

## I. Dynasty 101

### Chapter 101: Hidden Agendas

Wang Family Residence.

A loud slap echoed through Wang Chengchou's study.

Inside the study, Wang Shijie knelt on the floor, a bright red handprint on his right cheek.

"You fool! If it had been anyone else today, you'd already be dead! I've told you time and again not to lose yourself in women, but you've forgotten everything! With such behavior, how do you expect to achieve anything great in the future?"

Wang Chengchou's chest heaved with anger, clearly furious.

Wang Shijie clutched his face, his voice trembling. "Father, I was only thinking of the Wang family! If I could somehow win Princess Pingyang's favor, wouldn't that give our family a direct connection to her? Then we wouldn't have to kowtow to Xiao Ming anymore. Aren't you also suspicious that the Prince of Qi is planning to eliminate the powerful families of Qingzhou? If we don't find a powerful ally now, when will we?"

"Bah! Do you really think someone like you could win Princess Pingyang's favor?" Wang Chengchou snapped.

Wang Shijie was taken aback and muttered, "How do you know if you don't try..."

"Hmph, but Princess Pingyang's leniency toward you seems to carry a deeper meaning. Her visit to Qingzhou is undoubtedly about the Prince of Qi's goods, but Xiao Ming will never agree to her demands. It's possible that Princess Pingyang is looking for a local powerful family to secretly keep an eye on Qingzhou for her," Wang Chengchou speculated.

Wang Shijie's eyes lit up with excitement. "Father, are you saying Princess Pingyang has taken an interest in our Wang family?"

"I can't say for sure, but if she were to choose, our Wang family would undoubtedly be the most suitable. Moreover, Princess Pingyang has always been close to Prince Wei. If Prince Wei ever needs us, our Wang family could coordinate with him to keep the Prince of Qi in check," Wang Chengchou explained.

"Exactly! Three years ago, Prince Wei hinted that we should take advantage of the barbarian chaos to kill Xiao Ming. It's clear that Prince Wei has designs on Qingzhou. It's a shame that Xiao Ming was too cowardly and fled back to Chang'an. Otherwise, I would have led the men to do it myself," Wang Shijie said with a sinister grin.

"Enough of this reckless talk!" Wang Chengchou's expression turned grave. He nervously stepped outside, looked around to ensure no one was listening, and then returned to the room. "Whether that person was sent by Prince Wei or not is now impossible to prove. We must never speak of this again. If word reaches the Prince of Qi, our Wang family will be utterly destroyed."

Wang Shijie came to his senses, a cold sweat breaking out on his back, and he quickly fell silent.

Wang Chengchou sighed. "Let's hope Princess Pingyang summons us tonight. With her as our ally, our Wang family will truly be secure."

Meanwhile, at the Plum Blossom Villa outside Qingzhou City, Princess Pingyang was instructing Ouyang Mu to summon the Wang father and son.

“Your Highness, why summon the Wang father and son? They are utterly uncouth,” Ouyang Mu said disdainfully.

Princess Pingyang calmly combed her hair and replied, “What do you know? Haven’t you noticed the changes in Qingzhou during our journey? Not to mention the fully armored soldiers at the city gates, even the common people outside the city seem more prosperous than elsewhere. In three to five years, even Prince Wei won’t be able to underestimate Xiao Ming. If we don’t plant a pawn here now, when will we?”

Ouyang Mu frowned. “But why choose the Wang family?”

“It’s simple. During the banquet, Xiao Ming seemed almost gleeful about the Wang family’s predicament, and the other powerful families reacted similarly. This suggests that the Wang family is struggling. That makes them easier to control.”

Ouyang Mu nodded. “If Prince Wei learns of Your Highness’s efforts on his behalf, I wonder how he will repay you.”

“This time, I’m not doing this for Prince Wei. My nephew Xiao Ming is quite intriguing. The more he refuses to share his crafts, the more interested I become. By having the Wang family keep an eye on things, we might find opportunities in the future,” Princess Pingyang said with a sly smile. Xiao Ming’s offer of a high-level membership hadn’t satisfied her appetite.

Ouyang Mu nodded again. The Wang family owned many estates outside the city. He only needed to contact their people and have them summon the Wang father and son.

As Ouyang Mu left, Princess Pingyang turned to gaze at the lotus pond outside. The setting sun painted the lake's surface red, and the tips of the lotus leaves seemed to be brushed with rouge.

As someone deeply entrenched in the political center of the Great Yu Empire, she was acutely sensitive to any shifts in power. Her visit to Qingzhou was far from just about Xiao Ming's crafts.

She had also come to assess the situation. What she had seen so far had given her a new perspective on Xiao Ming and allowed her to gauge his potential in the struggle for the throne.

She knew that her status and wealth were entirely dependent on Emperor Xiao Wenxuan. Once the throne changed hands, everything she had could vanish. Therefore, she couldn't afford to stay neutral in the princes' power struggles. Choosing the wrong side would lead to a miserable future.

After all, no amount of wealth could protect her from the whims of an emperor.

It was for this reason that she navigated carefully among the princes. After careful consideration, she had already chosen her side. Planting a pawn in Xiao Ming's fiefdom was part of her plan.

“Xiao Ming, Xiao Ming, don’t blame your aunt for being ruthless. Blame your lack of a powerful maternal family,” Princess Pingyang murmured to herself. In her eyes, Xiao Ming’s fate was already sealed—he would become a sacrificial pawn in the princes’ power struggle, just like Prince Ning before him.

As she lost herself in thought, a sudden “whoosh” broke the silence. A cold breeze brushed past her ear, and an arrow embedded itself in the pillar of her room.

The villa was built by the water, and her room overlooked the lake. She looked in the direction the arrow had come from and saw a dozen black-clad figures emerging from the water, armed with crossbows.

“Assassins!” Princess Pingyang’s face turned pale with fear.

She had never experienced such terror before and screamed at the top of her lungs.

The golden-armored guards quickly noticed the black-clad figures in the water. Dozens of archers rushed over and began firing arrows into the lake.

The assassins, seeing the guards closing in, fired another volley of arrows before diving back into the water and disappearing.

The guards then noticed hollow reed tubes sticking out of the water. The assassins had used these to breathe while sneaking in.

No wonder they hadn't been detected earlier.

"After them!" one of the golden-armored guards shouted, leading a group in pursuit.

The remaining guards quickly formed a protective circle around Princess Pingyang.

Wang Xuan retreated after the initial attack, as planned. Seeing the golden-armored guards giving chase, he led his men toward Qingzhou City.

Outside the city, Lu Fei was waiting with a cavalry unit. Once Wang Xuan and his men reached the city, Lu Fei would capture them.

After swimming to the shore, Wang Xuan sprinted toward Qingzhou City, with the golden-armored guards hot on his heels.

As the city came into view, the golden-armored guards spotted a group of cavalry approaching. The leader, a burly general, called out, "Aren't you Princess Pingyang's guards? What are you doing here?"