

I. Dynasty 344

Chapter 344: The Poisoned Wine of Power

A faint scent of gunpowder still lingered on the battlefield outside Yunzou City.

After repelling the first wave of rebel attacks, a dreadful silence fell across the scene.

Taking advantage of the lull, Zhan Xingchang immediately deployed the militia. The 30,000-strong militia that had formed voluntarily inside Yunzou City was now dispatched to the east, south, and west gates.

He knew that the rebels would focus their assault on the north gate, but Xiao Ming had already made arrangements—3,000 musket soldiers were stationed there, ready. At the same time, Qi Guangyi was leading 5,000 cavalry with sharpened blades, standing by to charge the enemy as needed.

Zhan Xingchang smiled faintly as he looked at the determined militia who were ready to fight to protect Yunzou.

These were the people of the Qingzhou region—fiercely loyal to the Prince of Qi. For him, and for their homeland, they were ready to face any enemy.

Once positioned, the militia were assigned posts by the commanders of the Yunzou garrison. Over the years, during the farming off-seasons, the militia had undergone military training and had even participated in joint drills with regular army units. This system was introduced after the military reform and gradually rolled out across the six prefectures.

Though the reform had only recently begun, the militia now had discipline and understood military order. Zhan Xingchang felt confident that these fighters could stand up to the rebels—they were nearly as capable as official troops.

After the militia were positioned, he brought up thousands of refugees who had sought shelter in Yunzou and prepared them for a special task. Along the way, he had already instructed them on what to say.

On the city wall, he brought an elderly man and the refugees to the north gate.

“Fellow villagers, stop fighting!” the old man shouted hoarsely. “We’re all people of Jizhou! Prince Qi has treated us with great kindness—he’s feeding us and will even give us farmland. Why are you attacking Yunzou?”

A refugee spotted a young man in the enemy crowd. “Shuanzi! I’m your uncle! Stop fighting—your parents are here in the city too! There’s food here, there’s land to till. Stop this madness!”

More and more refugees on the wall began shouting to their family members in the rebel ranks. The cries grew louder and more emotional.

On the ground, some of the rebels recognized their relatives and called back tearfully.

“Uncle! I’m here! How are my parents?”

“They’re well! There’s food and shelter here! It’s better than anything we’ve had in years!” the old man answered.

Soon, sobs were heard both above and below the walls. Families were reuniting through shouts across the battlefield.

"I won't fight anymore! I want to enter the city!" the young man known as Shuanzi shouted, throwing down his wooden stick.

Others around him looked moved. Most of them had only followed the Dragon King for a bite to eat. If they could have a peaceful life, why keep fighting?

"Death to deserters!" a furious voice roared.

A rebel officer suddenly stepped forward and slashed Shuanzi from behind with his steel blade. Shuanzi fell with wide, stunned eyes.

The crowd froze in horror. Their faces went pale and their hands trembled.

The leader they had once supported, the Dragon King, had become this cruel?

A chill crept into everyone's hearts.

The rebel officer raised his voice: “Don’t fall for Prince Qi’s tricks! Have you forgotten what Prince Yong did to us? The Great Yu Empire is rotten to the core! The noble families bleed us dry! They’re no better than the barbarian invaders!”

He pointed at the city walls. “That man is the seventh prince of Great Yu! His father is the corrupt emperor! Only the Dragon King is worthy to rule the world! Once we take Chang’an, the wealth of the empire will be ours!”

The officer shouted: “Heaven is dead, the Dragon King shall rise!”

The rebels echoed: “Heaven is dead! The Dragon King shall rise!”

Cries echoed as over 20,000 elite Dragon Guards assembled behind them without warning.

On the wall, Zhan Xingchang sighed.

When he heard them shouting “The Dragon King shall rise,” he felt a deep sadness.

The Dragon King was no longer a scholar driven by outrage to seek justice—he had become just another man thirsting for supreme power.

‘Power is like poisoned wine,’ Zhan Xingchang thought. ‘The more you drink, the more you want, and once you start, you can never put the cup down.’

“Shuanzi!” the old man cried out, seeing his nephew collapse, his voice breaking with grief.

Others on the wall burned with anger. They glared at the rebel officer below.

“Let’s go down there!” someone shouted.

Zhan Xingchang hadn’t expected the Dragon King to become this fanatical, willing to slaughter his own followers.

Still, their earlier attempt at psychological warfare had worked—many rebels were clearly shaken.

“I won’t go down,” the old man cried. “I want revenge for Shuanzi!”

“Nor will we! We want to bring our loved ones back!” others shouted.

Just then, the north gate slowly creaked open.

Three thousand musket troops quickly lined up outside the gate. In three rows, they raised their flintlocks.

Qi Guangyi's cavalry also prepared for action.

Zhan Xingchang looked toward the gate and saw a familiar figure—Prince Qi. Clearly, the chant “Heaven is dead, the Dragon King shall rise” had made his decision for him.

Among the rebels, the Dragon King had been watching in secret. When he saw the gate open, he was thrilled. He didn't expect the defenders to make such a foolish move.

“Charge!” he ordered.

The rebels charged again, urged on by the Dragon Guards.

At the gate, the musket troops stood firm.

As the rebels came into range, the first row of soldiers pulled their triggers.

“Bang! Bang!”

Fire and smoke burst forth. The rebels in front collapsed in a heap.

Those behind panicked and retreated immediately. They had no real will to fight—and the terrifying weapon shooting fire terrified them.

Even Zhou Xing, the general beside the Dragon King, went pale and froze with fear.

Before he could decide whether to continue charging, another thunderous explosion erupted from the city wall.

More screams followed. Blood sprayed across Zhou Xing's face.

Looking up, he saw defenders on the wall aiming their fire-breathing weapons directly at him.