

I. Dynasty 79

Chapter 79: The Unknown

“Your Highness, by offending Prince Wei this time, aren’t you afraid that he will raise an army and attack you if chaos breaks out in the future?”

At the southern gate of Qingzhou, a group of officials watched as Prince Wei’s sedan chair disappeared into the distance. It was then that Qian Dafu posed the question.

“Good question. If I don’t offend Prince Wei now, does that mean he won’t attack me in the future? The world says Prince Wei is as timid as a mouse, but from this incident, it’s clear that my uncle is not only bold but also extremely shrewd. I’m afraid many have been deceived by him, including my father,” Xiao Ming replied.

“Your Highness, are you suggesting that Prince Wei has been secretly amassing power, waiting for the right moment?” Qian Dafu asked.

“I’m afraid that’s exactly the case. Over the years, Prince Wei has purchased far more warhorses than my father allowed him. He has also secretly ambushed merchant caravans from other feudal lords buying horses in the grasslands. His ambitions are not small. Moreover, his close ties with the Huyan Tuo tribe are not just about buying horses. I fear...” Xiao Ming frowned.

“Fear what?”

“This is just speculation, but never mind. We’ll take things one step at a time. The most important thing now is to focus on our own fief. The four great families must be neutered,” Xiao Ming said resolutely.

Now, he needed to fully control the military and political affairs of his fief and use slaves to accumulate enough capital for war. This was precisely why he had demanded one hundred thousand slaves from Prince Wei.

These slaves were meant to provide manual labor. While one hundred thousand might not seem like a lot, their combined labor could rival thousands of hydraulic hammers. In an era where machinery was far from widespread, these slaves were crucial for his industrial development.

As for why he didn't demand three hundred thousand, five hundred thousand, or even a million slaves, the answer was simple: he could demand them, but he couldn't afford to feed them.

Even so, he had also demanded two million bushels of grain, enough to feed the one hundred thousand slaves for half a year.

As for why he didn't impeach Prince Wei, the reason was simple: a cornered Prince Wei would vent his anger on Xiao Ming first. Moreover, even if Prince Wei were punished and imprisoned, Xiao Ming wouldn't gain any advantage from Wei's territory. Instead, it would only benefit his brothers.

Rather than that, it was better to secure some pure profit.

At the Tuo River dock, Prince Wei boarded his ship surrounded by his personal guards. He glanced back at Qingzhou City and sneered, "Xiao Ming, what I can give you, I can also take back. Just wait. I'll make you repay me tenfold."

At that moment, a young man in white robes approached Prince Wei and respectfully greeted him, "Uncle."

Seeing the young man, the ferocity on Prince Wei's face dissipated, replaced by a look of doting affection. "Yu'er, your health is weak. Why have you come out? You should be resting."

The young man smiled casually and said, "Uncle, if I don't come out for a walk, I'll grow moldy. Since we're in Qingzhou, I thought I'd take a look around the city."

"You went into Qingzhou City?" Prince Wei asked in surprise.

The young man nodded. "I also went to the industrial district outside the city, but the security there was tight, and outsiders couldn't enter easily."

Cao Yu, who was standing nearby, said, "Your Highness, that's no problem. With five thousand armored soldiers, we can easily sweep through Qingzhou City. I'll lead the men and clear the way for you!"

"General Cao, don't be reckless," the young man said sternly. "Prince Qi may be weak, but he is still a prince. Even when beating a dog, one must consider its master, let alone a prince."

Hearing this, Prince Wei looked at the young man with sorrow. "Yu'er, in my eyes, Xiao Wenxuan has never been the true emperor of the Great Yu Empire, and those princes are not the true princes. The throne rightfully belonged to your father, and you are the true prince of the Great Yu Empire."

"Uncle, the victors write history. This is the nature of the struggle for power. The true enemy of the Great Yu Empire is the barbarians. They are the most formidable enemy the Han people have faced in

thousands of years. If my father were still alive, he wouldn't want to see brothers killing each other," the young man in white advised.

"Yu'er, your thinking is still too naive. From my interactions with the Huyan Tuo tribe, it's clear that the barbarians have become a dynasty no weaker than the Great Yu Empire. But look at our empire now—feudal lords fighting among themselves, a scattered mess, with powerful families controlling the court and local clans dominating the countryside. If the Great Yu Empire cannot unite, how can we resist the barbarian cavalry?" Prince Wei declared.

After a pause, he continued, "I've thought it over, and the only way to destroy these powerful families is not through politics but through war—a complete purge."

The young man in white remained silent for a long time before finally sighing. "Uncle, your words are exactly the same as my father's. But let's keep this between us. If others hear it, they will turn against us. My father's fate is a cautionary tale."

Prince Wei gazed at the flowing river, his eyes distant, lost in thought.

As if to lighten the mood, the young man in white suddenly smiled and said, "Uncle, this Prince Qi is quite interesting. I saw many intriguing things in Qingzhou City—merchant guilds, a patent office, and armies working the fields. This Prince Qi is truly unusual."

"Unusual indeed. He just extorted one hundred thousand slaves and two million bushels of grain from me. Although my fief is wealthy, these are not insignificant amounts," Prince Wei said.

The young man's interest grew. "I didn't expect Uncle to suffer a loss at his hands. But with this exchange, we don't have to worry about the secret letter being exposed. After all, once the transaction is complete, he becomes an accomplice."

"Exactly. That's why I agreed. I even tried to intimidate him, but the boy has changed. He actually said that even though the Qingzhou army is weak, they are ready to fight. Haha, he's got spirit. I'm starting to like this kid," Prince Wei laughed heartily.

The young man in white smiled. "This Prince Qi seems different from the other princes. Perhaps he can bring us something unexpected."

Prince Wei's laughter gradually faded, and his expression turned cold. "But no matter what, he is still an obstacle in our path. For now, he is useful to us, but if the day comes when we must face him on the battlefield, we cannot show mercy."

The young man in white nodded. He looked toward Qingzhou City as the massive fleet began to move. Yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that this Prince Qi would become a formidable adversary in the future.

On the shore, a cavalryman galloped south, carrying Prince Wei's order to gather slaves. One hundred thousand slaves from various cities in Wei's fief began to converge on Jinling, boarding ships in batches and heading toward Qingzhou.

Ten days after Prince Wei's departure, the first batch of slaves and grain arrived in Qingzhou—ten thousand people and five hundred thousand bushels of grain.

As he watched the massive warships from Prince Wei's fief, Xiao Ming couldn't help but marvel. Prince Wei's naval forces were truly impressive.