

## I. Dynasty 369

### Chapter 369: Restoring Peace

“Free food! Free food!”

A Youzhou villager shouted excitedly. On his back was a sack full of rice he had just received.

More and more villagers started shouting too.

At the same time, cavalrymen rode through the city to announce that everyone could go to the granary to get food.

Though they didn’t fully trust the army that entered the city, they still trusted their neighbors. When they saw others coming back with rice, they couldn’t resist anymore. Pushing past their fear, they ran to the granary.

Soon, a large crowd gathered around the food distribution site.

“Slow down, one by one! Don’t push—there’s enough food for everyone!” Xiao Ming and Niu Ben stood at the front of the granary, maintaining order.

The villagers were finally willing to approach. This was real progress. Once they got food, their minds would slowly begin to clear.

As the news spread, more and more people arrived. Soldiers of the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry kept order while others handed out rice.

Seeing the constant flow of people coming and going, everyone present felt joy. At last, the people of the city were willing to make contact with them.

While food was being distributed, Lei Ming kept questioning the captured slave soldiers to get more information about the city.

Not long after, Lei Ming returned and reported, “Your Highness, the slave soldiers said that the former Prince Kang’s residence was where the barbarians ruled Youzhou City. Records and documents are stored there.”

“Oh? Let’s go have a look then,” Xiao Ming replied.

Xiao Ming only had a vague memory of Prince Kang. He was very young at the time, and Prince Kang rarely visited Chang’an, so they’d never really met.

Following Lei Ming, he arrived at a residence in the city center—Prince Kang’s former palace. The gate sign was gone, but two stone lions and a red lacquered gate still marked its past.

It seemed a clean and orderly barbarian had once lived there, as the palace still held its old beauty. With towers, pavilions, flowers, and artificial hills, it looked completely out of place in this ruined city.

“Your Highness, this Prince’s residence can serve as a command center,” Niu Ben said with satisfaction, already thinking about spending the night there.

But Lei Ming quickly said, very seriously, “They say Prince Kang took his own life right in this palace. It might bring bad luck for Your Highness to stay here.”

Xiao Ming had been in a good mood, but those words made his skin crawl. He kicked Lei Ming’s rear. “You brat! You trying to get a beating?”

Lei Ming looked confused for a second, then realized what he said. “Your Highness, if Prince Kang’s spirit is still here, he would surely be grateful to you.”

“Get lost!” Xiao Ming raised his foot again to kick him.

Niu Ben gave Lei Ming a glare. ‘This kid really doesn’t know how to talk,’ he thought.

Lei Ming had brought a slave soldier to help guide the way. With the soldier’s help, they soon found the room where the barbarians had kept city records.

Inside were piles of books and scrolls.

“Looks like the barbarian official here was literate,” Niu Ben said as he opened a ledger.

Xiao Ming nodded and began flipping through the population records.

They showed the population decline over the years—from 700,000 at its peak, now down to 200,000. The most recent record was from a military draft.

Xiao Ming guessed that many of the slave soldiers taken in the recent war had come from Youzhou City.

“200,000 people...” Xiao Ming handed the ledger to Niu Ben.

Seeing the numbers, Niu Ben’s face darkened. If things had gone on for a few more years, the people of Youzhou might have been completely wiped out.

Besides population, there were also records of land and grain. Page after page of brutal evidence of the barbarians’ cruelty.

Just then, a soldier came in and said, “Your Highness, many villagers have gathered outside.”

Xiao Ming and Niu Ben exchanged a look and walked outside together.

Outside the gates, they saw a crowd of villagers kneeling, bowing their heads in sorrow.

When Xiao Ming appeared, an elder lifted his head and tearfully said, “Great sir, you’ve saved our lives. We have nothing to repay you with—please accept our humble thanks!”

As he spoke, tears rolled down his cheeks.

Xiao Ming quickly helped him up. “Everyone, please rise. Losing Youzhou was a shame for the Great Yu Empire. But now the barbarians are gone, and you are free. You no longer need to live on your knees. The barbarians will never bully you again.”

Hearing this, the elder wept even harder. For ten years, they had lived in misery. Now, finally, they were free—it felt like waking from a nightmare.

“Thank you, great sir! Thank you!” he cried, wiping his tears.

Lei Ming then proudly stepped forward. “Elder, I’m also from Youzhou. I escaped with my family to Cangzhou years ago. Now it’s Prince Qi who has driven out the barbarians, and we serve under him. Please spread the word—no one needs to be afraid anymore. From now on, Prince Qi will rule Youzhou.”

Once Lei Ming said he was a local, the people looked at him with great respect.

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded. He had brought Lei Ming here exactly to use his identity to connect with the people.

“Prince Qi! Prince Qi is our savior! We’ll go tell everyone this good news. We’re no longer rootless—we finally have our own ruler again!” the elder said excitedly.

He and the others bowed deeply to Xiao Ming, then happily returned home.

“Your Highness, it’s done. You don’t need to worry about Youzhou anymore,” Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Thanks to his kindness and effort, the people of Youzhou were finally beginning to recover. It wouldn’t be long before this place came back to life.

He was relieved that Youzhou hadn’t been completely destroyed by the barbarians.

But he couldn’t stay here long, there was still so much to handle in his territory, especially with his upcoming trip to Chang’an.

After resting one night in Youzhou City, Xiao Ming left Lei Ming in charge until Pang Yukun could arrive to take over.

He and Niu Ben then returned to Qingzhou.

Five days later, they arrived.

By then, Qingzhou was filled with celebration. News that the Qingzhou Army had taken Shanhai Pass had spread quickly through newspapers.

Niu Ben returned to the Qingzhou military camp, he had his own responsibilities.

Xiao Ming went straight to the Prince Qi's residence.

As he approached the gates, he saw wagons and carriages lined up, completely blocking the entrance.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming suddenly felt a chill down his spine.

He instantly realized these were merchants coming to collect their debts.