

I. Dynasty 122

Chapter 122: Crisis

The atmosphere in the main hall was tense.

Xiao Ming and Hóngyún stared at each other for a long time before Hóngyún let out a soft sigh. “It’s only been half a year, yet Your Highness treats me like a stranger.”

“Miss Hóngyún, let’s get to the point. Do we really need to exchange sweet nothings and talk about eternal love? Besides, you’ve always been entangled with the Wáng family. Do you think I don’t know that?” Xiao Ming said indifferently.

Hóngyún chuckled lightly. “Your Highness has indeed changed. It seems that over the past five years, Your Highness has truly been biding your time. Back then, I found it strange why a prince of the empire would mingle with the Wáng family.”

Xiao Ming frowned and remained silent.

Hóngyún had first met Xiao Ming at a banquet hosted by the Wáng family. That very night, Wáng Shìjié had sent Hóngyún to Xiao Ming’s mansion, and Xiao Ming had been overjoyed at the time.

But now, things had changed. Looking back, Xiao Ming couldn’t help but feel wary of Hóngyún.

Turning to gaze at the blooming peach tree outside the main hall, Hóngyún continued, “Now that the Wáng family is gone, I have no more reservations. Your Highness is of noble birth, and I know I am unworthy of entangling with you. All I ask is for my freedom and a comfortable life in my later years.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t that he was heartless, but the “entanglement” had happened before his time.

However, from his memories, Hóngyún had always been a shrewd woman, and now it seemed that was indeed the case.

If she had thrown a tantrum or made a scene, she would have been driven away. But by offering a secret about the Wáng family in exchange, she had earned herself a favor.

“What do you want? As long as it’s not excessive, I will grant it,” Xiao Ming said, treating this as a debt his predecessor had left behind.

Hóngyún thought for a moment and said, “I hope Your Highness can redeem my freedom and provide me with some silver. After this, we shall never meet again.”

“That’s simple enough,” Xiao Ming replied. “I can agree to that. Now, can you tell me the secret about the Wáng family?”

Hóngyún lowered her head, as if weighing her words, before finally saying, “Wáng Chéngchóu conspired with the Hūyántuó tribe to launch a joint attack on Qíngzhou this autumn and winter.”

“What?!” Xiao Ming’s expression changed drastically. “This is no joking matter.”

Hóngyún explained, “I was in the Wáng mansion at the time and overheard this while passing by the rooms of Wáng Chéngchóu and his son. At first, I thought it was just a joke between father and son, but after returning to Qíngzhōu and learning about the barbarian cavalry, I realized it was true. Those barbarian cavalry had entered Qíngzhōu through a cave in Cāngzhōu to scout the area.”

Xiao Míng’s expression turned grave. Only a few people, including Lǚ Fēi, knew about the cave in Cāngzhōu. Now that Hóngyún mentioned it, there was no doubt about the truth of her words.

“Traitors!” Xiao Míng slammed his fist on the table. In history, it was not uncommon for borderland noble families to collude with foreign tribes, but he never expected it to happen in his own fiefdom.

Hóngyún sighed. “Though I am just a woman, I understand the importance of loyalty to one’s country. That’s why I came to inform you, hoping Your Highness can report this to the court and prepare early.”

“Thank you, Miss Hóngyún. Though you may have fallen into the world of pleasure, your sense of righteousness surpasses that of many men,” Xiao Míng said with a faint smile.

Hóngyún shook her head. “I am just a woman who wishes to live a peaceful life. I do not want to see the world plunged into chaos.”

“Regardless, your information is crucial. I will have Steward Qián redeem your freedom and prepare five thousand taels of silver for you,” Xiao Míng said.

Hóngyún nodded, gave Xiao Míng a deep curtsy, and then slowly walked away.

Watching Hóngyún's retreating figure, Xiao Ming fell deep in thought. From the very beginning, he had been puzzled by the appearance of barbarian cavalry deep within Qíngzhōu.

The cave Lǚ Fēi had discovered was extremely well-hidden. How could the barbarians have known about it? The only explanation was that someone had colluded with them and provided the information.

Moreover, the recent ban on warhorse trade by the barbarians now made sense. Prohibiting the sale of war materials before a conflict was a clear sign of impending war.

However, now that the Wáng family had been eliminated, the Hūyántuó tribe had lost their internal collaborators. It was unclear whether their plans would change.

If this was part of the barbarians' grand strategy, they might still attempt to attack Cāngzhōu, regardless of the Wáng family's involvement.

"Six months! This is going to be tough," Xiao Ming muttered, stomping his foot in frustration.

The barbarians were a constant threat hanging over the Great Yu Empire like a sword. The empire's repeated defeats in wars had left its officials terrified at the mere mention of the barbarians.

The Great Yu Empire was no longer the ambitious nation it had been at its founding. It had become a nation focused on maintaining the status quo. The officials were only concerned with maintaining internal control, while they chose to retreat step by step in the face of the barbarian threat.

Tribute payments and land concessions seemed to have become the go-to solutions for dealing with the barbarians. But a wolf could never be satiated, and the barbarians were precisely such insatiable wolves.

This matter was of grave importance, as it threatened the safety of his fiefdom. Xiao Ming couldn't afford to take it lightly.

Moreover, he had to admit a harsh truth: the barbarians held a relative military advantage over the Great Yu Empire. Due to the empire's chaotic horse administration, there were virtually no cavalry units within the empire.

This meant that the empire was perpetually on the defensive, lacking the ability to launch offensives, while the barbarians could come and go as they pleased, leaving the empire in a passive position.

However, in Xiao Ming's view, human factors played a significant role in the empire's repeated defeats against the barbarians.

In any war, the training, discipline, and fighting spirit of the soldiers were crucial. Yet, the Great Yu Empire's armies lacked the fighting spirit to face the barbarians, and their training and discipline were relatively weak.

This only exacerbated the empire's already disadvantageous position in wars.

“It seems it’s time to start propaganda and foster hatred,” Xiao Ming muttered to himself as he slowly walked out of the main hall. Only by making the people of his fiefdom despise the barbarians could they unite to fight against them in the future.

Otherwise, if the people remained fearful of the barbarians and lacked the will to fight, his fiefdom would remain in grave danger.

As he stepped out of the main hall, Qián Dàfù had already seen Hóngyún off. He said, “Your Highness, Miss Hóngyún has left. Hehe, it seems Your Highness has truly changed. Even Miss Hóngyún is no longer of interest to you.”

“Do I have time to indulge in women now? Hóngyún told me that Wáng Chéngchóu had colluded with the barbarians, planning to attack Cāngzhōu this autumn. This is what we should be worried about,” Xiao Ming said sternly.

Qián Dàfù’s face immediately paled. In his eyes, Xiao Ming saw fear. “Your Highness, what should we do? Should we report this to the Emperor? The barbarians have always coveted the Central Plains. It seems they are planning to make a comeback.”

“Report to the Emperor? Hmph, three years ago, he didn’t care if I lived or died. Do you think he’ll care now?”