

I. Dynasty 361

Chapter 361: Population Deal

Outside the Qingzhou military camp, Prince Yong stood tall in armor, a sword at his waist, looking every bit like a battle-hardened general.

Chen Xinran stood behind him, looking a little helpless.

With the barbarians retreating, Prince Yong was, of course, overjoyed. But right after, he began thinking about how to reap the biggest benefits from this great victory.

One benefit would be military merits. The other would be the spoils of war.

This time, the barbarians had abandoned a large number of warhorses and left behind two hundred cannons.

However, the Jinwu Guards and the Qingzhou army didn't seem willing to share the spoils with Prince Yong. He knew very well why that was.

Just as Prince Yong was shouting, Xiao Ming walked out from the camp.

Xiao Ming looked stern, with no trace of a smile on his face.

Seeing him, Prince Yong suddenly felt a chill down his spine and quickly dropped his arrogant demeanor.

Still, since he'd long been used to acting however he pleased in his fief and was also Xiao Ming's elder, he spoke up anyway, using his seniority:

"Prince Qi, what's the meaning of the Qingzhou army keeping all the cannons to themselves? Are you trying to hog everything? Don't forget, this is my fief."

Xiao Ming looked at him calmly. The two hadn't seen each other in five or six years, and even back then, they hadn't been close. He said,

"Please be respectful, Uncle. Do you really not know the reason for the war in Jizhou this time? And how exactly you responded when it broke out? Do I need to explain all this to you? Or should I tell the Emperor instead?"

Prince Yong's expression changed drastically. He snapped,

"Xiao Ming, what do you mean by that? Don't think I don't know you've been gathering refugees in my territory. If this gets reported, you won't get off easy either!"

"Hahaha..." Xiao Ming laughed.

"I'm not afraid of being scolded by Father for taking in some disaster victims. I didn't even claim any military credit. But you, Uncle—selling off relief food and causing the aid to fail, then refusing to go out and fight when the barbarians came—are you sure the Emperor won't strip you of your 'Single-Word Prince' title over these two issues?"

In the Great Yu Empire, “Single-Word Princes” like Prince Yong or Prince Wei held higher prestige. Two-Word Princes, like Prince Huainan, had lower status.

If a vassal prince made a serious mistake, the court could demote their title as punishment. After that, any Two-Word Prince would have to bow to a Single-Word Prince.

Already feeling guilty, Prince Yong was shaken by Xiao Ming’s hard stance.

Luo Quan couldn’t say anything because of Prince Yong’s status, but Xiao Ming wasn’t playing nice at all, leaving him with no moves.

Prince Yong glanced around and then forced a smile.

“Dear nephew, we’re both members of the royal family. If we undermine each other, it’ll just make outsiders laugh. Fine, fine, I won’t ask for the cannons. But can I at least have some of the horses?”

“No, you can’t,” Xiao Ming replied firmly.

“I mobilized a lot of men and supplies to save you, Uncle. I’ve heard you never do a losing deal. Well, neither do I.”

This Jizhou campaign came out of nowhere. He had to act fast. Soldiers had died, and they'd spent tons of silver on food, cannonballs, and gunpowder.

Even though he'd persuaded over two hundred thousand refugees to move into his territory, it still wasn't enough for him.

Prince Yong, already frustrated, snapped:

"You say no to everything! Don't push your uncle too far. Don't forget—this is my fief!"

"So what? Do you want to fight me?" Xiao Ming sneered.

Now that the barbarians had been driven from the grasslands and he had taken control of Shanhai Pass, he didn't need Prince Yong to guard the western gate anymore.

Once he controlled the pass, the route into the Central Plains from the steppe was in his hands. These vassals should be paying him protection fees, not the other way around. That's why Xiao Ming had no reason to be polite.

He wanted to vent his anger and make it clear that no one could push him around. It was also part of his larger plan.

If he couldn't put Prince Yong in his place, how could he freely profit from Prince Yong's territory later?

Prince Yong was about to argue again when Chen Xinran suddenly stopped him.

"Your Highness, Prince Qi misunderstood. The Qingzhou army is far too strong—we're no match for them."

Then he pulled Prince Yong aside and whispered,

"Now's not the time to offend Prince Qi. Never mind the cannons—he has muskets and hot air balloons now. We're the ones who need his help. After this battle, the Jizhou army is seriously weakened. Without those cannons, Prince Liang on the border could walk all over us."

Prince Yong's eyes flickered, and he slowly nodded.

"But what can we do? Did you see how rude Prince Qi was?"

Chen Xinran replied,

"Your Highness, Prince Qi was very clear—he wants compensation for sending troops. As long as we offer that, I think he'll be willing to compromise."

Hearing that, Prince Yong nodded and turned to Xiao Ming.

“Dear nephew, thank you for coming to Jizhou’s aid. I know your fief is still underdeveloped and struggling. I’d be willing to trade something for the cannons. Do you need food, or...?”

At that, Xiao Ming smiled.

He glanced at Chen Xinran. ‘Seems there’s at least one sensible person beside Prince Yong.’

He said,

“Those barbarian cannons aren’t all that useful to me. I can give them to you, Uncle. But as you know, my fief is vast and sparsely populated. I don’t ask for much—just allow me to gather the disaster victims in Jizhou, and hand over Azure Dragon King and the refugees under him to me as well.”

At the mention of Azure Dragon King, Prince Yong’s expression turned fierce.

“That rebel deserves to die! Now that the barbarians have fled, I was just about to take care of him and the rebels who followed him. If you need manpower, I’ll turn them all into slaves and send them to you.”

“No need for that,” Xiao Ming replied.

“I just need your help capturing Azure Dragon King. As for the refugees, I’ll handle them myself.”

There were still many refugees under Azure Dragon King. These common people were innocent. If Prince Yong dealt with them, many would die.

So Xiao Ming only wanted Prince Yong to help defeat Azure Dragon King—he would take care of resettling the refugees himself.

“Of course, of course,” Prince Yong laughed.

To him, those rebels were a threat anyway. He would’ve killed them all if he could. And even if they surrendered, he didn’t have the food to feed them.

So he didn’t mind Xiao Ming’s request at all.

Xiao Ming nodded. Prince Yong didn’t yet understand how important population was, and that was exactly what Xiao Ming was counting on. If he could add four or five hundred thousand people to his territory through this war, it would all be worth it.