

I. Dynasty 103

Chapter 103: Turning the Tables

The next day, Qingzhou Prison.

Xiao Ming personally escorted Princess Pingyang to interrogate the Wang father and son.

At this point, Xiao Ming had Lu Fei bring Wang Xuan out of the prison to confront the Wang family.

In the Qingzhou government office, Xiao Ming sat in the main seat, while Princess Pingyang sat to the side.

“Wang Chengchou, Wang Shijie, do you two know your crimes?” In the government office, Wang Shijie and his father knelt on the ground alongside Wang Xuan.

Wang Chengchou was still in shock from seeing Wang Xuan. He snapped out of it and looked at Xiao Ming. “Your Highness, what crime has this commoner committed?”

“Your Highness, please understand, my father and I are truly innocent!” Wang Shijie kowtowed repeatedly. By now, they both knew they had been implicated in Wang Xuan’s assassination attempt on Princess Pingyang.

At this point, Wang Chengchou understood. Xiao Ming had finally made his move against the Wang family. He inwardly laughed bitterly, realizing that Princess Pingyang's arrival had become a death sentence for their family.

"You both claim to be innocent. Then do you recognize this man?" Princess Pingyang asked sternly.

Wang Chengchou looked at Wang Xuan, who had clearly been tortured. Knowing he couldn't deny the facts, he said, "I recognize him. This man is Wang Xuan, my nephew. However, three months ago, he violated Qingzhou's laws, and I personally had him beaten to death. I have no idea how he's still alive."

As he said this, Wang Chengchou glanced at Xiao Ming.

"Prince of Qi, is this true?" Princess Pingyang asked.

Xiao Ming nodded. "Indeed, Master Wang once claimed that Wang Xuan was responsible for the Wang family's illegal hoarding of plow oxen. Out of respect for the Wang family's status as a local powerhouse, I allowed him to handle the matter himself. As for how Master Wang dealt with it, I'm not entirely clear."

Princess Pingyang, having witnessed countless schemes and intrigues in Chang'an, knew that Wang Xuan, being an unpopular member of the Wang family, wouldn't have dared to hoard plow oxen on his own.

It was clear that Wang Xuan had been a scapegoat, and Wang Chengchou's use of him to take the blame was an attempt to deceive Xiao Ming.

If this had happened under another prince, Wang Chengchou would have been punished immediately. However, Xiao Ming had let it slide, indicating that he had his own concerns. This showed just how bold the Wang family had become in Qingzhou.

Initially, Princess Pingyang hadn't believed that the Wang family would do such a thing. But now, her thoughts were shifting. If a local powerful family could so brazenly disrespect a prince, how would they treat her, a princess?

After a moment of contemplation, Princess Pingyang said sharply, "You don't know why he's still alive? Do you think I know? Hmph! A mere local family dares to act so brazenly. Do you think the Great Yu imperial family is so easy to bully? Xiao Ming, what is the punishment for attempting to assassinate me?"

"If proven true, the punishment is the execution of the entire family and the extermination of their nine clans," Xiao Ming said softly.

Wang Chengchou was horrified. His earlier statement had been directed at Xiao Ming, not Princess Pingyang. He hurriedly said, "Your Highness, I truly don't know how Wang Xuan is still alive. Moreover, Wang Xuan is the illegitimate son of my younger brother and a lowly woman. If I wanted to assassinate you, why would I send him? And what benefit would my family gain from assassinating you? Please, Your Highness, see through this deception and don't be used by others."

At this moment, Wang Xuan, lying on the ground, coughed violently and said hoarsely, "Your Highness, I take full responsibility for my actions. This matter has nothing to do with the Wang family. It was the Prince of Qi who ordered me to do it, all to eliminate the Wang family."

Xiao Ming's expression changed dramatically. "Nonsense! How could I order you to assassinate my aunt?"

Wang Xuan chuckled weakly. “Your Highness, although I’m not favored in the Wang family, I’m still a member. Why would I harm my own family? I’ve endured the torture in prison just to expose you in front of Princess Pingyang and reveal your true nature.”

“You...” Xiao Ming pointed at Wang Xuan, furious. “Lu Fei, where are you?”

“Here, Your Highness!” Lu Fei responded.

“Torture him until he tells the truth!” Xiao Ming shouted, visibly enraged.

This sudden turn of events left Princess Pingyang momentarily stunned. Ouyang Mu also looked puzzled, while Wang Chengchou’s face turned ashen.

“I’ve long heard of Master Wang’s cunning. This act of self-sacrifice is indeed impressive,” Princess Pingyang said after a brief moment of confusion, as if she had suddenly understood everything.

She walked up to the Wang father and son and said, “Although I reside in Chang’an, I’ve heard about the situation in Qingzhou. Over the past five years, your Wang family, relying on your status as a local powerhouse, has looked down on the Prince of Qi. Now that you see him working diligently to improve Qingzhou, you fear he will eventually settle accounts with your family. So, taking advantage of my visit, you staged this act of self-sacrifice to frame the Prince of Qi, hoping the Emperor would strip him of his title, allowing your family to remain safe. Am I right?”

“Your Highness, that’s not true! Wang Xuan is lying!” Wang Chengchou cried out desperately.

When Wang Xuan accused the Prince of Qi, Wang Chengchou knew it was over. If Wang Xuan had insisted that the Wang family was behind the assassination, Princess Pingyang might have suspected that Xiao Ming was secretly orchestrating things.

But now that Wang Xuan was accusing the Prince of Qi, Princess Pingyang’s sharp mind would overanalyze the situation and ultimately conclude that the Wang family was behind it.

“Hmph, you say black is white and white is black. Then tell me, which of Wang Xuan’s words are true, and which are false?” Princess Pingyang snorted.

Wang Shijie was so frightened that his limbs went weak. If convicted, he would face certain death. He shouted, “Your Highness, Wang Xuan is telling the truth! This matter has nothing to do with our family!”

“Shut up!” Wang Chengchou, both shocked and furious, pushed Wang Shijie to the ground.

Wang Shijie, now desperate, shouted at his father, “Father, we didn’t do this! It must be the Prince of Qi framing us! Wang Xuan is right. He’s still a member of the Wang family. He wouldn’t harm us.”

A faint smile appeared on Xiao Ming’s lips. There was no need to say more.

Ouyang Mu then said to Princess Pingyang, "Your Highness, it's clear that the Wang father and son are lying. How could someone who was nearly beaten to death by Wang Chengchou still speak in their defense? The only explanation is that Wang Xuan has always been a pawn of the Wang family. He and the father and son are in cahoots, all to frame the Prince of Qi."

Princess Pingyang nodded and turned to Xiao Ming. "Prince of Qi, what do you think?"

"Auntie, if something were to happen to you in my fiefdom, regardless of who was responsible, given Father's temperament, I would likely be stripped of my title. Although I may be slow-witted, I'm not foolish enough to do something so self-destructive," Xiao Ming said calmly. "Besides, what would I gain from assassinating you?"

"Auntie believes you," Princess Pingyang said, turning to the Wang father and son. "In that case, I'll leave the Wang family to you to deal with. Ouyang Mu, assist the Prince of Qi."

"Thank you, Auntie," Xiao Ming said, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Wang Chengchou and Wang Shijie.

Wang Shijie's earlier words had betrayed the Wang family's true thoughts. There was no room for reconciliation now. After months of careful planning, it was finally time for blood to be shed.