

## I. Dynasty 162

### Chapter 162: Preparations Before the War

Bishui Pavilion was serene and elegant, peaceful and quiet—just like Consort Zhen herself.

Lately, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan found himself weary of the gaudy, painted faces in the harem. What he longed for now was this calm and tranquility. Here, he could almost forget all his burdens—at least for a little while.

Perhaps it was age. Perhaps just exhaustion. These days, he found himself recalling his own youth as a prince.

Back then, Prince Wei, Prince Ning, and the other princes were still by his side. But now, all that remained was a cold and lonely throne.

The very throne he had once pursued with madness and obsession.

“If Prince Ning were the emperor now... would the Great Yu Empire suffer such humiliation?”

The terrifying thought flashed through his mind—but he quickly shook it off in alarm.

Cold sweat soaked his back.

He let out a bitter laugh. Enough of that. I still have to deal with the barbarian ultimatum and the endless bickering of my ministers.

Looking at Consort Zhen's lowered lashes, Xiao Wenxuan seemed to make up his mind.

"Prince Qi is carrying a heavy burden now," he said. "How could I turn a blind eye? His affairs are now state affairs."

Consort Zhen sighed. "It doesn't seem like anything major—just that his fiefdom ran out of niter. Apparently, no merchants are delivering to Qingzhou anymore?"

"Niter?" Xiao Wenxuan frowned. "He's making gunpowder? I didn't expect he'd be capable of that too."

"I was surprised as well," Zhen replied as she gently fed him a spoonful of lotus porridge. "Our Ming'er seems to have picked up all sorts of skills. I don't even know where he learned them."

"At least it's better than when he was just a lazy prince," the emperor chuckled. "No matter where he learned it, it's useful now."

Then his tone sharpened. "The only major niter source in the empire is in Shu Prefecture. Prince Shu must be behind this. Those two have never gotten along, even back in Chang'an. Now that Prince Shu knows Ming'er needs niter, he's obviously playing games."

A father knows his sons well. Xiao Wenxuan understood Prince Shu's petty nature all too clearly.

“Even now, the princes are scheming against one another,” Consort Zhen muttered with a frown, clearly displeased.

It wasn’t often Xiao Wenxuan saw her lose her temper. He found it oddly refreshing, but said, “Of course, I’m just speculating. Even if it’s Prince Shu’s doing, confronting him directly would get me nothing but denials.”

“Then what can we do? This niter seems vital to Ming’er,” she said worriedly.

“No matter,” Xiao Wenxuan replied. “I’ll immediately order all niter and gunpowder from the armory to be allocated to him. I’ll also demand that Prince Shu deliver his niter stockpile to Chang’an. Let’s see if he dares refuse.”

He had ruled for over thirty years. Court intrigue was second nature to him.

Zhen nodded quietly. Neither of them fully understood how crucial gunpowder would become. They simply saw it as another resource like coal or iron.

Sighing, Xiao Wenxuan sat up and swung his legs off the bed. “There are twenty fire lances left in the arsenal. I’ll have those sent to him as well.”

“Your Majesty, where are you going?” Consort Zhen asked with concern.

“Ming’er’s needs can’t wait. Besides, I still have to deal with those nagging ministers.”

He dressed and stepped out of Bishui Pavilion.

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Outside the Chengqing Hall, a crowd of ministers were kneeling.

“Your Majesty, we beg you to reconsider!” they cried. “This is a rare opportunity for peace with the barbarians. Think of the people!”

Xiao Wenxuan’s face was unreadable.

“If that’s how you feel,” he said coolly, “then any of you with daughters—send them into the palace. I’ll adopt them as imperial princesses. We’ll arrange the marriage alliance using your daughters.”

The court froze.

Xiao Wenxuan had not taken the throne merely due to Prince Zhao’s support—he was also sharp as a blade.

In the past, he might've accepted the barbarians' terms for a decade of peace. But after witnessing the ambitions of the vassal lords, he saw the real danger.

The imperial family's lands were shrinking, while these regional lords used "defending the country" as an excuse to demand money and grain. If this continued, the empire would fall into someone else's hands.

So this time, he passed the burden back to them.

The ministers looked at each other in dismay. Sending the emperor's daughter was easy—it didn't affect them. But their own daughters?

Everyone knew how barbaric the nomads were. A daughter sent away like that might never live to see another day.

Still stunned, the ministers said nothing.

Then the emperor added, "And about the treasury—you all know we're stretched thin from annual tributes. Perhaps you ministers could recommend which vassal lord we should borrow silver from?"

Another bombshell.

Looking at their anxious faces, Xiao Wenxuan gave a cold snort and swept away, leaving them speechless.

“This matter is settled,” he declared. “If Prince Qi and Prince Wei can’t defend Cangzhou, so be it—it’s a failure of the royal family. But if they do... and anyone dares suggest surrender again, I’ll have his head!”

He left.

The ministers slowly rose to their feet.

One of them asked, “Lord Cui, what do we do now?”

“What do we do?” Cui Hao snapped. “You planning to send your daughter?”

“Of course not,” the other replied sheepishly.

“Then we wait for Cangzhou to fall. Our emperor won’t cry till he sees the coffin,” Cui Hao sneered, then left humming a tune.

The other ministers quickly dispersed. There was no point staying.

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Qingzhou.

It had been twenty days since the newspaper announced the niter buyback policy. With real silver being handed out, the people no longer hesitated. Homemade niter production was booming.

Every day, government offices in towns and counties were lined with peasants carrying powder for sale.

Even though shipments from Chang'an had brought plenty of niter, Xiao Ming refused to stop local purchases.

Because the intelligence reports brought with those ships made clear: they had only two months left.

"Three months," said Pang Yukun, standing in the command office. "Which means just over two months remain now."

Xiao Ming had received a letter from Xiao Wenxuan even before the supply ships arrived. The emperor's anger practically leapt off the page—describing the barbarian envoys' arrogance in court.

But from that, they could also confirm one thing: the barbarians would attack in three months.

Now they had barely two.

Staring at the twenty fire lances delivered alongside the letter, Xiao Ming said, “Exactly. We start now. In three days, the wheat outside the city will be ready for harvest. Send orders to every county—begin grain stockpiling. Also start organizing labor teams to transport supplies to Cangzhou.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “Leave it to me, Your Highness. I won’t let these tasks slow down your greater plans.”