

## I. Dynasty 189

### Chapter 189: Mixed Joy and Sorrow

Late August, under the blazing sun, Chang'an felt hotter than ever.

But the news of the Great Victory at Cangzhou made the heat even more intense. In every alley and courtyard, from markets to manors, everyone was talking about it. The common people were ecstatic. The hawkish ministers—the ones who always advocated for war—were overjoyed, rushing to the palace to offer their congratulations to Emperor Xiao Wenxuan. Their long-held stance had finally been proven right.

Of course, while some celebrated, others were miserable. The peace-favoring officials, upon hearing the news, looked as if they were attending a funeral. Still, a victory was a victory for Great Yu, and even they had no choice but to enter the palace and offer their congratulations to the Emperor.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty! The victory at Cangzhou is a tremendous achievement. Prince Qi has humbled the barbarians. Their envoys’ ridiculous demands can now be completely ignored,” General Luo Quan declared loudly in the Chengqing Hall, brimming with confidence.

The other hawkish ministers stood proudly behind him, puffed up like triumphant roosters. Their eyes swept over the peace faction with open disdain, silently mocking them: You see? The barbarians aren’t so terrifying after all.

Emperor Xiao Wenxuan laughed heartily. With so many officials coming to congratulate him, he couldn’t be more pleased.

“Thank you, thank you. This is a day for the entire nation to celebrate!”

Across the hall, Minister Cui Hao and his fellow civil officials forced smiles that looked more painful than grief. The barbarians had been thoroughly defeated at Cangzhou and wouldn’t dare make trouble there again anytime soon. But this meant Zhao King and Liang King’s territories would be the next targets. If the barbarians decided to vent their frustration on those lands, the officials who lived luxuriously off those princes’ wealth would soon find their silver cut off.

Cui Hao bowed and offered his forced congratulations. Then he said, “Your Majesty, though Prince Qi’s victory is indeed worth celebrating, we must not forget the barbarians’ strategy. Among the one hundred thousand troops, only twenty or thirty thousand were real soldiers—the rest were slaves. This loss is merely a scratch to them. If they become enraged and return in force, the situation could escalate. Therefore, I believe we should send envoys to the Golden Horde, make it clear this was Prince Qi acting independently, and that it has nothing to do with Great Yu.”

“Your Majesty, please consider this carefully,” the peace faction chimed in.

“A bunch of cowards! Traitors!” Luo Quan roared. “This is the perfect time to cut off the tribute and demand the return of Youzhou. How can we shamelessly send envoys to apologize?”

Xiao Wenxuan’s smile faded. He said coldly, “I’ve already said, if we win this battle, I will no longer tolerate talk of tribute, land concessions, or peace deals. Today, I’ll let it pass because you’re from the Cui clan. Say it again, and I won’t be so forgiving.”

Cui Hao shivered with fear. The emperor’s tone was icy, and he knew it wasn’t a joke. After the humiliations from the barbarian envoy, Xiao Wenxuan clearly held a deep grudge.

Behind the ministers, the princes had also arrived at Chengqing Hall. The Crown Prince and his brothers stood silently, all feeling complicated emotions. Even a fool could see how delighted their father was. It was obvious that their seventh brother, Xiao Ming, was now in favor.

The Crown Prince felt especially conflicted. On one hand, his grandfather Zhao King had hoped Cangzhou would fall, to ease pressure on his own territory. On the other hand, winning Xiao Ming's support would greatly help solidify his claim to the throne. With this victory, Xiao Ming's standing among the princes would rise significantly. Gaining his favor would be a major boost. And yet... because of Zhao King, the Crown Prince simply couldn't bring himself to like Xiao Ming.

Still, after a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward and said, "Father, our seventh brother has accomplished a great feat. He deserves to be generously rewarded."

"Indeed. That's what an elder brother should say," Xiao Wenxuan replied with satisfaction.

Encouraged, the Crown Prince continued, "Given his contribution, I think it's time to lift the travel ban from years ago. That way, our seventh brother can return to Chang'an to visit family whenever he wishes."

"There's no need to even say that," the emperor responded warmly. "Prince Qi has proven himself capable of leading on his own. He's become a pillar of the royal family and deserves this privilege."

Xiao Wenxuan felt more pleased with his heir than he had in a long time.

The Second Prince and others couldn't help feeling sour. They had never taken Xiao Ming seriously. To them, he was a distant feudal prince, someone easily forgotten. Yet here he was, suddenly at the center of everything. And this one victory alone was worth more than all their accomplishments combined.

Still, they knew better than to speak poorly of Xiao Ming now. Cui Hao had just been publicly scolded, after all.

The Second Prince said, "Father's foresight is unmatched. Sending our seventh brother to Qingzhou was a stroke of genius. This victory belongs to him, but also reflects Father's great judgment—it will surely be remembered in the history books."

Xiao Wenxuan laughed heartily. He knew the Second Prince was flattering him, but it worked. In front of the court, it made him look brilliant.

The Third Prince shot a glance at his brother. He had planned to say the same thing but had been beaten to it. Everyone knew their father loved to be praised. Linking this victory to him would surely win favor.

But the Third Prince wasn't about to give up. He added, "Father, I've already ordered your words from that day in court—where you firmly rejected the ministers' advice—to be recorded by the scribes. This triumph at Cangzhou will be written alongside them in history."

Actions speak louder than words, and this remark earned the Third Prince the upper hand. The Second Prince's smile stiffened.

The Crown Prince, meanwhile, was fuming inside. Once again, he'd laid the groundwork only for others to take the credit.

Xiao Wenxuan looked fondly at the Third Prince, then turned to the Fourth Prince, who had remained silent the whole time.

“Fourth, why haven’t you said anything?”

The Fourth Prince replied, “I have no words, Father. I am simply in awe.”

That made Xiao Wenxuan laugh even louder. Since ascending the throne, he hadn’t laughed so much in one day.

Luo Quan and the other war-hawk officials were beaming. Still, Luo couldn’t help but say, “It’s a shame we don’t have the full details of the Cangzhou battle yet. We’ll have to wait for the newspapers to reach Chang’an.”

At this, Xiao Wenxuan’s face lit up with anticipation. “That Prince Qi—always keeping us in suspense. Looks like he’s waiting for the papers to arrive in the capital so everyone can see his achievements at once.”

“It’s understandable,” Luo Quan chuckled. “It’s a major victory, after all.”

Even as he smiled, his thoughts returned to his son. He still hadn’t heard whether Luo Xin was safe.

Noticing his concern, the Emperor reassured him, “Don’t worry, General. If anything had happened to Luo Xin, Prince Qi would’ve mentioned it in his letter.”

Then, with a sweep of his sleeves, Xiao Wenxuan stood up, invigorated. “Once the newspapers from Qingzhou arrive—let us hold a grand banquet in the palace to celebrate!”