

I. Dynasty 192

Chapter 192: Military Funeral

The scorching sun blazed overhead, and the relentless chirping of cicadas from the treetops grated on the nerves.

Fei Yue'er frowned slightly. Having studied history since childhood, she was well aware of the humiliations inflicted by foreign invasions. Though a woman, she shared the same fervent hope for her nation's strength as any man.

Regardless of whether she would marry into Prince Qi's household, Pan Yu's slanderous words about Prince Qi displeased her deeply.

No matter how heartless a person might be, they should never disparage the great victory at Cangzhou—nor the prince who had personally defended its walls.

She spoke softly but firmly, "Cousin, you should leave now. Prince Qi's future is in Heaven's hands. I am unwell and must rest. I hope you will devote more time to your studies in the future, rather than idling here."

Pan Yu's face paled further. Fei Yue'er was dismissing him—telling him not to return.

"Cousin, believe me, I only want what's best for you."

With a sigh, he turned and left.

Once he was out of earshot, Xiao Huan muttered, "Even if Prince Qi were flawed, he's still better than you. Everyone knows about your wild escapades outside."

"Xiao Huan." Fei Yue'er's voice carried a warning.

Though Xiao Huan was her personal maid, she was still a servant. If such words were overheard, she could face punishment.

Gently placing the newspaper back where it belonged, Fei Yue'er shook her head slightly and led Xiao Huan away.

The uproar caused by the newspaper in Chang'an had only just begun. Now, copies were so scarce they were practically priceless. Merchants from Qingzhou were swarmed by scholars, officials, and traders alike.

"Don't push! Don't push!" A Qingzhou merchant grinned from ear to ear.

Originally a poor scholar, he had turned to business to support his family. When Prince Qi returned victorious, all of Qingzhou had erupted in celebration, decorating their homes as if for New Year's.

The next day, when the newspaper detailing the Battle of Cangzhou was published, it was instantly sold out.

Realizing that this battle wasn't just Prince Qi's triumph but a national milestone—especially for Chang'an—he borrowed a large sum of silver to purchase a thousand copies and bring them to the capital.

Standing by the bustling Qujiang Pool, he had barely cried out "Qingzhou newspapers!" before being mobbed.

At first, he nearly fled in fear. But seeing the eager hands clutching silver, he steadied himself—even if I'm crushed by coins, it'll be worth it.

Despite the demand, he dared not overprice them. In Qingzhou, newspapers sold for just three or four coins each. Here, he settled for one tael of silver per copy.

Yet even at that price, his thousand copies vanished in moments. Some scholars bought hundreds at once.

As the last paper was snatched up, the scholar stared at the pile of gleaming silver before him.

This was real wealth—and for the first time, he fretted over money. A thousand taels wasn't just banknotes; it was a hundred pounds of solid silver. How could a frail scholar like him carry it all? A luxurious problem indeed.

But more precious than the silver was the sudden respect he felt.

Chang'an scholars had always looked down on those from Qingzhou, mocking them as "country bumpkins" during imperial exams.

Now, these same scholars gazed at him with envy, pressing for more details about Cangzhou's victory.

Pride swelled in his chest—pride in being Prince Qi's subject.

For the first time, he questioned whether he should still sit for the exams. Perhaps staying in Qingzhou wasn't so bad.

Even if he never rose high in office... He glanced at the silver. At least he could earn a comfortable living.

His thoughts were interrupted by a heated argument among noble youths, nearly coming to blows.

Eavesdropping, he nearly laughed aloud. They were debating who had been closest to Prince Qi during his time in Chang'an—each claiming intimate friendship with him.

He shook his head. I wonder how Prince Qi would feel, knowing all of Chang'an is buzzing about him.

But knowing Prince Qi's independent nature, he likely wouldn't care at all.

And indeed, as the scholar guessed, Xiao Ming had no time to dwell on Chang'an's reactions.

After the brief celebrations, Qingzhou was now shrouded in a solemn atmosphere.

Unlike Chang'an's scorching sun, a light drizzle fell over the city. In the past, such weather would have kept people indoors.

But today, the muddy streets were packed with citizens.

Cangzhou's victory had safeguarded the city, the people's grain, the merchants' wealth, and the stability of the six provinces.

Yet behind the triumph lay countless lost lives—soldiers who would never return, parents who had buried their children.

Victory was worth celebrating, but the fallen soldiers also deserved remembrance.

After a short rest, Xiao Ming decreed that the martyrs be buried in a dedicated military cemetery, ensuring their sacrifice would never be forgotten.

Such a practice was unprecedented in this era, but Xiao Ming deemed it necessary.

This was not just mourning—it was about fueling the soldiers' hatred for the barbarians and reminding the people that these deaths were honorable. History must never forget those who shed blood for their nation.

They were gone, but their spirit endured.

On the streets, Qingzhou soldiers marched in solemn silence, carrying the bodies of their fallen comrades in two orderly lines.

Families of the deceased wept bitterly, their grief moving every onlooker.

Xiao Ming, Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and Luo Xin led the procession, clad in the same armor as their men.

On their shoulders, they too bore the bodies of fallen soldiers.

Here, rank meant nothing. They were all brothers-in-arms.

The soldiers clenched their jaws, watching their commanders with burning pride.

When had common soldiers ever received such honor? They thought. Even if we die on the battlefield, we will have no regrets.

And among the young men yet to enlist, fury toward the barbarians simmered. Many clenched their fists.

When the army next recruited, they would join—to avenge these fallen heroes.