

## I. Dynasty 78

### Chapter 78: Extorting Prince Wei

“Hahaha, my dear nephew, it’s been five years. You’ve grown even more handsome and impressive.”

Prince Wei stepped out of the sedan chair and gave Xiao Ming a hug, vigorously patting his back with his right hand.

“Cough, cough.” Xiao Ming nearly coughed up blood from the force of Prince Wei’s pats. The sheer weight and momentum of this three-hundred-pound man were no joke. He quickly escaped Prince Wei’s embrace and smiled, “Uncle, you’ve certainly grown even more... robust over the past five years.”

“Ah, the capital of Jinling is filled with exquisite delicacies and fine wines. I don’t have many hobbies, but eating is one of them. If you ever visit Jinling, nephew, I’m sure you wouldn’t be able to resist either,” Prince Wei said, patting Xiao Ming’s shoulder.

The two appeared cordial as they walked toward the main hall. Outside, Prince Wei ordered his personal guards to stay behind, entering the hall alone with Xiao Ming.

Once inside, Prince Wei’s expression immediately darkened. As they sat down, the atmosphere grew tense, filled with an unspoken tension.

“Nephew, Zhou Ziyu was my man. The smuggling of warhorses was done under the emperor’s tacit approval. You should release him now.”

The pleasantries outside were merely for show. When it came to matters of interest, exchanges were often direct. Prince Wei had no emotional attachment to Xiao Ming and got straight to the point.

“What! Uncle, why didn’t you say so earlier? Zhou Ziyu has already been executed,” Xiao Ming feigned surprise.

“Executed?” Prince Wei’s bulky body nearly leapt from his chair. But then he paused, his eyes narrowing as he slowly sat back down. “Well, what’s done is done. After all, ignorance is no crime. But tell me, nephew, did you find a letter on Zhou Ziyu’s person?”

Xiao Ming knew the real issue had finally come to light. He replied casually, “Ah, yes, there was a secret letter...”

Prince Wei hesitated for a moment before continuing, “So, nephew, you’ve read the contents of the letter?”

“Indeed,” Xiao Ming suddenly stood up and began pacing the room, a sly smile on his face. “Uncle, what are you prepared to offer in exchange for this letter?”

The contents of the letter were extremely sensitive for Prince Wei, involving matters that could not see the light of day. This was precisely why he had come in person, accompanied by five thousand soldiers—a clear attempt to intimidate Xiao Ming.

Although Xiao Ming was displeased, he understood that if he were to expose this matter, Prince Wei would be furious, potentially leading to a border conflict that would benefit no one.

Moreover, the contents of the letter did not concern the safety of the Great Yu Empire but rather involved Prince Wei and Prince Yan.

“An exchange?” Prince Wei’s expression relaxed slightly. “Nephew, you are indeed clever. This matter is merely a private dispute between me and Prince Yan. Besides, as members of the royal family, we should be working together.”

“While that may be true, Uncle, it’s not right for you to bribe the Huyan Tuo tribe to ambush Prince Yan’s merchant caravans in the grasslands. Those caravans carried documents bearing the emperor’s seal. And when did you become so friendly with the Huyan Tuo tribe? Three years ago, barbarian cavalry ravaged my fief but didn’t venture south at all. If this were thoroughly investigated, it would surely give the court officials plenty to write about.”

Prince Wei’s expression changed dramatically. Xiao Ming’s smug grin made him seethe with anger. He hadn’t expected Xiao Ming to be so astute, immediately identifying the true crux of the matter—the relationship with the Huyan Tuo tribe.

To purchase horses from the grasslands, Prince Wei had naturally established connections with the Huyan Tuo tribe, which involved significant bribes. Over time, due to the vast amounts of gold and silver he had provided, the Huyan Tuo tribe had grown close to him. In the letter, he even referred to the tribe’s chieftain as a brother, a level of familiarity that far exceeded the boundaries set by Emperor Xiao Wenxuan.

If this were brought to the attention of the court, officials aligned with Prince Yan would undoubtedly launch fierce attacks against him, and Emperor Xiao Wenxuan would be furious, likely punishing him severely.

Although Prince Wei was confident in the wealth and military strength of his fief, and even unafraid of the emperor's five hundred thousand imperial guards, the Great Yu Empire was in decline, and Emperor Xiao Wenxuan still held significant authority.

If the entire empire turned against him, he wouldn't be so confident.

"Nephew, let's discuss what you want in exchange. How much silver do you need? How many beauties?" Prince Wei wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Seeing this, Xiao Ming knew he had struck a nerve. He had indeed grasped Prince Wei's weakness. "I'm not interested in silver or beauties. I want one hundred thousand slaves and two million bushels of grain."

"One hundred thousand slaves?" Prince Wei was taken aback. In his memory, Xiao Ming had only ever been interested in silver and beautiful women. This request surprised him.

But after a moment's thought, he understood Xiao Ming's reasoning. With Xiao Ming's trade in soap, perfume, and other novelties, what he needed most was labor.

With slaves, Xiao Ming could build more workshops, earn more silver, and with silver, beautiful women would naturally follow.

"So, Uncle, what do you say? I have no interest in the conflict between you and Prince Yan. Your close ties with the Huyan Tuo tribe are merely a matter of familiarity. But these are enough for someone to accuse you of colluding with the enemy in court. And the events of three years ago are more than enough to fuel speculation."

One hundred thousand slaves might seem like a lot, but Xiao Ming believed it was a manageable demand for Prince Wei.

Given the wealth of Prince Wei's fief, wealthy households often kept private slaves. Moreover, Prince Wei's relationship with the Huyan Tuo tribe meant he could easily purchase large numbers of slaves from them. One hundred thousand was not an unreasonable number.

"Is that all?" Prince Wei asked hesitantly.

"That's all," Xiao Ming replied with a smile. He had kept the demand at a level that was both achievable and unlikely to provoke Prince Wei into a rage.

"Hahaha... Well, this trip wasn't in vain. In the future, nephew, if you have any requests, feel free to ask me. After all, we are neighbors," Prince Wei laughed heartily and extended his hand to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming then produced the secret letter, but suddenly tore it in half. "Uncle, it's not that I don't trust you, but the current situation leaves me no choice. The first half of the letter concerns Prince Yan, while the second half involves the barbarians. We'll each keep half. Once the one hundred thousand slaves arrive, I'll return the second half to you."

Prince Wei's expression darkened. "Nephew, don't push me too far. This shows you don't trust me."

"Three years ago, I trusted you, Uncle."

Prince Wei's face flushed with embarrassment. Three years ago, he had promised Xiao Ming military support but had delayed sending troops, merely observing from the border.

"Hmph, Xiao Ming, what do you mean by this? What if I refuse?" Prince Wei, ever the shrewd man, suddenly threatened, attempting to intimidate Xiao Ming.

"My Qingzhou army may be weak, but we are ready to fight! How things will end, however, will depend on your capabilities, Uncle. After all, my fief is poor—it's already a mess, so what's a little more chaos?" Xiao Ming's tone was firm.

Prince Wei's bulging stomach heaved rapidly for a moment before he finally slumped back into his seat. "You're ruthless!"