

I. Dynasty 215

Chapter 215: Aunt and Nephew Reconcile

“Seventh Brother!”

A gentle breeze stirred the beaded curtains as Princess Xiangcheng’s crisp voice called out to him.

Xiao Ming finally tore his gaze away from the veiled woman and turned to his sister. “You seem in high spirits, little sister. Though I suppose this year’s gathering must have disappointed you—no dashing talents to catch your eye.”

Zhu Yushu and the other two immediately protested, “Your Highness, are we not talented young men?”

Qin Rui and Du Boyuan nodded vigorously.

Their attention, however, wasn’t on Princess Pingyang—but entirely fixed on Princess Xiangcheng, their expressions oozing flattery.

Princess Xiangcheng had heard plenty about the trio’s notorious reputations in Chang’an. Despite their victory today, her disdain for them remained unchanged.

Ignoring them, she simply held out her hand to Xiao Ming.

“What?” Xiao Ming blinked.

Princess Pingyang laughed. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten her habits? An outstretched hand means only one thing—gifts. You did bring plenty of Qingzhou specialties to Chang’an, didn’t you? Your aunt is quite curious herself.”

Vampires, the lot of them. Xiao Ming sighed inwardly but kept his smile. “No need to worry, Aunt. I’ve brought gifts for you as well—and of course, little sister won’t be left out.”

“I knew Seventh Brother wouldn’t forget me!” Princess Xiangcheng beamed. “Where are they?”

“You’ll have to wait a couple of days. I’ll send someone to deliver them.” Xiao Ming had no intention of letting her pick through his goods—she’d walk off with the best items.

Princess Xiangcheng pouted but finally nodded. “Fine. Let’s go boating then.”

Zhu Yushu and the others, barely containing their excitement, hurriedly agreed.

As the four stepped past the beaded curtains, Princess Pingyang rose. The veiled woman exchanged a few words with her before turning to leave.

Xiao Ming had only glimpsed half her face earlier—but even that was breathtakingly beautiful.

Scanning the gathering, he noticed neither Lü Luo nor Zi Wan. They must have been eliminated in the second round.

Watching the veiled figure depart, Princess Xiangcheng giggled. "Seventh Brother, that was Fei Yue'er."

"That was Fei Yue'er?" Xiao Ming stared at the retreating silhouette.

Princess Xiangcheng nodded. "You're a lucky man. She's a real beauty."

"Seventh Brother isn't so shallow."

Xiao Ming craned his neck for one last look at Fei Yue'er's graceful figure.

Princess Xiangcheng rolled her eyes and boarded the boat without another word.

Glancing at the ornate vessel, Xiao Ming suddenly lost interest. His goal was accomplished—though he'd only seen half her face, his mind was now at ease.

But since Princess Pingyang wanted to speak privately, he couldn't refuse.

The gathering had selected four scholars and four noblewomen—plus Princess Xiangcheng tagging along—making ten in total for the lake cruise. The chosen ladies all wore light veils, their refined manners marking them as daughters of elite families.

In the Great Yu Empire, commoners rarely received education—let alone women. True talent belonged to the wealthy.

Zhu Yushu and the others, barely containing their excitement, scrambled onto the boat. Xiao Ming followed at a leisurely pace.

As the boat glided across the lake, the trio swarmed around Princess Xiangcheng, competing to pour her tea.

Meanwhile, Princess Pingyang summoned Xiao Ming to the bow.

“Prince of Qi, it’s been over half a year since we last met in Qingzhou. I never imagined you’d shake Chang’an so soon—it seems I underestimated you.”

Dressed in resplendent peony-patterned robes, Princess Pingyang exuded regal elegance.

“You flatter me, Aunt. It was merely luck.”

Xiao Ming’s humility masked his unease. He had manipulated her during the Wang family incident.

Princess Pingyang snorted. “Luck? Hardly. Your schemes are meticulous—even I might have been used. I’ve pondered the Qingzhou affair often, but with no proof, I’ll say no more.”

Xiao Ming’s stomach dropped. Her bringing this up now surely preceded a demand—a classic negotiation tactic.

Without evidence, this was merely pressure.

“How could you think such a thing, Aunt? I’ve always respected you deeply.”

Princess Pingyang turned, her smile knowing. “Enough. That act works on others, not me. My nephews have exploited me often enough—but true or not, I’ll let it pass. You are family, after all.”

Xiao Ming stiffened. What game was she playing?

After a pause, she continued, “When you were in distant Qingzhou, I couldn’t protect you—not from lack of care, but distance. Don’t resent me for that.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Xiao Ming remained guarded.

He frowned. Princess Pingyang was sharp—close to Emperor Xiao Wenzuan, her actions always aligned with his. She must have learned of Xiao Ming’s rising importance.

This gathering was likely her olive branch. The Wang Chengchou incident in Qingzhou had terrified her—had Xiao Ming held a grudge, she’d be in danger.

With his newfound status, the shrewd princess was diversifying her bets.

She got along well with the other princes. Having once dismissed Xiao Ming, she now adjusted her approach.

Reviewing today’s events—her favoritism toward him, even inviting Fei Yue’er—it all fit.

Sure enough, Princess Pingyang said, “Your father has proposed to the Fei family on your behalf. Though I can’t intervene, I could arrange for you to see Fei Yue’er. I sent word summoning you, only to learn you’d already come. I worried you might miss the gathering—needlessly, it seems.”

Xiao Ming welcomed her peace offering.

Right now, he needed growth—not conflict. “Your thoughtfulness moves me, Aunt. I’m deeply grateful.”

“Think nothing of it. We’re of the same blood—no need for such formality.”

Princess Pingyang's serene smile confirmed her message had been received.

Standing at the bow, aunt and nephew chatted a while longer before rejoining the others.

The afternoon passed lazily on the boat. For once, Xiao Ming relaxed, soaking in the autumn beauty of Qujiang Lake.

By evening, the party dispersed ashore, each going their separate ways.