

I. Dynasty 142

Chapter 142: A Peerless Beauty

The tea on the table exuded a faint fragrance, and the room was silent.

Luo Quan stared at Fei Ji for a long time before speaking. "With His Majesty's wisdom, how could he not see the current state of the empire? If so, why not send the imperial guards to Qingzhou?"

"General Luo, if it were that simple, His Majesty wouldn't be so furious. The King of Zhao wants nothing more than to divert disaster eastward. If the imperial guards mobilize, the barbarians will surely attack the fiefdoms of the Kings of Yong, Zhao, and Liang to contain them. Do you think they would agree? If His Majesty insists and provokes the barbarians, those kings need only deliberately let the barbarians through to threaten Chang'an directly. Thus, the imperial guards cannot move. The best outcome now is for the King of Wei to assist the Prince of Qi in holding Qingzhou. After all, the King of Wei is powerful among the vassal kings. If he commits fully, defending Cangzhou shouldn't be a problem."

"But the King of Wei likely won't act in good faith," Luo Quan said, narrowing his eyes.

"It seems General Luo is also a wise man. The whole world can see this clearly—only His Majesty remains blind to the King of Wei's true nature, too deeply misled. Alas, the pain of Prince Ning's death has left His Majesty with lingering guilt." Fei Ji sighed softly.

Luo Quan nodded, secretly admiring Fei Ji. This frail, gaunt man had always been astute in assessing the empire's situation.

"If that's the case, what can be done?" Luo Quan asked worriedly. "Isn't this a deadlock?"

"It is indeed a deadlock, but not necessarily hopeless. Whether the Great Yu Empire can continue to prosper depends on whether the Prince of Qi and the King of Wei can cooperate sincerely. If even they disregard the empire's peril, the imperial clan is doomed."

Luo Quan nodded again. "Chief Secretary Fei speaks wisely. His Majesty tacitly allowed my son to go to Qingzhou, likely out of concern."

Fei Ji smiled. "Enough of this. Come, let's drink tea. Some matters can only be left to unfold naturally. His Majesty's considerations are surely the result of deep deliberation."

Luo Quan agreed, and the two drank tea in silence. Soon, however, a young eunuch arrived with an imperial summons: the emperor wished for them to accompany him on a lake excursion.

They had no choice but to comply.

In their haste, they left the newspaper on the main hall table. Moments later, a delicate, jade-like hand picked it up.

"Miss, what is this?"

The newcomers were a mistress and her maid. The young woman had a face like a flower, a graceful figure, skin as smooth as congealed fat, and clear, phoenix-like eyes that sparkled like shooting stars.

This was none other than Fei Ji's youngest daughter, Fei Yue'er.

Her round-faced maid, Xiao Huan, dressed in a green skirt, stood beside her.

"Is this the so-called newspaper?" Fei Yue'er examined the contents. "Cousin mentioned the Qingzhou newspaper some days ago. This seems to match his description, and it records events in Qingzhou."

"That Prince of Qi who fled back to Chang'an three years ago and was whipped by the emperor?" Xiao Huan curled her lip. "Then this paper isn't worth reading."

Fei Yue'er chuckled, her beauty so radiant it momentarily stunned Xiao Huan. No wonder her cousin visited the Fei residence daily, restless when apart.

Fei Yue'er was about to set the paper aside. Her impression of Xiao Ming came solely from rumors—rebellious, erratic, a deserter. By all accounts, the Prince of Qi was a thoroughly unsavory character.

But when her eyes skimmed over a poem, she froze.

Due to her frail health, Fei Ji rarely allowed Fei Yue'er to venture far. Boredom often plagued her in the inner chambers, so whenever Fei Ji left, Xiao Huan would sneak her out to play in the estate.

Today, learning that Fei Ji and General Luo had departed, Xiao Huan had brought Fei Yue'er here.

“Miss, what’s wrong?” Xiao Huan asked, noticing her mistress’s flickering gaze.

“Xiao Huan, do you think the Prince of Qi is truly as wretched as others say?”

Xiao Huan pondered. “It’s all hearsay, but with so many saying the same, there must be some truth.”

“The moon still shines on mountain passes as of old.

How many guardsmen of the Great Wall are dead and cold!

Were the flying general of Dragon City here,

The Tartar steeds would not dare to cross the frontier.”

Fei Yue’er recited the lines softly. “Could someone so wretched compose such stirring verse?”

With a sigh, she fell silent.

Xiao Huan tugged her hand. “Miss, never mind the Prince of Qi. While the master is away, let’s feed the fish by the pond. Otherwise, your cousin will show up and start showing off his literary prowess again.”

Fei Yue’er flashed a mischievous smile and followed Xiao Huan to the rear garden.

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Meanwhile, Fei Ji and Luo Quan had arrived at Qujiang Pool in the southern city.

Renowned for its scenic beauty, the pool attracted scholars, poets, and beauties every April for spring outings—including high-ranking officials and nobles.

Occasionally, when weary of palace views, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan would board a painted boat, invite a few close ministers, and enjoy wine on the lake.

“His Majesty seems in high spirits. Has some joyous occasion occurred?” Fei Ji asked as the emperor smiled throughout the excursion.

Xiao Wenxuan laughed. “You’ve surely read the Prince of Qi’s poem. The Drunken Qingzhou was one thing, but this time, he’s truly astonished me.”

Realization dawned on Fei Ji and Luo Quan: the emperor had come to boast.

Even as a ruler, a father took pride in his son's literary feats—especially when they eclipsed the talents of Chang'an's finest scholars.

"Your Majesty has seen it too?" Fei Ji smiled. "Three days apart, and one must view him with new eyes. This time, we were equally amazed."

Xiao Wenxuan chuckled. "Thus, I've grown more confident about Cangzhou. This poem alone reveals the Prince of Qi's stance on the barbarian invasion. Hmph! The Kings of Zhao and the others will be sorely disappointed."

Fei Ji and Luo Quan exchanged glances. No wonder the emperor was so pleased.

After a pause, Xiao Wenxuan continued, "However, the Prince of Qi's fiefdom remains weak. Though mobilizing the imperial guards is unwise, we can support him with funds and provisions. Fei Ji, what say you?"

"This humble official understands. Tomorrow, I shall petition Your Majesty to allocate resources to the Prince of Qi." Fei Ji complied. This was their long-standing tacit understanding.

Then, Xiao Wenxuan turned to Luo Quan. "Luo Quan, if I recall correctly, Niu Ben is still serving hard labor?"

Luo Quan's heart raced. "Indeed, Niu Ben remains sentenced to the mines. Your Majesty...?"

“Have him continue his labor in Qingzhou,” Xiao Wenxuan said lightly.

Luo Quan was overjoyed. Niu Ben, like him, was a staunch advocate for war. But with a temper as stubborn as his name, Niu Ben had once offended the emperor in court and was banished to the mines. Five years had passed since then.

Now, this fierce general would finally return.