

I. Dynasty 126

Chapter 126: Schemes

“Consort Zhen, yesterday in court, many ministers impeached Prince Qi, seemingly quite dissatisfied with his actions in Qingzhou.”

As they strolled leisurely through the garden, Empress Zhao spoke to Consort Zhen.

The imperial harem was a place where news traveled fast, and the concubines close to her had already informed her of this matter.

Not only were Qingzhou’s policies vastly different from those of the Great Yu Empire, but recently, rumors of Xiao Ming targeting and massacring local noble families had also been spreading like wildfire.

What kind of place was the Great Yu Empire? It was a land where aristocratic families had ruled for thousands of years, deeply entrenched in the empire. Xiao Ming’s actions had greatly displeased other noble families.

Moreover, the Wang and Sun families of Qingzhou had been active in Chang’an for some time, and some court officials had accepted bribes from the Wang family. Naturally, they now sought to speak out on behalf of the Wang family.

After all, Prince Qi was far away in Qingzhou, and even if they criticized him openly in Chang’an, there was little he could do about it.

"I have also heard about this matter. However, the Wang family attempted to assassinate the princess, and the Sun family later plotted a rebellion. Ming'er likely had no choice but to act," Consort Zhen defended Xiao Ming.

Empress Zhao and Consort Zhen walked ahead alone. Empress Zhao glanced back at the concubines following them, ensuring they were far enough away, and then said in a serious tone, "That's just Prince Qi's side of the story. But the ministers in court are skilled at turning black into white and white into black. Some are saying that Prince Qi framed the Wang family to eliminate the noble clans."

"Your Majesty, the ministers who say such things are truly malicious. They are slandering my Ming'er. I beg Your Majesty to stand up for Prince Qi," Consort Zhen's face turned pale, and she moved to bow to Empress Zhao.

Empress Zhao quickly stopped her, her expression gentle. "Sister, the ministers wouldn't speak without reason. There must be someone behind this. After Princess Pingyang detoured to Jinling City, she sent someone to Chang'an in haste. Only then did the impeachment of Prince Qi begin."

"Princess Pingyang? King Wei?" A chill ran down Consort Zhen's spine. "Where has my Ming'er offended them?"

Both of these individuals held immense power and enjoyed the Emperor's favor. However, Empress Zhao had always been wary of King Wei and Princess Pingyang.

In her eyes, King Wei and Princess Pingyang were not people she could control, especially now that the two were growing closer.

In Chang'an, the two had not aligned themselves with any prince, and her attempts to win them over had all failed. If the two were to side with her, the Crown Prince's position would be truly secure.

But the problem was this: in the struggle for power, there were only enemies and allies, no neutral parties. Since she couldn't figure out these two, she remained cautious. Qingzhou bordered King Wei's fiefdom, making it the perfect place to keep King Wei in check.

"Who can say?" Empress Zhao said casually. "Now that King Wei is wealthy and powerful, with a strong army, perhaps he has other ambitions."

At this point, she suddenly stopped. "You should just take my words as they are and not spread them. I was merely speaking offhand. But don't worry, the Crown Prince has spoken up for Prince Qi in court."

Consort Zhen breathed a slight sigh of relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty, and the Crown Prince."

"There's no need for such formalities. The Crown Prince has always held Prince Qi in high regard. When they were in Chang'an, they got along well. After all, they are brothers and should help each other," Empress Zhao chuckled.

Consort Zhen, though without power or influence, had managed to maintain her status in the palace through her intelligence.

From the beginning, she had understood Empress Zhao's intentions: to pressure her into aligning with the Crown Prince and ensuring Xiao Ming's loyalty.

But now, she had little choice. When Xiao Ming had been indulging in pleasure and showing no ambition, she hadn't worried much about him. But now, with Xiao Ming's actions in Qingzhou making waves in Chang'an, she couldn't sit still.

She had always loved reading and knew that in the rise and fall of dynasties, few princes survived. Those who did were often powerless and insignificant.

Previously, she had hoped Xiao Ming would improve himself, but not to become a powerful feudal lord. She had wanted him to live a peaceful and stable life.

But now, everything was moving in an unpredictable direction. She had never been fond of political schemes, but for Xiao Ming's sake, she had no choice but to act in Chang'an.

She saw things clearly now. Although the Emperor was somewhat dissatisfied with the Crown Prince, the Crown Prince's position remained secure, especially with the support of Empress Zhao's father, Prince Zhao.

For now, the Crown Prince's position was stable, and what Xiao Ming needed most was time. Aligning with the Crown Prince would give him a powerful ally in Chang'an, someone who could shield him from slander and schemes.

Empress Zhao's earlier mention of the Crown Prince defending Xiao Ming in court was a clear hint.

“Your Majesty is absolutely right. The Crown Prince and Ming’er are as close as brothers and should support each other,” Consort Zhen said slowly.

Empress Zhao’s eyes sparkled with satisfaction. Consort Zhen had never explicitly supported the Crown Prince, but now, with Prince Qi under attack in court, this was her opportunity.

The Crown Prince, following her instructions, had led his faction in defending Xiao Ming in court.

And now, she had reaped the rewards.

She pressed on, “Prince Qi is no longer a child. It’s time for him to marry. I have a niece named Zhao Rong’er. I’ll bring her to the palace soon. If you find her suitable, I’ll bring it up with the Emperor. If he agrees, it will be a joyous occasion.”

“That’s true. I have been worried about Ming’er’s marriage. Thank you, Your Majesty, for your thoughtful consideration. On behalf of Ming’er, I thank you,” Consort Zhen smiled, though inwardly she was reluctant. But at this point, she had no other choice.

The marriages of princes were nothing more than political alliances, a fact Consort Zhen understood well. Xiao Ming’s wife would inevitably be a woman from a prominent family.

Empress Zhao sought to further bind Xiao Ming to her through marriage, but the Emperor’s thoughts on the matter remained unknown.

With a sigh, Consort Zhen realized that, whether she and her son wanted it or not, they were now entangled in the power struggles of the Great Yu Empire.

As they walked, a voice suddenly called out from nearby, "The Emperor approaches!"

The concubines turned and bowed in the direction of the voice. Xiao Wenxuan was walking toward them.

"Empress, Consort, what are you discussing so cheerfully?" Xiao Wenxuan seemed to be in a good mood, his face beaming with a smile.

Empress Zhao replied, "Your Majesty, Consort Zhen and I were just discussing selecting a consort for Prince Qi."

"Selecting a consort for Prince Qi?" Xiao Wenxuan's expression remained unchanged, but a flicker of something passed through his eyes. "So, you already have someone in mind?"

"Indeed. My niece, Zhao Rong'er, is well-educated and quite beautiful. I think she would be a good match for Prince Qi," Empress Zhao said.

Xiao Wenxuan nodded thoughtfully. "I have met Zhao Rong'er. She is indeed a fine young lady. But there's no need to rush Prince Qi's marriage. I have my own plans."