

## I. Dynasty 113

### Chapter 113: The Spark Ignites

At dawn, the first rays of sunlight pierced through the morning clouds and shone on the oil-paper windows of the Prince of Qi's residence. The servants in the residence were already bustling about.

Xiao Ming, who had barely slept all night, rose early. Li San was busy arranging the servants who would accompany Xiao Ming to the banquet.

For a spring outing, a prince naturally had to bring many servants. Among these servants, Li San had secretly placed numerous secret guards. In addition to Lu Fei's thirty elite soldiers, there were over twenty secret guards disguised as servants to ensure Xiao Ming's safety.

The Prince of Qi's residence appeared calm, but Lu Fei and Pang Yukun were already hard at work. The Qingzhou army had left the city the previous night and ambushed in the grove.

Lu Fei was also planning how to ensure the Qingzhou cavalry could quickly come to their aid. Ancient battles were akin to street brawls, often lasting a long time.

As long as Xiao Ming wasn't immediately captured by the powerful families, the Qingzhou army could buy plenty of time.

By noon, Xiao Ming set out, surrounded by servants.

On the grassland south of the lotus pond, Qin Chuanyun had already had his servants prepare the ingredients needed for the banquet, waiting for everyone to arrive.

When Xiao Ming arrived, Qin Chuanyun, Sun Yuanzhi, and the others were already present. Many of the powerful families sat on the grass, chatting.

“Your Highness, you’ve finally arrived,” Qin Chuanyun said obsequiously as he approached Xiao Ming.

The other powerful families stood up and bowed in greeting.

Led by Qin Chuanyun to the main seat, Xiao Ming returned the greetings and said, “Please, everyone, take your seats.”

Pang Yukun sat to Xiao Ming’s left and right, while thirty heavily armored guards stood on either side.

Sun Yuanzhi glanced at the fully armored Qingzhou soldiers and smiled. “Your Highness, today’s banquet is meant to reconcile us with Your Highness. After this, we will disband our private armies and return the land. Having these soldiers here somewhat ruins the mood.”

Before Xiao Ming could respond, Lu Fei said, “Master Sun, you worry too much. Even when you travel, you bring your own guards. His Highness, a prince of noble birth, traveling with only thirty guards is already extremely modest.”

“Captain Lu is right,” Qin Chuanyun flattered. “His Highness is a prince of the imperial family. When Her Highness the Princess traveled recently, she had over a thousand guards. There’s no need to make a fuss over this. Master Sun, you’re overthinking it.”

Sun Yuanzhi's expression was haughty. In his view, since Xiao Ming had arrived, he had already fallen into his trap. That was why he dared to speak so disrespectfully.

At this moment, he felt no need to grovel. He had his own plans.

The Sun and Wang families had been allied through marriage for generations. The Wang family's secret dealings were all known to the Sun family, and they had participated in every one. Because of this, Sun Yuanzhi knew that if Xiao Ming uncovered the Wang family's crimes, the Sun family would also be doomed.

The other powerful families he had coerced into this plot were unaware that they were merely pawns in Sun Yuanzhi's game. The Sun family had made thorough preparations. If this plan succeeded, all would be well. If it failed, they would flee to the grasslands. By then, not even Xiao Ming—or even the Emperor—could touch them.

These were Wang Chengchou's original plans. Sun Yuanzhi simply hadn't expected that the Sun family would be the ones to carry them out.

After a moment of contemplation, Sun Yuanzhi made up his mind. He said, "It's not that I'm overthinking things. It's just that Your Highness has always been wary of us. Otherwise, why would the Wang family suddenly be destroyed? Although I'm not a member of the Wang family, I know Wang Chengchou well. He would never dare to assassinate the princess. Your Highness, you know the truth better than I do."

With a cold laugh, Sun Yuanzhi continued, "Using the Wang family incident, Your Highness immediately issued decrees to weaken us, the powerful families of Qingzhou. You couldn't wait, which shows how deeply you despise us."

Instantly, the grassland fell into silence. Everyone's breathing seemed as loud as thunder.

Qin Chuanyun's face turned pale, and his body trembled slightly. He said, "Sun Yuanzhi, what do you mean by this? You invited His Highness to this banquet. Why are you speaking so disrespectfully?"

"Qin Chuanyun, you've disgraced us, the powerful families of Qingzhou. Tell me, in the entire Great Yu Empire, where are the powerful families not treated as honored guests by the princes? Yet you willingly degrade yourself to the level of commoners, no better than pigs or dogs. You've shamed all of us," Sun Yuanzhi said, pointing at Qin Chuanyun without any courtesy.

Wei Hong angrily said, "Sun Yuanzhi, what do you mean by this? Are you here to cause trouble? This is a grave disrespect. Although we've disbanded our private armies and returned the land, we're conducting our business openly and honestly. What's shameful about that?"

"That's right. What's shameful about it?"

"It's a disgrace, a humiliation to the powerful families."

" ... "

As soon as Wei Hong finished speaking, the powerful families led by Sun Yuanzhi and those led by Qin Chuanyun began to argue, and the scene quickly descended into chaos.

“Everyone, stop arguing. Let Master Sun finish what he has to say,” Xiao Ming suddenly said.

Sun Yuanzhi was impatient, eager to embarrass Xiao Ming as soon as he arrived.

“Your Highness, my meaning is simple. Please revoke your decrees and clear the Wang family’s name,” Sun Yuanzhi said, a strange smile playing on his lips.

“What a fine way to clear the Wang family’s name. If I admit to this, will you rush to Chang’an to report me, ensuring I’m punished and stripped of my title as prince?” Xiao Ming said calmly.

“Exactly. The title of prince is not for the unworthy. Your Highness is clearly unworthy, as evidenced by the opposition of so many powerful families. Even Qin Chuanyun is acting under duress. Those who have virtue gain support; those who lack it lose it. Your Highness, can’t you see that now?”

“Ha ha ha...” Xiao Ming suddenly laughed. “What a fine saying—‘those who have virtue gain support; those who lack it lose it.’ Master Sun, why don’t you ask the common people who has more virtue?”

“What do those lowly commoners know? My virtue is the virtue of the powerful families. This empire belongs to the powerful families. Our interests come first, and you, Xiao Ming, are going against the tide. Since you refuse to repent, I have no choice but to seek justice for us.”

With that, Sun Yuanzhi suddenly whistled. From the grove, the sound of charging soldiers erupted.

Lu Fei's expression changed drastically, and he immediately led the thirty guards to protect Xiao Ming.

At the same time, screams erupted from the banquet.

Sun Yuanzhi was shocked. The moment the whistle sounded, the servants at the banquet suddenly turned violent, killing over a dozen of the powerful families who had come with him.

Several of them charged straight at him.

"Protect me!" Sun Yuanzhi shouted, and a dozen servants rushed forward.

Qin Chuanyun was frozen in fear, staring blankly to the north. From the grove, more people emerged, all clad in silver armor, radiating killing intent.