

I. Dynasty 65

Chapter 65: Hydraulic Forging Press

“Your Highness, you’ll have to ask Chai Lingwu of Cangzhou about that,” Wang Shijie said solemnly.

Xiao Ming frowned. He had initially thought this was just ordinary horse smuggling, but Wang Shijie’s direct accusation of Chai Lingwu raised red flags. Chai Lingwu was the son-in-law of the Qin family, having married into their household.

However, what truly concerned Xiao Ming wasn’t the rivalry between the Wang and Qin families, but the fact that the Prince of Wei was smuggling horses. Had Chai Lingwu been bribed by the Prince of Wei? If so, this man was a ticking time bomb and needed to be replaced immediately.

This wasn’t Xiao Ming overthinking things. The position of Cangzhou’s governor was crucial, and the struggle for the throne within the Great Yu Empire was intensifying. In his judgment, if the Crown Prince were to be deposed, it would inevitably lead to chaos.

When that time came, anyone could become his enemy.

Therefore, the fact that the Prince of Wei was smuggling horses through Cangzhou merchants wasn’t the main issue. The Great Yu Empire lacked horses, and many nobles secretly purchased horses from the grasslands. The Prince of Wei wasn’t unique in this regard; Xiao Ming himself also wanted to smuggle horses from the grasslands to bolster his cavalry.

The real problem was that Chai Lingwu had bypassed him and secretly colluded with the Prince of Wei. This was the true issue at hand.

It had to be said that Wang Chengchou had struck a nerve this time. No feudal lord could tolerate a traitor in their midst.

“Your Highness?” Seeing Xiao Ming lost in thought, Wang Shijie reminded him again.

Xiao Ming snapped out of his reverie. “Thank you for the reminder, Shijie. I had no idea that such a treacherous individual was lurking in such an important place like Cangzhou. I will handle this matter and ensure the Wang family is duly rewarded.”

“Your Highness is too kind. As subjects of your fiefdom, it is our duty to share your concerns,” Wang Shijie said with a smile, feeling extremely pleased with himself. Now he wanted to see how the Qin family would respond.

To squeeze out outside merchants, the Wang, Sun, Wei, and Qin families had jointly purchased the operating rights for soap, perfume, and “Drunken Qingzhou” in Chang’an. Of course, their success in securing these rights was largely due to other merchants giving face to Xiao Ming.

However, even though the four families were collaborating in business, their internal conflicts remained unresolved. Li Kaiyuan had told him that the four families often quarreled over the distribution of goods.

After seeing Wang Shijie off, Xiao Ming summoned Pang Yukun to the prince’s residence and informed him of the situation.

Pang Yukun pondered for a moment and said, “Your Highness, this is an opportunity to remove the local powerful families from their positions in the government.”

“Pang Yukun, you and I think alike. But if we remove Chai Lingwu, who can take over as the governor of Cangzhou?” Xiao Ming asked.

“If Your Highness trusts me, I can recommend a few individuals. They are all from humble backgrounds and have earned their qualifications, but due to the corruption in the officialdom, alas...”

Xiao Ming understood Pang Yukun’s meaning. These individuals had passed the imperial examinations but had not been appointed to any official positions due to the dark nature of the bureaucracy.

Compared to the four families, Xiao Ming trusted Pang Yukun more. Even if these recommended individuals formed factions with Pang Yukun in the future, it would still be a matter of officialdom. However, the four families had members occupying key military and administrative positions across the six prefectures, which was what truly worried Xiao Ming.

This was also why he had been so tolerant of the four families.

If he were to recklessly purge the four families’ influence from the government, they would inevitably retaliate, plunging the fiefdom into chaos. Now that the Wang and Qin families were at odds, he could use this opportunity to remove these key officials.

At the same time, he could exacerbate the conflict between the two families.

"Pang Yukun, feel free to recommend them. I am in desperate need of talented individuals who can offer me sound advice. I have endured for five years, all for the sake of eliminating the four scourges of this fiefdom," Xiao Ming said through gritted teeth.

Pang Yukun nodded. "In that case, I will send them a letter and have them come to Qingzhou."

"Good. Let's set aside the matter of Chai Lingwu for now. Once they arrive, I will order Lu Fei to arrest Chai Lingwu," Xiao Ming said.

"Commander Lu Fei?" Pang Yukun was somewhat surprised.

"Three years ago, Cangzhou fell because the defending general abandoned the city. Now, with the horse smuggling in Cangzhou, neither Chai Lingwu nor Yuan Tao, the military commander of Cangzhou, have reported anything."

"Your Highness means that the two of them are colluding?" Pang Yukun's expression changed.

"Exactly," Xiao Ming said. This was a barbaric era, and also a very lawless one.

He couldn't afford to be careless. If Chai Lingwu and Yuan Tao learned that he intended to execute them, they might resort to desperate measures, such as rebelling or even colluding with the barbarians to invade. If that happened, he would be finished.

Pang Yukun thought for a moment and understood. He said, "Your Highness's foresight is truly admirable."

Xiao Ming chuckled. "Pang Yukun, you're actually praising me now?"

"Not at all. It's said that a scholar can be judged anew after three days. That applies to Your Highness. I take my leave now," Pang Yukun said with a bitter smile.

By now, dusk had enveloped the prince's residence, and the servants were lighting the red lanterns one by one.

In the past, when the prince's residence was short on funds, Xiao Ming had avoided wasting resources, leaving the residence in darkness. Now, he had Ziyuan purchase lanterns, each fitted with candles, and placed them along the paths of the residence, hanging them on bamboo poles.

This finally gave the prince's residence a more dignified atmosphere.

It also gave him a sense of security. After all, he was afraid of the dark, and this setup also improved safety. If any assassins tried to enter, the guards would spot them immediately.

Returning to his chambers, Lülao had already prepared hot water for him. After bathing, he went to rest.

The chill of winter was gone, and the air carried a hint of spring warmth. Winter was giving way to spring, and the farming season was approaching.

Xiao Ming was afraid of the dark and the cold. Thinking of the coming spring, he felt a sense of anticipation.

When the time came, he could go out to enjoy the spring scenery, go fishing, and savor the beauty of nature.

With these thoughts drifting through his mind, he spent the night half-dreaming. The next day, he taught a morning class at the academy, briefly introducing the periodic table of elements. In the afternoon, he went to the Machinery Department.

“Your Highness, what kind of armor are we making?” Chen Qi asked eagerly as soon as Xiao Ming arrived.

He hadn’t slept well the previous night.

“Plate armor,” Xiao Ming said.

Plate armor, which was quickly rendered obsolete by the advent of firearms, didn’t have a long history. However, its combination of protection and mobility was exceptional, especially against soldiers armed with swords. A soldier clad in plate armor was a nightmare for such opponents, as the armor provided nearly complete protection against slashing attacks.

Xiao Ming wasn't planning to use this armor to defend against firearms, as armor was unnecessary in the age of gunpowder.

Instead, he intended to use plate armor to counter the armies of the Great Yu Empire and the barbarian cavalry. The superior protection of plate armor would effectively block swords and arrows.

"Plate armor?" Chen Qi looked puzzled.

"But before that, we need one more thing: a hydraulic forging press," Xiao Ming said. This was the real reason he had chosen plate armor. Scale armor and lamellar armor were too labor-intensive to produce. Equipping his entire army with such armor would take an eternity.

However, with the hydraulic forging press, he could mass-produce plate armor and equip his army on a large scale. After all, steel was his advantage.