

I. Dynasty 100

Chapter 100: The Scheme

“Your Highness, this man has been secretly staring at you throughout the banquet. Such disrespect is unacceptable!”

The sudden outburst caught everyone off guard. It was only then that Wang Chengchou realized what had happened. He quickly stood up and apologized, “Your Highness, my son meant no harm. It’s just that Your Highness’s beauty is unparalleled, and he was momentarily captivated.”

Princess Pingyang chuckled upon hearing this. “You certainly know how to flatter. Since everyone here is a prominent family from Qingzhou, who might you be?”

“I am Wang Chengchou, and this is my son, Wang Shijie,” Wang Chengchou replied respectfully.

The reputation of Princess Pingyang was well-known to him. In the Great Yu Empire, few dared to provoke her.

Princess Pingyang’s expression shifted slightly, and she nodded gently. “So you’re the head of the Wang family, one of Qingzhou’s great clans. Very well. Since I’m here in Qingzhou for leisure, it would be inauspicious to spill blood. Ouyang Mu, release him and let Young Master Wang return to his seat.”

As she spoke, Princess Pingyang glanced at Wang Shijie.

“Yes, Your Highness!” Ouyang Mu dared not disobey the princess’s orders.

Across from Wang Chengchou, Qin Chuanyun and his son couldn’t hide their disappointment. If the princess had been truly angered, the Wang family would have faced serious consequences.

Xiao Ming had been watching the scene unfold with interest, though he too felt a twinge of disappointment. He had hoped to use this opportunity to further weaken the Wang family’s influence.

However, Princess Pingyang’s reaction to learning about the Wang family’s status in Qingzhou had been peculiar. Her leniency toward them now made him wary.

This princess was as politically astute as any man.

The banquet continued after this minor incident.

An hour later, the banquet concluded. Xiao Ming said, “Auntie, your resting quarters in the residence have been prepared. Please retire for the night.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ve found a villa outside the city and won’t trouble you further,” Princess Pingyang suddenly announced.

“A villa outside the city? Which one? Perhaps I could visit sometime,” Xiao Ming inquired.

“Funny enough, I happened to pass by it and took a liking to it. After discussing it with the wealthy owner, I decided to stay there for a few days. It’s on an island in the middle of a lake outside the city,” Princess Pingyang explained as she walked toward the exit.

Xiao Ming nodded. “In that case, let me escort you.”

“No need. It’s late, and you should rest,” Princess Pingyang said as she boarded her carriage.

Xiao Ming maintained a polite smile, but inwardly, he was suspicious. Princess Pingyang was not following the usual script.

As the carriage slowly departed, Pang Yukun, who had been standing beside Xiao Ming, said, “Your Highness, Princess Pingyang must have come to Qingzhou with some purpose, right?”

“Indeed, and her appetite is far from small. She wants the entire glass-making technology,” Xiao Ming replied coldly.

“Although Princess Pingyang appeared cheerful during the banquet, it was clearly forced. It seems her wishes were not fulfilled,” Pang Yukun observed. “By choosing to stay elsewhere instead of the residence, she’s avoiding our surveillance.”

“My aunt is a meticulous woman. The changes in Qingzhou won’t escape her notice. What worries me is that she might collude with the Wang family and plant a thorn in my territory.”

"Your Highness has noticed it too?" Pang Yukun asked.

"Hmph, the Wang family may be a local powerhouse, but they're still of low status. My aunt is extremely proud. In Chang'an, she would punish anyone who showed her disrespect. Yet this time, she let Wang Shijie off. My influence alone wouldn't have warranted such leniency."

"I share the same thought, Your Highness. The Great Yu Empire is in turmoil, and with the barbarians halting the sale of warhorses, they're likely preparing to take advantage of the chaos. When the Emperor first ascended the throne, the barbarians launched a massive invasion. To stabilize his rule, the Emperor signed a humiliating treaty with them at the gates of Chang'an, agreeing to pay annual tributes and ceding the lands north of Cangzhou to Youzhou. Only then did the barbarians withdraw."

Pausing for a moment, Pang Yukun continued, "This time, the barbarians will likely repeat their tactics. With each cycle, they grow stronger while the Great Yu Empire grows weaker. Moreover, the barbarians have long coveted the Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun. With Youzhou and other regions already lost, they won't let go of the remaining territories. Once the natural barrier of the Great Wall is breached, their cavalry will sweep through the land unopposed."

"I understand all this, but what does it have to do with Princess Pingyang?" Xiao Ming asked.

Pang Yukun explained, "It has everything to do with her. Your fiefdom borders the Huyantuo tribe of the barbarians to the north. If you can drive out the Huyantuo and reclaim Youzhou and other regions, you can block the barbarians' path into the Central Plains. By holding these strategic locations and gaining control of the cities and populations there, you can significantly strengthen your own power. But to drive out the Huyantuo, you must first eliminate the hidden threats within your fiefdom."

"Are you suggesting it's time to deal with the local powerful families?" Xiao Ming asked.

Pang Yukun bowed. "Yes. Now that Your Highness has begun to show your capabilities, even Princess Pingyang has taken notice. The other princes will not underestimate you either. The best way for them to hinder you is to support the local powerful families, as these families have wealth, grain, and private armies—enough to pose a serious threat to you."

"But the influence of these families is still substantial. If we act now, it will be a costly battle, with heavy losses on both sides," Xiao Ming frowned. "Moreover, we need at least three months to train the new army properly."

Pang Yukun suddenly smiled. "Your Highness, have you forgotten about the Qin family? If they learn that you plan to eliminate the Wang family, how do you think they'll react?"

Xiao Ming's brow furrowed. "I understand your point, but we still need a legitimate reason to move against the Wang family. Acting without justification would be unwise."

"Your Highness, the opportunity is right before us," Pang Yukun said softly. "Wang Xuan."

"You mean..." Xiao Ming's expression shifted.

Pang Yukun nodded. "Wang Xuan is a member of the Wang family. If he were to attempt an assassination on the princess, wouldn't that give you the perfect excuse to deal with the Wang family? Moreover, the golden-armored guards by the princess's side could assist you. What's not to like?"

Xiao Ming slowly nodded. Pang Yukun certainly had a devious mind. "Once Wang Xuan attempts to assassinate the princess, it won't matter whether she believes it or not. After all, Wang Xuan is Wang Chengchou's nephew."

"There's no time to waste. The princess will likely summon the Wang father and son tonight. If Wang Xuan acts now, the princess will surely believe that the Wang family is retaliating for Ouyang Mu's humiliation of Wang Shijie during the banquet," Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming couldn't allow potential threats to remain so close to him. The local powerful families had long been a thorn in his side, and this was the perfect opportunity to deal with them.

Even if he couldn't completely eliminate the Wang family, he could at least severely weaken them.

With this in mind, he immediately summoned Wang Xuan and explained Pang Yukun's plan to him.

"Your Highness, leave this matter to me," Wang Xuan said excitedly. "Wang Chengchou, no matter how capable you are, let's see how you wriggle out of this one!"