of the newspaper's contents. As the saying goes, "family shame should not be aired in public," and Xiao Ming had humiliated them in front of everyone.

However, after their initial anger, they found themselves powerless. The newspaper had simply reported the facts.

But the next day, their anger subsided when the newspaper praised the contributions of the Qin and Wang families to the fief's revival, leaving them both pained and pleased.

Xiao Ming's diversionary tactics had thoroughly confused them, making it impossible to discern his true intentions.

Under these circumstances, Xiao Ming swiftly began replacing village heads across the fief. Many believed that high-ranking officials posed the greatest threat, but in reality, corruption at the grassroots level was far more dangerous. If the branches of a tree rot, they can be cut off and regrown. But if the roots rot, the tree dies.

Recognizing this, Xiao Ming had launched this propaganda campaign as both a test and a probe. Now that his target was clear, he could proceed step by step.