

## I. Dynasty 322

### Chapter 322: Decay

Inside the palace in Chang'an.

After reading the report from Qingzhou, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan immediately summoned Fei Ji.

Inside the imperial study, the two men sat in silence for a long while.

“Your Majesty, I also received some news from Jizhou. Just like Prince Qi said, there was indeed a drought last year around Bingzhou and Jizhou. Until now, not a drop of rain has fallen. The people in Prince Yong’s territory have run out of food. Their suffering is beyond words.”

“Bingzhou, Jizhou, and Qingzhou again... Decades ago, the empire almost collapsed because of the chaos in those three places. Now this natural disaster comes. What are we supposed to do?” Xiao Wenxuan’s eyes were full of deep concern.

He still remembered—back then he was only the second prince of the Great Yu Empire, ordered to suppress the rebellion in those three places. The rebel army had enormous momentum, like a wave crashing through everything.

To put down the rebellion, the imperial guards fought desperately. There were countless battles, big and small. It took three years to finally behead the rebel leader, Zhang Dong. But the cost was heavy—more than sixty percent of the imperial guards were lost.

But it was that very war that gave him control over the military and secured his path to the throne.

Fei Ji looked at Xiao Wenxuan. “There’s no other way now. We must distribute food for disaster relief. But the court doesn’t have much left. Your Majesty must issue a decree and ask the other regional lords to provide grain—especially those ruling the wealthier lands, like Prince Chu, Prince Wei, Prince Shu, Prince Yan, and Prince Runan.”

“That’s the only thing we can do... but I doubt it’ll work,” Xiao Wenxuan sighed. These lords were already pushing the limits of loyalty. How could they be willing to provide relief?

He knew them too well. In times of danger, all they ever did was protect themselves.

With another sigh, Xiao Wenxuan said, “Prepare the decree right away and send it out. Also, Prince Qi proposed a way to deal with the locusts. It sounds strange, but it’s still a plan.”

Fei Ji nodded. Prince Qi’s idea was to eat the locusts. It was certainly odd, but better than starving.

Slowly leaving the study, Fei Ji returned home.

Qingzhou had just begun to recover over the past two years, yet now it faced this disaster. ‘Reality often goes against our wishes,’ he thought. He was truly worried about Xiao Ming’s fate.

‘I hope he can survive this.’

Just then, a gentle voice rang out. "Father, why are you sighing?" It was Fei Yue'er, walking over with Xiaohuan.

Fei Ji had never liked hiding things from Fei Yue'er. "The emperor summoned me just now. He said there are signs of drought and a locust plague in Bingzhou, Jizhou, and Qingzhou. There might be another outbreak of unrest in those areas."

"Qingzhou?" Fei Yue'er covered her mouth in shock. "But wasn't the weather good in Qingzhou just last year?"

"Among the three, Qingzhou is suffering the least. But if Jizhou and Bingzhou fall into chaos, Qingzhou won't be safe. When rebels rise, they always rob the wealthier places first," Fei Ji said with worry.

Xiaohuan cried out, "Ah! If Miss marries into Qingzhou now, wouldn't that be dangerous?"

"Don't talk nonsense," Fei Yue'er frowned. "Since the marriage has been arranged, Prince Qi and I are already one. If we are united in blessings, we must also face hardship together. It's not right to enjoy only the good times and avoid the bad."

Fei Ji glanced at her with approval. That's the kind of daughter the Fei family should raise.

"Prince Qi doesn't even fear the barbarians. Why would he be scared of some rebels? What the emperor worries about is the barbarians using this chance to rise again. Prince Yong and Prince Liang are nothing like Prince Qi."

Fei Yue'er slowly nodded. Prince Yong was aggressive and foolish, always ignoring others' advice. This situation could turn messy.

Perhaps not wanting to dwell on troubling matters, Fei Ji smiled and changed the subject. "Yue'er, I've noticed your complexion has returned. You seem healthy again. Since that's the case, you and Xiaohuan should go out and walk around more often."

"Thank you, Father!" Fei Yue'er said excitedly.

Then Fei Ji told her about Prince Qi's plan to deal with the locusts. Fei Yue'er was deeply moved. Xiao Ming's strange ideas continued to surprise her.

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In Qingzhou, after learning about the unrest in Jizhou, Xiao Ming doubled down on drought relief work across his territory. In early May, a sudden light rain finally came, and he let out a long sigh of relief.

So did Pang Yukun and the many people living in his domain.

At least it meant that a severe drought wouldn't hit the lands of the six prefectures.

“Even though it rained, we must not relax. The water storage ponds in the fields need to be built faster. The canals must be dug as soon as possible. We need to minimize the damage,” Xiao Ming ordered the officials from the six prefectures.

To prevent major losses, he personally supervised the drought relief. Recently, Li Kaiyuan had been selling large numbers of chickens and ducks to the people for them to raise.

Meanwhile, Pang Yukun had gone out to the villages to organize production teams across the counties. In the newspapers, Xiao Ming also issued a public command for everyone to join the effort against drought.

Now that it had rained, it was clear Qingzhou’s disaster wouldn’t be too serious. Though the harvest would be smaller, people should still have enough to survive.

And the food Xiao Ming had stockpiled would be enough to feed the army.

Still, trouble elsewhere could spill over. Xiao Ming had been instructing the secret guards to monitor the situation in Yongzhou.

The court had already sent food for relief in Yongzhou and asked other regional lords to send grain as well. But just as he had predicted—just like when he himself had gathered supplies during the Cangzhou campaign—the court’s decree had little effect.

The lords were just giving token amounts: thirty thousand stones here, fifty thousand stones there, just to brush off the court.

They were secretly hoping the court would fall into disgrace. But that wasn't even what made Xiao Ming the angriest.

According to the secret guards, only one-tenth of the relief food ever reached the people. The rest was stolen by corrupt officials in Chang'an and Jizhou. Li Kaiyuan had even bought some of that relief grain in the local markets.

'The officials of the Great Yu Empire have rotted this far. Collapse is only a matter of time.'

When Pang Yukun saw that the food sold on the market was disaster relief grain, he sighed bitterly and left Xiao Ming behind with a bleak silhouette.

In the days that followed, Pang Yukun worked like a man possessed—handling government affairs, appearing constantly in the fields.

This situation shocked Xiao Ming as well. He never expected the corruption he had only read about in books to unfold right in front of him. Now he understood why the people always rebelled during disasters.

Letting out a bitter sigh, he pinned all his hopes on his own land.

This rotting empire was like an old man on his deathbed, already smelling of decay.

After his last exchange of interests with the Cao family, they kept their promise—Yue Yun had returned to Dengzhou with three Galleon ships.