

I. Dynasty 108

Chapter 108: Striking While the Iron is Hot

South Gate of Qingzhou City.

Xiao Ming, accompanied by a group of Qingzhou officials, was seeing off Princess Pingyang.

Just as her arrival had drawn attention, her departure was equally conspicuous.

Xiao Ming had explained the entire situation with the Wang family to Princess Pingyang the previous night. Her reaction had been indifferent, as if she had merely squashed an ant.

However, this trip to Qingzhou had taken an unexpected turn, and Princess Pingyang seemed unwilling to stay any longer. She planned to leave for Jinling City the next day.

Xiao Ming prepared some Qingzhou specialties as gifts for her: fine wine, perfumes, soaps, and, of course, glassware.

Her visit had been a blessing in disguise, giving him the opportunity to eliminate the Wang family. Compared to the gifts he gave her, he had gained far more. The grain stored in the Wang family's warehouses across the six states alone would ensure that the Qingzhou army wouldn't have to worry about food for years to come.

In addition to the grain, the Wang family also owned vast tracts of farmland, plow oxen, mines, and slaves. All of these assets were now confiscated by the state. Truly, the fall of the Wang family had left Xiao Ming feasting on their riches.

“Your Highness, the Wang family has fallen, but there are still three other families left. It’s strange that the Sun family didn’t intervene to support the Wang family. Otherwise, we could have had an excuse to wipe them out as well,” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming was also surprised by this. The Sun family had remained inactive, as if the matter had nothing to do with them. It seemed they were content to watch from the sidelines.

“It just means the Sun family isn’t foolish. Otherwise, they would have met the same fate as the Wang family,” Xiao Ming said slowly.

“Your Highness, what should we do about the remaining three families?” Pang Yukun asked. He believed in striking while the iron was hot and wanted to resolve the issue once and for all.

Xiao Ming had taken down the Wang family in one swift move, catching everyone off guard. However, it wouldn’t be long before the other families realized what had happened. He said, “No rush. The combined strength of the remaining three families is about equal to the Wang family’s. We can handle them easily. It all depends on whether they are willing to cooperate.”

Pang Yukun nodded, understanding Xiao Ming’s meaning. “If they disband their private armies, surrender their fortresses, and content themselves with being wealthy merchants, Qingzhou can accommodate them.”

As they watched Princess Pingyang’s carriage disappear into the distance, Xiao Ming sighed softly. The greatest taboo for any ruler is having armed forces within their territory that are beyond their control.

Xiao Ming was no exception. He could tolerate the powerful families engaging in business, no matter how much profit they made. But there was one line they could not cross: they must not threaten his rule.

Using the Wang family incident as a pretext, he intended to put an end to the practice of powerful families maintaining private armies in his fiefdom.

As he discussed this with Pang Yukun, he led the officials back into Qingzhou City.

Meanwhile, in the carriage that had already traveled several miles, Princess Pingyang lifted the curtain and looked back at Qingzhou City. She said to Ouyang Mu, "Why do I feel like something isn't right? It's as if I've been used by the Prince of Qi."

Ouyang Mu, who had been silent throughout the journey, replied, "Your Highness, this humble general cannot say for sure, but the Prince of Qi is certainly not simple. During the incident at the Wang family fortress, he didn't act rashly as he did five years ago. Instead, he was patient and calculating."

"Resolving the issue of the powerful families in his fiefdom without shedding blood—he certainly has some skill. The more you say, the more I feel like I've been played by this nephew of mine. Ah, perhaps Xiao Ming deliberately acted contrary to expectations, making me believe that the Wang family was behind the assassination attempt," Princess Pingyang sighed.

Ouyang Mu said, "If that's the case, we can report the Prince of Qi to the Emperor when we return to Chang'an."

Princess Pingyang chuckled. "You think too simply. With no evidence and no witnesses, who can prove anything?" She lazily yawned and let the curtain fall, thinking to herself, "If Xiao Ming is given a few more years, the struggle for the throne in the Great Yu Empire might take an unexpected turn. How interesting."

At the same time, in the Qin family residence in Qingzhou City.

Qin Chuanyun was not celebrating the fall of the Wang family. On the contrary, when Wang Chengchou and Wang Chengheng were publicly executed in the eastern market, he felt a chill run down his spine, as if he would be the next to lose his head.

"Father, what should we do now?" Qin Mu asked nervously, watching his father pace back and forth in the room. The image of Wang Chengchou's lifeless, wide-open eyes still haunted him.

Qin Chuanyun stopped pacing. "What can we do? Can't you see His Highness's intentions now? He wants his fiefdom free of any threats to his rule. The Wang family openly and secretly opposed him, and he knew it all along. This was a warning to the rest of us."

"Father, will our Qin family be next?" Qin Mu asked, trembling.

Qin Chuanyun fell silent. Gritting his teeth, he said, "No, we absolutely cannot become the next Wang family. Come with me now to see His Highness."

Qin Mu nodded and followed his father to the Prince of Qi's residence. On the way, they ran into Xiao Ming, who was returning.

“Your Highness, Qin Chuanyun is guilty!” Qin Chuanyun knelt on the ground as soon as he saw Xiao Ming.

In the middle of the street, Qin Chuanyun’s kneeling drew the attention of many merchants and commoners, who stopped to watch.

Xiao Ming glanced at Qin Chuanyun and his son. “Both of you, get up. This is a public place. It’s unseemly. If you have something to say, come back to the residence with me.”

Pang Yukun nodded inwardly. It seemed Qin Chuanyun had finally realized the gravity of the situation.

The group returned to the residence, where Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun received the Qin father and son in the main hall.

Xiao Ming was now ready to openly implement his policy of weakening the powerful families, as the balance of power had shifted.

“Master Qin, what has made you so anxious?” Xiao Ming asked, though he already knew the answer.

“This commoner is guilty of failing to properly discipline his clan members. Many of them have violated the laws in the six states. I beg Your Highness to punish me,” Qin Chuanyun said with a pained expression.

Pang Yukun and Xiao Ming exchanged glances and burst into laughter. Pang Yukun said, "Master Qin, there's no need to beat around the bush. You're here because you're afraid the Qin family will meet the same fate as the Wang family."

Qin Chuanyun was taken aback but then slowly nodded.

Qin Mu knelt before Xiao Ming and said, "Your Highness, this commoner was disrespectful in the past, daring to address you as an equal. I deserve death."

"Get up," Xiao Ming said calmly. "Since you've come, you must understand that I cannot tolerate powerful families in my fiefdom who refuse to obey."

Qin Chuanyun and Qin Mu both nodded.

Xiao Ming continued, "I am not a bloodthirsty man. Otherwise, the thousands of members of the Wang family would already be dead. You are my subjects. If you are willing to live peacefully in the fiefdom, I will not harm you. Disband your private armies, return the land you seized from the people, and from now on, focus on doing business peacefully. The Qin family will remain safe."

In the past, the powerful families not only monopolized the economic lifelines of the fiefdom but also meddled in political affairs. Many officials in the six states worked for them.

Now, Xiao Ming was cutting off their access to political power. From now on, they would simply be merchants.