

I. Dynasty 71

Chapter 71: Execution

Cangzhou.

The ravages of the barbarian invasion three years ago had left this city scarred and struggling to recover. The once-thriving Cangzhou now had a population of only thirty thousand.

The city was a shadow of its former self, with a dwindling population and abandoned industries. However, since the government issued the farmland reclamation order during the winter, some residents had gradually returned to cultivate the land.

Despite the sparse population, the city was bustling with merchants. Some carried official permits, but many more were smugglers without proper documentation.

The Great Yu Empire had always strictly controlled trade with the barbarians. However, under pressure from the barbarians, the empire had no choice but to open its borders to trade. Yet, certain types of trade were strictly prohibited.

The first was coal and iron, and the second was horses. Generally, any trade involving war materials was banned unless accompanied by official documentation.

When the Wang family had previously discussed trade with the barbarians with Xiao Ming, they had been terrified because they were secretly involved in the coal and iron trade.

Unlike usual, at noon that day, a group of heavily armed cavalry entered Cangzhou. The sight of their armor nearly frightened the city's residents to death.

The cavalry wore barbarian-style armor, and their horses were as robust as those of the barbarians. At first glance, it seemed as if barbarian cavalry had entered the city. It wasn't until they saw the Qingzhou military flag that the residents felt somewhat reassured.

Acting on Xiao Ming's orders, Lu Fei had led the elite cavalry of Qingzhou, traveling day and night to reach Cangzhou in just two days and one night.

His mission was to arrest Cangzhou's governor, Chai Lingwu, and Cangzhou's military commander, Wei Tong, and bring them to Qingzhou. If they resisted, they were to be executed on the spot!

Upon entering Cangzhou, Lu Fei and his thirty cavalymen headed straight for the Cangzhou government office.

Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong—one was the son-in-law of the Qin family, and the other was a member of the Wei family. In Lu Fei's eyes, neither of them was any good, and the four great families deserved to be torn to pieces.

Three years ago, when the barbarians invaded, their iron hooves trampled the lands of the six prefectures, and the people wailed in agony under their oppression. Meanwhile, the local powerful families hid in their fortified manors, gathering their private armies for self-defense and refusing to come out.

At that time, there were only about two thousand barbarian cavalry in the six prefectures, while the private armies of the four families numbered nearly ten thousand. Yet, these families were unwilling to risk their forces in battle.

It wasn't until Lu Fei led three thousand soldiers in a bloody battle in Cangzhou and defeated the barbarian vanguard that the private armies of the four families finally arrived. Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong, seeing the barbarians retreat, joined in the pursuit of the remaining barbarian cavalry.

Afterward, they claimed credit for the victory, and the Qin family sought rewards from the Prince of Qi, who had just returned to Qingzhou from Chang'an, still shaken from his expulsion.

Seeing Cangzhou recaptured, the Prince of Qi, overjoyed and without investigating further, appointed Chai Lingwu as the governor of Cangzhou and Wei Tong as the military commander. For three years, the two had controlled Cangzhou, one in charge of administration and the other of military affairs.

At the time, Lu Fei could understand the Prince of Qi's feelings. The limited forces of the fiefdom had suffered heavy losses in the battle against the barbarians, and they had no choice but to rely on the private armies of the local powerful families. This was why, apart from Qingzhou, the other five prefectures were controlled by the four families.

"Heh, I never thought you'd have a day like this!" Lu Fei thought with great satisfaction as he galloped through the city.

For three years, he had been seething with anger but dared not speak out. How could the blood of thousands of soldiers be exchanged for Cangzhou only to hand it over to such cowards? Now, with Xiao Ming's order, these two scoundrels were finally going to be executed.

When they reached the Cangzhou government office, Lu Fei dismounted and entered, his voice booming like thunder. "Governor Chai, where are you? The Prince has issued an order. Come and receive it!"

The office was nearly empty, with only a few clerks present. One of them timidly replied, "Commander Lu, Governor Chai is not here!"

"Not here? Then where is he?" Lu Fei's eyes widened in anger. "Speak quickly! If you delay my mission, I'll skin you alive!"

The clerk was terrified. He had seen Lu Fei during his previous visit to Cangzhou a few days ago, and Lu Fei's fearsome reputation from three years ago was well-known to him. Frightened, he stammered, "The governor and the commander have gone to the Bichun Garden in the city."

"Humph! Those two scoundrels!" Lu Fei stormed out of the office, mounted his horse, and shouted, "Follow me! Surround the Bichun Garden!"

"Yes, sir!" The thirty cavalymen roared in unison, their hooves thundering as they rode off.

The clerk finally caught his breath. Seeing Lu Fei's demeanor, he realized something serious was happening. He hurried out of the office and headed for the military headquarters.

Meanwhile, at the Bichun Garden, Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong were drinking and toasting, each with a beautiful woman in their arms. Across from them sat a richly dressed merchant.

“Governor Chai, Commander Wei, thank you for your help in smoothly transporting one thousand warhorses out of the city. This is a small gift from the Prince of Wei. Please accept it!” The merchant raised his cup in thanks.

Chai Lingwu opened the wooden box the merchant had pushed toward him. Inside was a layer of gold ingots. Wei Tong glanced at it, exchanged a look with Chai Lingwu, and both nodded slightly.

Since the two had taken control of Cangzhou, every merchant involved in border trade or smuggling had to pay them tribute to pass through without trouble.

In just three years, the two had amassed hundreds of thousands of taels of silver.

As the three raised their cups, a commotion erupted outside. The sound of shouting and horses neighing filled the air, followed by the screams of women from the first floor of the Bichun Garden. Before they could react, the door to their room was kicked open.

Lu Fei strode in, his right hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

“Commander Lu!” Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong were both startled.

Regaining their composure, Wei Tong said displeased, “Commander Lu, what are you doing here? What is the meaning of this?”

Chai Lingwu also looked disdainful. The two, stationed far away in Cangzhou, were unaware of the changes in Qingzhou. Relying on their status as members of powerful local families, they looked down on Lu Fei, a mere brute.

Lu Fei took in the scene—a table laden with delicacies and beautiful women in their arms.

He was already angry at Wei Tong for his half-hearted efforts in building the military farms and delaying the land reclamation. Thinking of his soldiers toiling in the fields, surviving on thin porridge, his anger flared.

But then, he suddenly smiled and said, “My apologies, my apologies. A few days ago, I received an order from the Prince of Qi to come to Cangzhou. Learning that the two of you were here, I came to deliver the order.”

Wei Tong, seeing Lu Fei’s apologetic demeanor, felt smug. No matter how formidable Lu Fei was in the military, his humble origins meant he still had to defer to them.

He said indifferently, “What instructions does His Highness have?”

“Instructions? Not at all. His Highness, recognizing your three years of service in guarding Cangzhou, has sent me to reward you. Let me read it to you.” Lu Fei continued to smile.

Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong exchanged glances and smiled.

The merchant sitting across from them couldn't help but sneer. These two had been embezzling in Cangzhou, colluding with the Prince of Wei internally and the barbarians externally. Yet, the Prince of Qi was now rewarding them. How absurd! Truly the most useless of the princes.

Lu Fei began reading, "Governor Chai Lingwu and Commander Wei Tong of Cangzhou, hear the order!"

Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong stood up and bowed. "Your servants are here!"

"Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong, as governor and commander of Cangzhou, have neglected their duties to defend the border. Instead, they have secretly colluded with merchants to smuggle warhorses, embezzling funds and undermining the Prince's military farm decree..."

At this point, Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong turned pale with shock. Wei Tong immediately reached for the hilt of his sword, but the soldiers behind Lu Fei quickly stepped forward and pinned the two to the ground.

"...From this day forward, you are relieved of your positions as governor and commander. You are to be taken to the Qingzhou prison. Any resistance will be met with immediate execution!"

"Lu Fei, you're lying! I don't believe this is the Prince's order! I demand to see the Prince!" Chai Lingwu roared.

Wei Tong threatened, "Lu Fei, half of Cangzhou's garrison is made up of my Qin family's private army. If you dare harm a single hair on my head, you'll never leave Cangzhou alive!"

As soon as he finished speaking, the sound of horses neighing and soldiers clamoring erupted from downstairs.