

I. Dynasty 128

Chapter 128: The Situation

A gentle, warm breeze wafted through the Bishui Pavilion, carrying with it the faint scent of spring from the newly sprouted greenery in the courtyard.

Consort Zhen's delighted expression did not escape Xiao Wenxuan's notice. He smiled and said, "However, don't get too excited just yet. The Fei family is not an easy one to deal with. Prince Qi's marriage will have to wait for some time."

"As long as the consort is a daughter of the Fei family, it will be worth it even if Ming'er has to wait a few more years. But Your Majesty, please make sure to choose a good one from the Fei family for Ming'er."

"Of course. At the very least, it must be a daughter from the main branch of the Fei family to be worthy of my son. Although Xiao Ming had many faults in the past, a prodigal son who returns is more valuable than gold. Now, he must be worthy of the Fei family."

Consort Zhen nodded. "But Your Majesty, what about Empress Zhao..."

"You don't need to worry about that. The Crown Prince's consort is the daughter of the current Grand Chancellor, Fei Ji. If Prince Qi also marries a daughter of the Fei family, it will only strengthen the relationship. Empress Zhao won't oppose it."

"Then I can rest easy," Consort Zhen said.

After discussing Xiao Ming's marriage, Xiao Wenxuan changed the subject. "By the way, where is the glass that Prince Qi sent me?"

"It's right here," Consort Zhen led Xiao Wenxuan to an inner room, where a delicate wooden box contained nine crystal-clear glass goblets.

Xiao Wenxuan's eyes widened in amazement as he picked up one of the goblets and examined it closely. "Pure as water, smooth as jade. Was this glass really produced in Qingzhou's workshops?"

"There's no doubt about it. These days, many merchants have flocked to Qingzhou just for this glass," Consort Zhen replied.

"This Prince Qi... In the past, I refused to give him silver to squander. Now, it seems the one million taels I gave him are probably beneath his notice. But engaging in commerce is one thing; he must not neglect the governance of his fiefdom. After all, a calamity is about to strike," Xiao Wenxuan frowned.

"A calamity?" Consort Zhen felt a sudden sense of foreboding.

"This year, the barbarians of the grasslands suddenly banned the sale of warhorses to the Great Yu Empire. I've received news that the barbarians intend to cross Cangzhou and continue south. Last year's heavy snow caused significant losses for the barbarians, and they now covet the lush, fertile lands of the south."

Consort Zhen covered her mouth in shock. "Your Majesty, if that's the case, what should we do?"

“When the founding emperor established the system of enfeoffment, it was to have the princes guard the borders, protecting the nation above and bringing peace to the people below. As a prince and feudal lord, Prince Qi must defend Cangzhou. Otherwise, what use is his title as a feudal lord?”

“But Your Majesty, Qingzhou was ravaged by the barbarians three years ago and has yet to recover its former glory. How can Prince Qi defend it now?” Consort Zhen, concerned for her son, knew all too well the dangers posed by the barbarians.

Currently, there were four feudal lords guarding the northern borders: Prince Zhao, who guarded Liangzhou; Prince Liang, who guarded Lingzhou; Prince Yong, a member of the imperial clan who guarded Jizhou; and Prince Qi, who guarded Cangzhou.

In the north, these four feudal lords guarded the key entry points for the barbarians into the Central Plains. Among them, Prince Zhao’s fiefdom was famous for its Xuanjia cavalry, which had fought the barbarians to a standstill in numerous battles, with victories and defeats on both sides. Behind Prince Zhao was Chang’an, the seat of the Great Yu Empire’s emperor.

It was precisely for this reason that Xiao Wenxuan placed such importance on Prince Zhao.

Prince Liang’s Black Feather Iron Guards were equally renowned. Unlike Prince Zhao, who relied on cavalry to counter cavalry, Prince Liang had built numerous fortresses along the border with the barbarians, garrisoning them with his Black Feather Iron Guards. Over the years, several fortresses had been breached, but his fiefdom remained secure.

Prince Yong of Jizhou was Xiao Wenxuan’s youngest brother. His fiefdom bordered Prince Qi’s to the east. Compared to Prince Liang, Prince Yong’s situation was somewhat worse.

However, relying on fire tubes and crossbows, Prince Yong had repelled several barbarian invasions. As a member of the imperial clan, he received support from the imperial guards sent by Xiao Wenxuan, as well as large quantities of fire tubes and crossbows from the Chang'an Artillery Bureau.

Compared to these three feudal lords, Prince Qi was clearly in the worst position. Qingzhou was far from Chang'an, and by the time reinforcements arrived during a barbarian invasion, it would already be too late.

Moreover, the events of three years ago had left Qingzhou severely weakened, its people impoverished, and its army reduced to a fraction of its former strength.

Thinking of this, how could Consort Zhen not worry?

Xiao Wenxuan frowned at Consort Zhen's words. "You underestimate your son too much. In the past six months, Prince Qi has earned enough silver to make up for the losses of three years ago. Moreover, he has reorganized the Qingzhou Army, equipping them with a strange type of armor and restoring a military system similar to the militia system. Now, his fiefdom's army numbers at least twenty thousand. Both you and I have underestimated his capabilities. With the incorporation of the local militias, I believe his forces now number at least thirty thousand."

"So many?" Consort Zhen could hardly believe that in such a short time, Xiao Ming had rebuilt the Qingzhou Army to half its former strength at its peak.

A strange smile played on Xiao Wenxuan's lips. "Is there any doubt? That boy even managed to win over Pang Yukun, the Chief Secretary I sent to him. He probably thinks I don't know anything, but he's still too naive."

"This child... There's nothing in the world that Your Majesty doesn't know. But Your Majesty, although Prince Qi is not the most filial, he would never dare to defy you," Consort Zhen's heart raced as she thought about how reckless Xiao Ming had been to poach someone from the Emperor's side.

Seeing Consort Zhen's worried expression, Xiao Wenxuan suddenly laughed. "It's fine. I never liked Pang Yukun anyway. Let him stay in Qingzhou. He probably knows he can't return to Chang'an. That blockhead has finally come to his senses."

"So Your Majesty means to let Prince Qi defend Cangzhou on his own this time?" Consort Zhen probed.

"Exactly. Three years ago, he brought great shame to the royal family. If he can't defend Cangzhou this time, he might as well die there. If he succeeds, he will prove his worth. No matter who ascends the throne in the future, they will still need him to guard the north. Otherwise, he will still face death. And if he succeeds, I will swallow my pride and send him a daughter of the Fei family."

Consort Zhen's heart ached. She understood that Xiao Wenxuan was not targeting Xiao Ming specifically. Even if it were the Crown Prince defending Cangzhou, Xiao Wenxuan's attitude would be the same.

A prince fleeing from battle was a disgrace to the royal family and would bring ridicule from the entire empire. She finally understood why Xiao Wenxuan had said that Xiao Ming's marriage would have to wait.

A family like the Fei, with four generations of high-ranking officials, would never willingly marry their daughter to a prince who abandoned his fiefdom and people to flee back to Chang'an.

She also finally understood why Xiao Wenxuan had repeatedly said that he would rather Xiao Ming die than see him return to Chang'an in disgrace.

Looking in the direction of Qingzhou, Consort Zhen thought, "Ming'er, this time you must prove yourself. From now on, success or failure depends on this."