

## I. Dynasty 264

### Chapter 264: The Envoy from Prince Wei

“People talking nonsense?”

Xiao Ming frowned. He had never really thought about that before. But now that Ziyuan mentioned it, he suddenly understood.

This phrase came from the old rule of “three obediences and four virtues” for women. So, when the female workers mentioned gossip, it likely meant some people were criticizing them—saying they were out working instead of staying home and serving their husbands.

“It’s true,” said Ziyuan. “Because of this, many female workers quit midway. Every few days someone doesn’t show up to work.”

Xiao Ming sighed and shook his head. Once again, old customs and traditions were getting in his way.

He said, “In that case, I’ll write about it in the newspaper. I believe there are still many open-minded people out there. Oh, by the way—how much are you paying the female workers?”

“Ninety copper coins a month,” Ziyuan replied, holding up nine fingers.

“Thirty copper coins?” Xiao Ming’s eyes widened in shock.

At that time, one coin could only buy two liang (about 100 grams) of rice in Qingzhou. That meant ninety coins a month was worth just six jin (3 kg) of rice—or about six modern-day yuan. No wonder the workers were quitting. It was such a low wage that it wasn't even worth the effort.

If it weren't for the lack of work opportunities for women in ancient times, no one would even take the job.

Plus, in traditional farming society, families lived off their own production. The men farmed, and the women wove. So if they could already weave at home, why bother working outside for such little pay?

"What's wrong, Your Highness? Is that too much?" Ziyuan asked innocently.

Luluo couldn't hold back and said, "Sister, you're usually smart—how could you not see this? His Highness isn't saying it's too much. He's saying it's too little. These women came because it's His Highness's workshop. They respect him. But if you pay them less than what they'd earn sewing at home, of course they won't stay."

Xiao Ming smiled and patted Luluo's head. "You're smarter than your sister. Ziyuan, you're acting too much like an old-fashioned housekeeper—just like Qian Dafu. Too stingy. Let's fix that. From now on, I'll set the pay: one silver tael per month for each female worker."

"One tael? That's too much!" Ziyuan gasped. "That silver all comes from the palace!"

Xiao Ming asked, "Then tell me—how much do you plan to sell each padded jacket for?"

Ziyuan's eyes sparkled and she said playfully, "At least three silver taels!"

"And how much does it cost to make one?"

"With materials and wages—around two taels at most."

"There you go," Xiao Ming said. "Right now, the textile workshop has 100 workers and makes 30 jackets a day. That's 900 silver taels profit in a month. If we had 1,000 workers, that's 9,000 silver a month. That's not a small number."

Ziyuan finally understood. "You're right! The key now is recruiting more workers."

Xiao Ming nodded. "Exactly. One tael a month means 12 taels a year—that's as much as a season's harvest. Do you think people will still refuse to come?"

"You're right, Your Highness! In that case, please help write about this in the newspaper," Ziyuan said excitedly.

Xiao Ming nodded. The new city wall was almost finished. The barbarians would have a very hard time attacking it now. That meant Xiao Ming could finally focus on developing industry.

He chatted and joked with the two girls for a while. Then, a servant arrived to report: an envoy from Prince Wei was waiting outside, with a formal letter.

“Prince Wei’s envoy?” Xiao Ming frowned.

Since their parting in Chang’an, he hadn’t heard much from Prince Wei. But he had heard that Prince Wei kept asking the court to get cannons from Xiao Ming—using the excuse that pirates were attacking the coasts.

After thinking for a moment, Xiao Ming said, “Let him in.”

The servant left. Ziyuan and Luluo excused themselves.

Not long after, a young man in white robes approached, led by a servant.

From a distance, Xiao Ming felt like this man looked familiar, but when he looked closer, he couldn’t remember where he’d seen him.

“I am Xiao Qi, chief aide to Prince Wei. Greetings, Prince Qi,” said the man in white with polite confidence.

“Your surname is Xiao?” Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow. “Are you from the Xiao clan of Nanyang?”

Xiao Qi replied respectfully, "No, Your Highness. I'm not from the Nanyang Xiao clan. Many people share the Xiao surname. I'm just a commoner."

"Is that so?" Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. "You're young, yet you're already a top aide to my third royal uncle. If not from the Nanyang clan, then you must be incredibly talented."

"You flatter me, Your Highness. I was only lucky to earn Prince Wei's favor," Xiao Qi replied.

Xiao Ming looked him over again but didn't press further. Instead, he asked, "So, why did my third uncle send you?"

"I'm here about the cannons, Your Highness," Xiao Qi said seriously. "Prince Wei already has the Emperor's permission. He hopes you will sell cannons to him."

"When was this decided?"

"While Your Highness was in Cangzhou for several months, the Emperor agreed to it a month ago."

Xiao Ming frowned deeper. "So Father still favors my third uncle after all."

Xiao Qi said, "Your Highness is mistaken. This isn't about favoritism. The coastal regions are suffering. While you were in Cangzhou, 30,000 pirates landed in Yandu, captured Changping County, and killed

thousands of people. The county is now a pirate base. Your Highness, how could His Majesty watch his people suffer and do nothing?”

Xiao Ming suddenly laughed. “Only 30,000 pirates, and my third uncle is already panicking. Then what should I have done when I faced 100,000 barbarian soldiers? Wet my pants?”

“The whole country knows how rich Wei is, and how strong their army is. Losing Changping County— isn’t that Prince Wei’s own failure?”

Xiao Qi was stunned. Everyone had praised Prince Qi’s victory at Cangzhou. He had planned to use patriotism and righteousness to persuade Xiao Ming. But now, Xiao Ming ignored the big picture and instead blamed Prince Wei for being incompetent. Xiao Qi didn’t know how to respond.

Xiao Ming laughed silently to himself. He could see through this envoy’s tricks.

Since Xiao Wenxuan, the Emperor, had already approved the sale, and Prince Chu in the south would surely follow next, this business deal was now official. He had no choice but to accept.

But if they thought they could use words like “patriotism” or “national duty” to pressure him into selling cheap cannons, they were dreaming.

Compared to him, these other princes had no right to speak of loyalty or righteousness.