

## I. Dynasty 339

### Chapter 339: The Mountain Battalion

“Your Highness, is this really for the Physics Academy?”

Inside the Bowen Academy, Lin Wentao asked in an excited voice.

The students of the Physics Academy were flushed with excitement as they looked at the fifty thousand taels of silver notes in Xiao Ming’s hands.

They had all been poor scholars; none had ever seen this much money before. Fifty thousand taels—it was unbelievable.

Xiao Ming nodded. “This is what I promised you. Naturally, it’s for you. But one thing—this money is for public use by the Physics Academy, not for private gain. It will be managed by the academy’s administration, and every expenditure will be reported to the government office.”

Lin Wentao nodded in agreement. This meant that aside from the usual support provided by the government, they now had an independent budget to buy experimental materials as needed.

“Thank you, Your Highness! We will use this money carefully.” Lin Wentao’s face was glowing with joy. Last time, it was his lack of funds that got him kicked out of the textile workshop. Now that they had funds, they could finally run experiments freely.

Xiao Ming handed the silver notes to the administration of the Academy and clearly explained their purpose.

Aside from being the head of Bowen Academy, Xiao Ming had appointed several old scholars to teach literature and oversee daily affairs—this formed the academy's administrative office. Without such oversight, a large academy like this would have descended into chaos.

After storing the silver in the academy treasury, Xiao Ming walked around the campus. Unlike before, the learning atmosphere was vibrant. Students could be seen gathered in groups discussing textbooks.

This warmed his heart. Every beginning is hard, but he believed Bowen Academy would become increasingly well-organized over time.

After dealing with Lin Wentao, Xiao Ming went directly to the command office.

The war was at a critical point. He needed to stay there to issue orders at any time.

Meanwhile, in Yuncheng—

A ragged army marched slowly into the city.

What kind of army was this? Among them were elderly men over fifty, boys under fifteen, and some individuals who looked more like criminals than soldiers.

Their appearance on Yuncheng's streets was alarming. Compared to the disciplined Qingzhou Army, this group looked like a gang thrown together at the last minute.

And in truth, that's exactly what they were—thirty thousand troops hastily pieced together by Prince Wei.

Half were retired or unfit soldiers. Some were freshly drafted recruits with no training. The rest were condemned criminals from prison.

"This is Prince Wei's army? And we expect these guys to guard our supply lines?" Lu Fei spat on the ground in disgust.

Niu Ben sighed deeply. Xiao Ming had ordered them to wait for Prince Wei's army to go to Jizhou together so their supply lines would be protected.

But this army looked more dangerous than bandits. Niu Ben feared they might rebel at any moment.

"His Highness couldn't have imagined the Mountain Battalion was this rotten," Luo Xin crossed his arms, disgusted.

He wasn't unfamiliar with this kind of unit. In the Great Yu Empire, ghost soldiers were common—troops listed on the payroll but didn't exist. Even among regional armies, this was standard practice.

On paper, the army existed. But when war broke out, they had to round up civilians to fill the ranks.

Such forces had no combat strength and would collapse as soon as fighting began.

Luo Xin used to tolerate this, as every commander dabbled in it. But after serving in Qingzhou, he couldn't stand it anymore.

In Qingzhou, no officer dared to fake troop numbers.

Niu Ben ruled with an iron fist and had Xiao Ming's full trust. In Cangzhou, some officers were caught stealing salaries for phantom troops—Niu Ben personally executed them.

Their heads were hung alongside those of traitors on Cangzhou's gates.

When Xiao Ming heard, he was furious. He ordered a full investigation across all six provinces. Any officer involved in payroll fraud was executed without exception.

The military across the six regions was purified overnight. No one dared cross that line again.

But that also showed how deeply corruption had infected the rest of the Great Yu's military—except Qingzhou, which remained clean under Xiao Ming's control.

Now, seeing Prince Wei's troops, Luo Xin instantly knew what they were: a ghost army, a mob in uniform.

Years of luxurious peace in Jiangnan had made many forget the realities of war.

"We have no choice. General Luo Quan of the Imperial Guard has sent urgent orders—we must proceed to Jizhou. The Guards are on the move. We're to surround and crush Chagatai from two sides." Niu Ben frowned. "Tell Prince Wei's people—rest for one day. Tomorrow morning, we march to Jizhou. We can't delay. If Beishan arrives before we break the siege, Jizhou will become the frontier of their invasion into Qingzhou."

Lu Fei nodded and left.

At the front of the column, Prince Wei's officers were riding when Lu Fei stopped them.

"Gentlemen, I am Lu Fei, captain of the Qingzhou Army. Our commander invites you to march with us to Jizhou tomorrow morning. Please do not delay the schedule."

A sharp-eyed officer at the head of the group gave Lu Fei a glance of disdain. "And who are you to stand in our way, you lowly captain? Get lost! If your commander wants something, he can come speak to me himself!"

The arrogance of the Mountain Battalion's officer infuriated Lu Fei. Already disgusted by their condition, this insult made his blood boil.

“You? Worthy of seeing my commander? Spit!” Lu Fei cursed.

The officer turned purple with rage. “How dare a mere captain from Qingzhou bark at the mighty Wei Army! You’ve got guts. Seize him! Teach him a lesson—let’s see if it’s Prince Wei or your little Prince Qi who’s greater!”

At his command, his personal guards dismounted and rushed at Lu Fei.

But the nearby Qingzhou soldiers, resting along the streets, sensed trouble and rose immediately.

They gathered silently behind Lu Fei, their eyes fixed on the incoming guards—murderous intent in every gaze.