

I. Dynasty 76

Chapter 76: Interrogation

“Outside the bamboo, a few peach blossoms bloom;

The river warms, and ducks are the first to know.

Reeds sprout short amidst the lush grass,

Just as the pufferfish begin to rise.”

This poem, written by Su Shi of the Song dynasty, perfectly captured the scene before Xiao Ming, evoking a deep sense of resonance.

After leading the ox for about an acre’s distance, Xiao Ming returned the ox to the soldier. By then, he was drenched in sweat. Primitive agriculture without modern machinery made both spring plowing and autumn harvesting exhausting tasks.

Lu Fei walked over, laughing heartily. “Your Highness, I thought you were only skilled in archery and horsemanship. I didn’t expect you to be so adept at farm work too.”

Xiao Ming almost blurted out, “I used to do this often as a child,” but caught himself and instead said, “What’s so difficult about it? I just learned from the soldiers.”

Recalling his childhood in his previous life, Xiao Ming felt a pang of sadness. He had never known who his parents were and had grown up with the elderly woman who raised him. Sadly, she passed away a year after he started working.

It was perhaps because of this that he had little attachment to his past life and quickly adapted to this new world.

“Even so, Your Highness is probably the first prince in the Great Yu Empire to know how to plow a field,” Lu Fei chuckled, then changed the subject. “Your Highness, the construction corps is doing well with farming during the agricultural season, but we also need to train during the off-season. What about the armor for the Qingzhou army...”

Lu Fei had been hesitant to bring this up earlier, but now he finally did.

Xiao Ming replied, “I’ll keep my promise. By the end of next month, the first batch of plate armor, crossbows, and modao (a type of long saber) will arrive at the Qingzhou camp.”

“Modao? Crossbows? Why not bows?” Lu Fei was puzzled. Xiao Ming had promised to equip the Qingzhou army, but the specifics were still unclear to him.

“It’s getting late today. Tomorrow, I’ll take you to see what a modao is,” Xiao Ming said.

Lu Fei’s face lit up with excitement. “Thank you, Your Highness!” The Qingzhou army had been impoverished for so long that the mere mention of weapons and equipment made them as excited as wolves spotting prey.

After washing the mud off his legs in the Xiaoqing River, Xiao Ming prepared to leave. As he stood up, he caught sight of a large shadow darting through the water.

Upon closer inspection, it was a massive carp. Following the carp was a large school of fish. The unpolluted natural environment allowed the fish population to thrive, evoking in Xiao Ming a sense of idyllic tranquility, like the “old man in a straw hat fishing alone on a boat.”

Though he had been busy lately, Xiao Ming realized that some leisure was necessary. He wondered if he should ask Chen Qi to make him a fishing hook.

As he walked back to the prince’s residence, Xiao Ming pondered the importance of agriculture and animal husbandry. While farming was crucial, animal husbandry was an equally vital part of agriculture that had long been neglected.

Some argued that the Song dynasty’s lack of warhorses was due to the loss of horse-breeding lands, but the chaotic horse administration of the Song dynasty was also to blame.

From the recent incident of purchasing oxen, Xiao Ming also recognized the importance of animal husbandry.

Therefore, after farming, his next task for the production teams in each prefecture would be animal husbandry—cattle, sheep, mules, horses, chickens, fish, and pigs. None could be neglected.

Upon returning to the prince's residence, Xiao Ming had a simple meal and was about to draft a policy on animal husbandry when Ziyuan approached him.

"Your Highness, while you were away this afternoon, someone from the Prince of Wei arrived at the residence. They asked me to inform you that the Prince of Wei will arrive in Qingzhou in five days to pay you a visit."

"The Prince of Wei is coming to visit me?" Xiao Ming felt as if he had just heard the biggest joke of his life.

This "Uncle Wei" had never provided him with any substantial help since his arrival. Even three years ago, he had acted just like the local powerful families, gathering troops to defend his own borders without sending a single soldier to Xiao Ming's fiefdom.

Moreover, during the oxen purchase incident, he had played Xiao Ming for a fool, driving up the price and causing him to lose over a hundred thousand taels of silver.

Now, he was actually coming to visit?

After some thought, Xiao Ming realized that the Prince of Wei's visit was likely not as simple as it seemed. The merchant Lu Fei had captured in Cangzhou was still in the Qingzhou prison.

The fact that the Prince of Wei was arriving so quickly suggested that the merchant had a lot of valuable information. It was necessary to interrogate him.

Putting down his brush, Xiao Ming immediately sent someone to fetch Lu Fei. They would interrogate the merchant, Zhou Ziyu, that very night.

Qingzhou Prison

Located on a street adjacent to the Qingzhou army barracks, the Qingzhou prison was under the jurisdiction of the Qingzhou government office. Usually, criminals caught by the city's constables were held here.

Because it was next to the Qingzhou army's garrison, few ever dared to plot jailbreaks. That was why Lu Fei had dared to imprison the merchant here.

"Your Highness, this is the merchant." The dim lantern light flickered in the damp corridor, filling the air with the stench of rot, spoiled food, and human waste.

Zhou Ziyu was locked in the innermost cell. Unlike the other prisoners' despondent looks, he appeared quite at ease—almost as if he could leave whenever he pleased.

"Zhou Ziyu, you're certainly enjoying yourself." Hearing Lu Fei's shout, Zhou Ziyu slowly rose from his reclining position, walked to the cell door, and glanced at both Lu Fei and Xiao Ming.

He cupped his hands in mock deference. "You must be Prince Qi. This humble merchant, Zhou Ziyu, pays respects to Your Highness."

Xiao Ming studied him with interest. “How did you know I was Prince Qi?”

“In Qingzhou City, there’s only one person that Captain Lu would follow so obediently—none other than Prince Qi.”

Xiao Ming’s lips curled. “You have sharp eyes. Since you’re such a clever man, I’ll get straight to the point—are you smuggling warhorses under Prince Wei’s orders? What exactly is Prince Wei’s intention behind this operation?”

Zhou Ziyu burst into laughter. “Your Highness, do you really think I’d risk offending Prince Wei to tell you anything?”

“And you’re not afraid of offending me?”

“Forgive me for speaking bluntly, Your Highness—but do you truly believe, in His Majesty’s heart, you’re more important than Prince Wei? If the emperor had to choose between you and Prince Wei, who do you think he’d let live—the prince with wealth and soldiers, or the prince with a worthless fiefdom?”

The hidden scorn in Zhou Ziyu’s eyes was unmistakable. His arrogance enraged Lu Fei, who lashed out with his whip—striking Zhou Ziyu across the face. Blood trickled down his cheek.

“You dog! How dare you speak to His Highness like that? Even if your Prince Wei had three heads and six arms, I’d still cut him down!” Lu Fei raised his whip for another strike, but Xiao Ming stopped him.

Zhou Ziyu's words were harsh, but not without truth. Xiao Wenxuan, the emperor, always prioritized profit. If Xiao Ming ever became a liability, his father wouldn't hesitate to abandon him.

By mentioning the emperor, Zhou Ziyu had already exposed the deeper scheme behind this smuggling ring.

"So... this horse-smuggling operation is secretly authorized by my father, isn't it?"