

I. Dynasty 342

Chapter 342: The Tension Builds

As the evening fell, darkness slowly covered Yunzhou City.

Below the city walls, torches began to light up in the Azure Dragon King's camp. Countless flames stretched far into the distance, with no end in sight.

After Xiao Ming revealed his identity, murmurs began to rise among the people below.

Last year, news of Xiao Ming driving out the barbarians had already spread across the Great Yu Empire through newspapers. Many commoners had heard of it.

The young man who had spoken earlier put away his arrogant look. He disappeared into the crowd, and a short while later, returned with a man in a black robe.

Xiao Ming looked at the scholar. The scholar looked back at him.

After a moment of silence, the scholar said, "Greetings to Prince Qi."

In the dim light, Xiao Ming couldn't clearly see the scholar's face—it was Qi Zhengyuan.

He spoke directly, "Azure Dragon King, I don't understand why you've brought your troops to Yunzhou. The disasters in Jizhou weren't caused by people. Though Prince Yong made mistakes, now the real enemy is the barbarians. You should see the big picture. Why would you do something that hurts your own and helps your enemies?"

The Azure Dragon King's deep voice replied, "Your Highness, you may have misunderstood. I came here only because we have no food. The people are starving. I only hope Your Highness can lend us some grain. As a citizen of the Great Yu Empire, how could I ever think of cutting off the Qingzhou army's supplies?"

"Rubbish! If you're just borrowing food, why don't you go to another city?" Qi Guangyi asked angrily.

The Azure Dragon King calmly replied, "Even Your Highness has your troops ready for battle. How could the guards of other cities lend us anything? To them, we are nothing but rebels. They'd rather kill us on sight. But we are just starving people who had no choice but to take up weapons. I heard Your Highness is kind and willing to help victims of disaster, so I brought them here."

His words were clear and steady.

Looking at the endless sea of people, Xiao Ming knew—if they were peaceful, they were refugees; if not, they were rebels.

He couldn't risk letting them into the city. If they caused trouble, he might lose the whole province, and Niu Ben and the others might never return.

This wasn't the time to act out of kindness. The people were under the Azure Dragon King's command now, and they would do what he said.

But since the Azure Dragon King claimed he only wanted food, Xiao Ming tried to test him. “There is some food in the city. If you want to borrow grain, how much do you need?”

“Three hundred thousand shi of grain,” the Azure Dragon King replied calmly.

Xiao Ming’s face changed. He said, “That’s one shi per person—enough food for each of them for months. Azure Dragon King, are you trying to make things difficult for me?”

The Azure Dragon King remained calm. “Your Highness, the disaster in Jizhou won’t be over in just a few months. I don’t think it’s too much to ask.”

At that moment, Xiao Ming understood the truth behind the Azure Dragon King’s words.

He was no longer just against Prince Yong—he was going against the entire Great Yu Empire. He wanted to overthrow the court.

Now that the southern part of Jizhou was under his control, his eyes were set on Yunzhou, the nearest city.

And the rise of Prince Wei alongside him made the victims trust him more and more. They were willing to follow him in anything.

“Your Highness, the Azure Dragon King is rebelling,” Zhan Xingchang said coldly.

Xiao Ming nodded. At this point, the Azure Dragon King had shown his true colors.

Maybe at first, he had only wanted to help the starving people. But with each victory, his ambition grew. He might even believe that, with these people, he could reach for the throne.

And the Azure Dragon King likely knew that once he crossed this line, there was no going back.

He was gambling everything. He had chosen the perfect time—when the Qingzhou army was away and the city's defenses were weak.

Once someone takes this path, talk of kindness or loyalty becomes useless. In this world, only winners are remembered.

So what now?

That was the question in Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang's minds.

After a long moment, the two exchanged a look. With the city surrounded, there was only one option left—fight.

“What a pity for the innocent people,” Xiao Ming sighed in his heart. These people didn’t understand. They only believed the Azure Dragon King was right because he gave them food.

He never wanted to use force against disaster victims. But now, it seemed he had no choice.

Still, he gave one last warning. “Azure Dragon King, in front of you is the Qingzhou army—not the useless soldiers of Prince Yong. You’d better think this through.”

The Azure Dragon King replied, “Your Highness, I’m only here to borrow food. If you refuse, then there’s nothing more to say. I can’t control starving people behind me if they get desperate.”

Xiao Ming snorted coldly. He no longer wanted to speak with him.

‘He’s too naive. These three or four hundred thousand people will eventually be wiped out by the Great Yu Empire. And he will fall with them.’

Even though the empire was weak, it still had enough power to crush a rebellion. If Prince Yong hadn’t been busy fighting the barbarians, these rebels wouldn’t have lasted this long.

Night fell deeper. The Azure Dragon King, having just finished his march, didn’t seem eager to attack during the night. But the city of Yunzhou was now completely surrounded by hundreds of thousands of victims.

That night, the Azure Dragon King stared at the small city of Yunzhou.

Just as Xiao Ming guessed, he had taken advantage of Qingzhou's weakness to act now.

Food in Jizhou was almost gone. Most of it was hidden in the city by Prince Yong, but now that city was surrounded by barbarians.

He didn't dare mess with the barbarians. A month ago, one of his 30,000-strong groups was crushed by just 10,000 barbarian cavalry.

Even though he had trained civilians into a kind of militia, they were no match for the enemy cavalry.

Attacking the barbarians would lead to disaster.

So he chose to face Prince Qi. To him, both Prince Yong and Prince Qi were royals. What difference did it make?

In his eyes, Princes Wei and Yan were far stronger, and he wasn't ready to challenge them yet.

Only after taking over all the land from Jizhou to Qingzhou could he begin to compete with those powerful princes.

Staring at Yunzhou City, his ambition kept growing. He was no longer a poor scholar—he was now a commander of hundreds of thousands.

As he thought about how to take the city the next day, Xiao Ming was also thinking about how to capture the massive crowd of disaster victims.

Xiao Ming was determined. He could not allow the Azure Dragon King to sacrifice the lives of these people. But to capture them, some casualties would be unavoidable.

“Your Highness,” said Zhan Xingchang, “the Azure Dragon King’s followers are just a disorderly crowd. They have no discipline or training. The people’s loyalty to him is also weak. I observed many of them—they looked unsure and hesitant. So I believe we shouldn’t stay behind the walls. Instead, we should go out and face them directly. Use the gunmen to scare them into surrender, and use cavalry to surround and capture them.”