

I. Dynasty 28

Chapter 28: The Plan to Capture Zhang Liang

Six miles southwest of Qingzhou City, a snow-covered mountain range stretched for hundreds of miles. Among these peaks, two towering summits, each standing four to five hundred meters high, faced each other like the humps of a camel.

This was the well-known Camel Mountain among the people of Qingzhou.

Days of heavy snowfall had blanketed the mountains in thick layers of white, leaving no trace of greenery.

In a secluded part of the mountain forest, a group of ragged individuals huddled around a campfire, seeking warmth.

Their faces were gaunt, their bodies frail—clear signs of prolonged hunger and exposure.

“Father, there’s nothing left to eat in the mountains. If this continues, we’re all going to starve,” a young man, around sixteen or seventeen, grumbled while clutching a bow and arrow.

“Shut up!” barked an older man seated to the east of the fire. He had a long, scruffy beard and a deep scar running across his forehead. “If you hadn’t attacked those government people, would we be hiding up here, too afraid to go down the mountain?”

The young man lowered his head, aggrieved. "I didn't do it on purpose. The snow was so thick—how was I supposed to know they were officials?"

"You ungrateful brat! Still talking back?" The older man grabbed a wooden staff and raised it, ready to strike. "I never should've let you handle a bow! I'll beat you to death today!"

The young man sprawled onto the ground. "Go ahead, beat me! Either way, we're all going to starve to death!"

Zhang Liang's grip tightened around the staff, ready to bring it down, but a few clansmen quickly intervened.

One of them said, "Chief, Kun'er only made a mistake because he was desperate. We haven't eaten in days. We're all starving."

Zhang Liang sighed deeply, lowering the staff in defeat. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't rashly led you all into banditry, we wouldn't be suffering like this."

Another man chimed in, "That's true. We were shipbuilders, not bandits. We don't rob commoners, and we don't dare attack the well-guarded merchant convoys of the noble families. We're the most pathetic bandits ever. We might as well leave Qingzhou and seek a new life elsewhere."

Zhang Liang scowled. "You think I'm a fool? It's not the Qin family I fear—it's Prince Qi. Ever since the Qin family aligned with him, they've become even more arrogant. No matter where we go, we'll still be under royal authority."

“That’s true, but I snuck down the mountain a couple of days ago and heard something interesting,” another clansman spoke up. “Prince Qi has ordered porridge to be distributed at city gates and has decreed land reclamation and farming rights for the people. Even more surprising, this year, Commander Lu has not launched a winter bandit suppression campaign. Instead, he has issued a decree: any bandit willing to surrender will be pardoned and given food. Those who refuse will be executed.”

Zhang Liang’s face darkened as he picked up the staff again, glaring at his son. “You damned brat! You attacked officials! Now how are we supposed to surrender and get food? You’ve doomed us all!”

Zhang Kun scrambled to his feet, realizing his father was truly furious this time.

Before the argument could continue, a lookout came running down the mountain, panting. “Chief, we’ve got sheep!”

That was their secret signal—a target for looting had appeared.

Immediately, the hungry bandits grabbed whatever weapons they had—wooden clubs, sickles, and rusty blades. Zhang Kun slung his bow over his shoulder. “Who are they?”

“A grain merchant caravan. Only four or five guards with them.”

“Father, let’s do it! If we don’t, we’ll starve to death!” Zhang Kun urged.

Zhang Liang hesitated. There was no other way. "Alright, move out!"

The thirty-odd bandits hurried down the mountain, heading for their usual ambush spot. The thick foliage provided ample cover, preventing their presence from being detected.

As they reached their positions, they spotted the approaching caravan: four wagons, each manned by a driver and guarded by four armed escorts.

On each wagon, large bamboo baskets were stacked high—just like the ones grain merchants used for transportation.

Seeing the amount of food, Zhang Liang's eyes turned bloodshot. If they seized this haul, they could last for months!

As the caravan rolled into their trap, he roared, "Attack!"

The bandits charged out of the trees, weapons raised.

The drivers and guards immediately drew their weapons, forming a defensive line around the wagons.

Something felt off to Zhang Liang. The guards didn't look panicked at all.

But before he could second-guess himself—

BAM!

The lids of the bamboo baskets suddenly burst open.

From inside, fully armored soldiers leaped out, weapons gleaming in the daylight.

Leading them was Lu Fei, who emerged from one of the baskets with a wild grin. “Bandit scum! Surrender now, or my blade will show no mercy!”

In an instant, the “small caravan” transformed into a force of thirty elite soldiers.

The bandits froze in shock.

They had walked right into a trap.

Lu Fei laughed heartily at the stunned expressions. This brilliant plan had been devised by Prince Qi himself—and it had worked perfectly! Inwardly, Lu Fei’s respect for Xiao Ming grew. He would never have thought of such an effortless way to capture these bandits.

Surrounded and outnumbered, Zhang Liang collapsed to his knees before Lu Fei. “General, I take full responsibility! Please spare my men!”

Zhang Kun’s face turned red with rage. “Father, don’t say that! I was the one who shot the official!”

Lu Fei narrowed his eyes. “So, you’re Zhang Liang? Enough talking—you’re coming with us to see His Highness!”

Qingzhou City – Governor’s Office

Lu Fei personally escorted Zhang Liang and his men back to the city. A scout was sent ahead to inform Prince Qi.

This entire plan had been orchestrated by Xiao Ming. Rather than rushing to retaliate immediately after Qian Dafu was injured, he waited three days before setting the trap.

As expected, hunger had clouded the bandits’ judgment—and they fell right into his hands.

At the governor’s office, Xiao Ming was already waiting.

Qian Dafu, though still weak, had recovered enough to walk and insisted on attending.

Lu Fei saluted. “Your Highness, Zhang Liang and his son Zhang Kun have been captured. Awaiting your judgment.”

Xiao Ming swept his gaze over the bandits.

“These are bandits?” he thought, unimpressed. “They look worse off than beggars.”

“You are Zhang Liang?” Xiao Ming’s voice turned sharp. “Do you realize that banditry and attacking government officials are capital offenses?”

Zhang Liang knelt, defeated. “Your Highness, I alone am responsible. Kill me if you must—but please spare my men.”

“You have guts,” Xiao Ming remarked coldly. “However, I am not one to slaughter indiscriminately. That said, while you may be spared death, you will not be spared punishment. According to the laws of Great Yu, the lightest sentence for your crimes is enslavement.”