

I. Dynasty 91

Chapter 91: Hidden Threats

“Brother Wang, since His Highness is unwilling, there must be a reason. Are you here to upset His Highness this time?” Qin Mu said lazily.

Compared to the Wang family, the Qin family was closer to Xiao Ming. However, the incident in Cangzhou had severely weakened the Qin family, and they harbored some resentment toward Xiao Ming.

But this resentment could only be buried deep in their hearts, as the incident had shown them that Prince Qi no longer needed to cater to their whims.

“Brother Qin, why would you say that? I’m here to make His Highness happy,” Wang Shijie said, clapping his hands. A servant from the Wang family entered, carrying a box.

Wang Shijie continued, “Your Highness, this is a gift from my father. We hope you will accept it.”

The servant opened the box, revealing sheets of paper filled with writing.

Xiao Ming glanced at them and was slightly surprised. He said, “These are land deeds.”

“Exactly, Your Highness. These are land deeds. My father learned that Your Highness still needs a large amount of farmland, so he has gifted you a thousand hectares of fertile land outside Qingzhou City,” Wang Shijie explained.

Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. His own land holdings in Qingzhou amounted to only a hundred hectares. This time, the Wang family was gifting him a thousand hectares of prime farmland. While this was a drop in the bucket for the Wang family, it was the first time they had offered land as a gift.

After a moment of thought, Xiao Ming understood. Wang Chengchou was indeed shrewd. For Xiao Ming, silver was no longer enough to sway him.

Now, the only way to win his favor was to cater to his interests. Xiao Ming’s land reclamation efforts were due to a lack of farmland, and Wang Chengchou had likely realized that commerce in Qingzhou was far more profitable than farming.

“Hahaha...” Xiao Ming laughed heartily. “Wang Chengchou is truly thoughtful. I am indeed in need of farmland, and this gift couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Wang Shijie smiled, pleased that he and his father had guessed correctly once again.

Qin Mu’s expression darkened. He sneered and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, I’m not like Brother Wang, who has vast land holdings across the six prefectures. However, I know that Your Highness is in need of skilled shipbuilders. I’ve purchased a thousand experienced carpenters from shipyards across the Great Yu Empire. I hope you will accept them.”

“Excellent!” Xiao Ming slammed the table, his excitement evident.

Although the shipyard had many slaves, none of them were skilled carpenters. Training a group of carpenters would take a long time, so the arrival of a thousand skilled craftsmen was a godsend.

However, the Wang family's gift of land and the Qin family's gift of craftsmen suggested that both families already knew what product Xiao Ming was about to unveil.

Xiao Ming frowned. Despite his strict confidentiality measures, it seemed that someone in the Machinery Department or the palace had leaked information.

Qin Mu looked smug, feeling that he had matched Wang Shijie's move.

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming said, "Since both of you have shown such sincerity, I won't disappoint you. This product is called glass."

"Your Highness, may we see it?" Wang Shijie and Qin Mu asked simultaneously.

Xiao Ming observed their expressions. Neither showed any surprise at the unfamiliar term "glass," which further confirmed his suspicions.

"Of course."

Xiao Ming gestured to a servant waiting outside, who left and returned with a recently produced glass bottle.

Wang Shijie and Qin Mu stared intently at the glass bottle in the servant's hand, their breathing growing heavier.

The bottle, more beautiful than jade, left them in awe. They could already imagine the immense profits this glass would bring.

"Your Highness, this is truly a masterpiece of divine craftsmanship. Are you really planning to sell it?" Wang Shijie asked excitedly.

Qin Mu added, "Your Highness, such an exquisite item—how should its value be measured?"

"Since I've brought it out, it's naturally for sale. Isn't that why both of you are here?" Xiao Ming said calmly.

With Xiao Ming laying his cards on the table, Wang Shijie and Qin Mu stopped beating around the bush. Wang Shijie said, "Your Highness, the first profits shouldn't go to outsiders."

"Brother Wang is absolutely right, especially for something as extraordinary as this," Qin Mu agreed.

The two of them went back and forth, each trying to secure the first opportunity to profit from the glass.

Xiao Ming, however, had his own plans. He intended to let the Qingzhou merchant group handle the initial sales, maximizing profits before auctioning off the distribution rights six months later.

He said, "I understand your intentions, but I plan to entrust the glass to the Qingzhou merchant group. However, since both of your families have shown such sincerity, I'll allow you to purchase the glass from the Qingzhou merchant group. How does that sound?"

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Both men were overjoyed.

After expressing their gratitude, they left one after the other. Once they were gone, Xiao Ming's expression darkened.

He summoned Li San and Wang Xuan.

"Your Highness," Li San and Wang Xuan arrived at the main hall simultaneously. Seeing Xiao Ming's grim expression, they grew uneasy.

Both Li San and Wang Xuan now worked in the command headquarters, using their official positions to conceal their true roles.

"I ordered you to closely monitor the Machinery Department and the industrial district. How did information about the glass still leak out?" Xiao Ming demanded angrily. "If the glass can leak today, what's to stop everything in the Machinery Department from leaking tomorrow? All my hard work will have been for nothing!"

Li San and Wang Xuan exchanged glances. Li San said, "Your Highness, I can guarantee that there were no breaches in the industrial district."

"Wang Xuan swears on his life that there were no breaches in the Machinery Department. We've been monitoring everyone Chen Qi and Chen Wenlong have interacted with. They haven't had any contact with members of the powerful families."

Xiao Ming snapped, "Guarantees? How can you guarantee anything? The fact is, information about the glass was leaked prematurely."

"Your Highness, the leak might have come from the palace," Li San suddenly suggested.

"The palace?" Xiao Ming frowned.

"Yes, Your Highness. We were afraid of angering you, so we didn't place any informants in the palace," Li San explained.

Xiao Ming's anger gradually subsided. The safest places were often the most overlooked. Due to the palace's tight security, Li San and Wang Xuan hadn't considered it a potential source of leaks.

"For now, this is just speculation. You may leave," Xiao Ming said. He realized he had been careless. "But remember, the responsibilities of the secret service are immense. I'm spending over a hundred

thousand taels of silver on you every month. I expect results. Now is the time to prove your capabilities. Find the leak.”

Li San and Wang Xuan bowed and left the main hall.

As Xiao Ming looked at the box of land deeds Wang Shijie had brought, a chill ran down his spine.

How many spies from the powerful families were lurking around him, both openly and in secret? This incident had served as a stark warning.