

I. Dynasty 196

Chapter 196: Preparations for Departure

Feng Deshui surveyed the Prince Qi's residence with a critical eye.

Seven days ago, he had set out from Chang'an, enduring the fatigue of travel by boat and horseback before finally arriving in Qingzhou that morning.

The news of Cangzhou's great victory had shaken the court and the public alike, and with the arrival of the newspapers in Chang'an, the details of the battle had spread far and wide.

Emperor Wenxuan, overjoyed, had hosted a grand banquet for his ministers. The very next day, Feng Deshui had been dispatched to Qingzhou to deliver the imperial edict.

As a eunuch serving directly under Emperor Wenxuan, Feng Deshui's personal journey to Qingzhou spoke volumes about the Emperor's regard for Xiao Ming.

Upon arriving at the city gates, he had presented his token and was promptly escorted to the Prince Qi's residence by soldiers.

"His Highness, Prince Qi, arrives!"

Just as he was taking in the modest simplicity of the residence, a voice announced Xiao Ming's arrival.

Moments later, a young man bearing a faint resemblance to Emperor Wenxuan entered the hall—none other than Xiao Ming himself, the current Prince Qi.

"This humble servant, Feng Deshui, pays his respects to Your Highness."

Wearing a practiced smile, Feng Deshui bowed deeply as Xiao Ming stepped into the main hall.

"There's no need for such formalities, Attendant Feng." Xiao Ming replied with a faint smile.

In the Great Yu Empire, eunuchs were collectively referred to as Minor Yellow Gates, but Feng Deshui held the rank of Attendant of the Yellow Gate, a position of considerable influence in the palace.

Feng Deshui's smile widened. He dared not put on airs before this prince.

Everyone knew that in the days to come, Xiao Ming would undoubtedly enjoy the Emperor's favor.

"Three years have passed, yet Your Highness has grown even more handsome, dashing, and noble. This old servant almost failed to recognize you!" Feng Deshui's words carried a hint of flattery.

Few in the world disliked praise, and though these were mere pleasantries, Xiao Ming chuckled. "It seems Attendant Feng has become even more eloquent over the years."

Feng Deshui's eyes crinkled into slits as he retrieved the imperial edict from his sleeve. "I shall not waste words—Your Highness surely knows why I have come?"

"Naturally. His Majesty summons me to Chang'an." Xiao Ming replied calmly.

Feng Deshui nodded and unrolled the edict.

According to Great Yu protocol, Xiao Ming was required to kneel when receiving an imperial decree.

Despite his recent victory, Xiao Ming remained acutely aware of his still-fragile foundations. The defense of Cangzhou had not only weakened the Qingzhou Army but had also drained his coffers.

The cost of ammunition, cannons, and gunpowder alone had amounted to hundreds of thousands of taels of silver.

Thus, he was hardly in a position to flaunt arrogance or defy imperial authority.

As he straightened his posture to receive the edict, Feng Deshui stopped him with a gesture.

“Your Highness, with only the two of us present, there’s no need for such rigid formalities. Once you’ve read the edict, it would be best to depart for Chang’an at once.” A shrewd glint flickered in Feng Deshui’s eyes.

Xiao Ming understood. The eunuch was extending an olive branch.

Rules were rigid, but people were flexible—and those who delivered edicts knew how to exploit that flexibility.

“Then I thank Attendant Feng for his consideration.”

Since Feng Deshui had shown courtesy, Xiao Ming knew how to reciprocate. He accepted the edict and called out, “Attendants! Bring the gifts.”

Three servants soon entered, each carrying a tray veiled with cloth.

“Attendant Feng, a small token of appreciation. I hope you’ll accept it.”

Feng Deshui’s smile deepened. This prince was clearly a man who understood the ways of the world. “In that case, this old servant humbly thanks Your Highness.”

At Xiao Ming’s signal, the servants unveiled the trays.

The first held gold. The second displayed delicate glass bottles of perfume. The third featured an exquisite glass sculpture.

Feng Deshui's eyes lit up.

While gold was commonplace for someone of his station, the perfume and glass were rare luxuries—items money could scarcely buy, as they were produced exclusively in Qingzhou.

“Your Highness is too generous. How could this humble servant dare accept such gifts?” Feng Deshui approached the glass sculpture, examining it closely.

The piece was shaped like an ox—a design yet unseen in the imperial palace.

Xiao Ming smiled. “For an esteemed guest who has traveled so far, these trifles are hardly worth mentioning.”

Feng Deshui was one of Emperor Wenxuan's inner circle. Cultivating his goodwill might prove useful in the future. As a prince, Xiao Ming knew better than to appear stingy—a little gold was a small price for potential allies in the capital.

As Feng Deshui sniffed the perfume, he added, “Since Your Highness has treated this old servant so generously, I cannot accept these gifts without offering something in return. There are matters you should be mindful of before departing for Chang'an.”

“Please enlighten me.” Xiao Ming’s brow furrowed slightly.

Feng Deshui lowered his voice. “While Your Highness’s victory at Cangzhou is a monumental achievement, certain ministers may seek to undermine it. I’ve heard that Cui Hao of the peace faction intends to raise... concerns about the cannons.”

“The cannons?” Xiao Ming had anticipated this. After Cangzhou, it was impossible to keep the cannons a secret.

“Beyond that, Your Highness once promised soldiers lands once held by the late Prince Yong. And of the hundred thousand barbarians slain, many were once subjects of the Great Yu. Some Confucian scholars may accuse Your Highness of indiscriminate slaughter. Before setting out for Chang’an, you would do well to prepare counterarguments.”

Xiao Ming nodded slowly. The eunuch’s information confirmed that his gifts had been well spent. The capital’s rumor mill was as efficient as ever.

As expected, there were those eager to tarnish his triumph. His achievements were too great—if they could offset them with alleged misdeeds, his detractors would rest easier.

After a moment’s thought, Xiao Ming said, “Attendant Feng, please stay in Qingzhou for two more days. Allow me some time to prepare.”

“Of course, of course.” Feng Deshui was already engrossed in admiring his new treasures.

With a nod, Xiao Ming instructed Ziyuan to prepare guest quarters for the eunuch.

Then he summoned Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang to the main hall to discuss Feng Deshui’s warnings.

“Your Highness, my suspicions were correct,” Pang Yukun said with a wry smile. “These courtiers may be inept at governance, but their tongues are sharp—especially Cui Hao. Do not underestimate him.”

Xiao Ming’s understanding of Chang’an’s political intricacies was limited. “Enough circling the issue. For this trip to Chang’an, I seek no rewards—only a safe return. Of course, if we can win over some factions, all the better.”

Zhan Xingchang and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, a flicker of excitement in their eyes.

Unlike other princes, Xiao Ming stood alone. If he failed to cultivate allies in the court, any upheaval in the empire would leave him vulnerable.

After all, facing the combined might of the Great Yu and the barbarians with only six prefectures would be madness.