

I. Dynasty 72

Chapter 72: Bloodshed

“Hahaha, my men are here! Lu Fei, let’s see what you can do to me now, huh!”

Lu Fei remained silent, his right hand suddenly drawing his sword. A flash of silver light followed, and two heads rolled to the feet of the merchant.

“Ah! Murder!” The two courtesans screamed in terror and fled the room.

The merchant turned pale and began vomiting uncontrollably.

Lu Fei then shouted, “Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong led a mutiny and have been executed by me!”

Downstairs, the Qingzhou cavalry was surrounded by about a hundred men. The two sides were pushing and shoving, on the verge of a full-blown fight. Suddenly, two black objects rolled to their feet.

When they looked closely, they realized they were the heads of Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong. They were horrified.

Then, Lu Fei, covered in blood, walked out like a god of death. “The two traitors have been executed. Drop your weapons, and I will spare your lives. Otherwise, you will be treated as rebels!”

Seeing their commanders dead and knowing Lu Fei’s formidable reputation in the military, the soldiers dropped their weapons one by one.

With a cold snort, Lu Fei ordered his men to wrap the heads and set off with his thirty cavalrymen, racing back to Qingzhou overnight. To ensure a swift capture of Chai Lingwu, each cavalryman had been provided with four horses.

By noon the next day, he arrived at the Prince of Qi's residence with the heads of Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong.

"Killed?" Xiao Ming asked, seeing the blood-soaked cloth.

Lu Fei nodded and recounted the events.

At the same time, Pang Yukun arrived at the residence with Chang Yuchun. Chang Yuchun said, "Your Highness, those two deserved to die!"

Having only arrived three days ago, Xiao Ming didn't know much about Chang Yuchun. He asked, "Why did they deserve to die?"

"Setting aside their involvement in smuggling warhorses, the fact that they mixed the private armies of powerful families into the Cangzhou garrison alone is enough to warrant their execution. If this continued, would Cangzhou still be Your Highness's Cangzhou? If the barbarians attacked again, wouldn't these two abandon the city and flee? Your Highness must not forget that the previous garrison commander also came from a local powerful family," Chang Yuchun explained.

Xiao Ming nodded. "But killing them so abruptly will surely provoke discontent. The Qin family is still influential. If they secretly oppose me, it's no laughing matter."

"Your Highness, since you dared to move against these two, you must have been fully prepared. The principle of watching tigers fight from a safe distance is something Your Highness surely understands better than I," Chang Yuchun said.

"Well said," Xiao Ming replied. Chang Yuchun had already discerned that Xiao Ming was exploiting the conflicts among the powerful families. He said, "Cangzhou is a crucial border town and must not be neglected. Once the cases against Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong are settled, you can take up your post in Cangzhou."

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Chang Yuchun said.

He was a man of merit but had no connections. After waiting for three years without an official position, he had been inspired by Pang Yukun's integrity and, upon receiving his letter, decided to move his entire family to Qingzhou.

Pang Yukun then said, "Your Highness, with Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong dead, the Wang family will surely recommend their own people. I hope Your Highness will not be swayed by their influence."

Xiao Ming's face darkened. Pang Yukun still didn't fully trust his judgment. He said, "My decision is final. I will not appoint anyone else."

Pang Yukun nodded and left with Chang Yuchun.

In the main hall, Lu Fei remained. Xiao Ming looked at him, speechless. This fierce general was indeed too fierce, killing the two without hesitation.

“You... I wanted to interrogate them, but now they’re dead, and there’s no evidence,” Xiao Ming said angrily.

Lu Fei chuckled. “Your Highness, that’s not necessarily true. I also captured a merchant who was colluding with them. He’s in the Qingzhou prison. If Your Highness is concerned, I can help with the interrogation.”

“At least you’re not completely reckless. By the way, with Wei Tong dead, the position of Cangzhou’s military commander is vacant. Select capable individuals from the Qingzhou army to fill the post. We cannot afford to lose control again!” Xiao Ming said.

Not only Cangzhou, but Xiao Ming was also deeply concerned about the other prefectures. Most of their officials were from the four great families. By exploiting the conflict between the Wang and Qin families, he planned to thoroughly cleanse Cangzhou.

As for the other prefectures, he would use this conflict as a catalyst.

As Chang Yuchun had pointed out, Xiao Ming intended to watch the tigers fight and reap the benefits.

After instructing Lu Fei to send capable individuals to Cangzhou, Xiao Ming also ordered him to organize the newly recruited soldiers into a new army, directly under his command, with no interference from the other prefectures' military headquarters.

This way, he could use the new army to check the forces of the other prefectures. However, with Qingzhou and Cangzhou under control, the other prefectures wouldn't be able to cause much trouble.

His only concern was the Qin family's backlash. Chai Lingwu and Wei Tong were core members of the Qin family.

After Lu Fei left, as Pang Yukun had predicted, the Wang family sent someone to recommend their own candidates for the positions of Cangzhou's governor and military commander.

Cangzhou was a lucrative prize, and everyone knew it. With the Qin family suffering heavy losses, the Wang family naturally wanted to secure a more advantageous position.

However, they no longer had anything to offer that could sway Xiao Ming. He was no longer the prince who could be bribed with a mere ten thousand taels of silver.

The Wang family's envoy left empty-handed. Shortly after, Li San entered.

"How is it? Any movement from the Qin family?" Xiao Ming asked.

Li San and Wang Xuan now served as his left and right secret guards. Xiao Ming had tasked them with setting up a network in Qingzhou, starting with gathering information from the streets and alleys.

Secondly, he had slaves assume various ordinary roles in the city to act as his eyes and ears.

However, infiltrating the four great families directly was still difficult, and they likely couldn't achieve it yet.

"Your subordinate has been keeping a close watch on the Qin family. Recently, many branches from various prefectures have been visiting, seemingly discussing something significant," Li San reported.

"Good, keep watching. If an opportunity arises, try to plant a spy within the Qin family," Xiao Ming said.

Li San acknowledged the order and left. As he exited, Wang Xuan, who had been waiting outside, entered, his iron mask giving Li San a cold glance.

Shivering slightly, Li San smirked. Wang Xuan was a man of few words, and Li San found it hard to get along with him.

"Your Highness, Wang Chengchou is currently pleased, though he is somewhat annoyed that you rejected his recommended candidates. He has been complaining in his residence, but there's no other movement for now," Wang Xuan said in his naturally hoarse voice, speaking slowly and deliberately.

“They’re celebrating too early. You said that Wang An, the governor of Dengzhou, murdered seventy-two members of the Fang family and seized their land. Is this true?” Xiao Ming asked. As a former member of the Wang family, Wang Xuan was well aware of their underhanded dealings.

With the Qin family suffering a loss, they would be eager to retaliate against the Wang family. Having lost a governor and a military commander, the Qin family would want the Wang family to suffer equivalent losses.

Xiao Ming was now gathering evidence for the Qin family, secretly eroding the power of both families. By the time they realized what was happening, he would already have control over the armies and government offices of the six prefectures.

Even if they tried to resist, they would be like the Monkey King in the Buddha’s palm—unable to escape his grasp.