

## I. Dynasty 219

### Chapter 219: The Prince of Shu Rebuked

Chengguang Hall faced south, towering over Chang'an with an unobstructed view of the city below.

Following Xiao Ming's instructions, Emperor Xiao Wenzuan raised the monocular telescope to his eye. Instantly, the distant palace gates appeared startlingly close.

The Emperor jerked back in alarm, lowering the device. "What sorcery is this?"

Xiao Ming wasn't surprised—Niu Ben and Lu Fei had reacted similarly. Smiling, he explained, "Father need not fear. This is simply the telescope's marvel—no dark arts involved. It works through two specially shaped glass lenses."

"Two pieces of glass?" The Emperor steadied himself. Even as ruler of the realm, such wonders still amazed him.

Prepared for this, Xiao Ming dismantled a second telescope, extracting the lenses. "Observe, Father."

As Xiao Ming aligned the lenses, the Emperor saw the same magnifying effect recreated.

His tension melted into fascination. Raising the telescope again, he scanned Chang'an—the palace gates, ministerial offices, even pedestrians on Vermilion Bird Avenue appeared crisp and clear.

“Astounding! In warfare, this could provide critical foresight!”

“Precisely, Father. At Cangzhou, these allowed me to spot barbarian movements long before they saw us.”

Their exchange left the entire court straining for a glimpse. The military officials grew particularly restless upon hearing its tactical value.

Luo Quan, who’d learned of telescopes from his son, urgently requested, “Your Majesty, might this subject examine it?”

Flushed with pride over Xiao Ming’s gift, the Emperor readily shared. “Come! All witness the Prince of Qi’s ingenuity!”

Officials took turns gasping at the device. Even the princes swallowed their pride to look—emerging with conflicted expressions. The Prince of Shu’s envy burned hottest.

After the demonstration, the Emperor circled the glass sculpture once more before returning to his throne, thoroughly pleased.

“Prince of Qi, these gifts delight me. You’ve matured remarkably—but where did you learn such wonders?”

Xiao Ming had prepared for this inevitable question. “Years ago, a shipwrecked missionary from the ‘Great Western Land’ reached my territory. He provided books and taught me these arts.”

“Indeed? Why did Pang Yukun never mention this?”

“With powerful clans dominating Qingzhou then, I kept his presence secret. His knowledge proved invaluable for eventually suppressing those families.”

The Prince of Shu interjected skeptically, “Where is this missionary now?”

“His injuries were grave. He passed within a year.”

“Conveniently dead with no witnesses,” the Prince sneered.

The Emperor, initially intrigued, now glowered. “Prince of Shu! Do you confess your crimes?”

The Prince stiffened. “What crimes, Father?”

Slam! The Emperor rose in fury. “My investigators confirm you blocked saltpeter mines! While Qi defended Cangzhou, you jeopardized the empire for petty schemes! Shall I strip your feudal title?”

“Father!” The Prince dropped to his knees, shooting desperate glances at the Third Prince.

The Third Prince cursed his brother's stupidity—opposing Xiao Ming during the crisis was madness. But blood compelled him to intervene.

"Father, while reckless, the Prince acted on reports of saltpeter smuggling to barbarians. His intentions weren't malicious."

"Yes! Exactly!" The Prince grasped this lifeline.

Unlike hereditary non-imperial fiefs, royal princes could have territories confiscated for misconduct. The threat was real—lesser princes held mere counties.

The Emperor's anger chilled the hall. "Third Prince, more excuses?"

"Sire, the reports exist." The Third Prince's back grew damp with sweat. Few warranted such risks.

After a tense pause, the Emperor decreed, "Regardless, the Prince forfeits saltpeter oversight. Minister Qin Chengming!"

A red-robed official stepped forward. "Your servant attends."

“The Court of Imperial Treasury now controls all saltpeter mines. Monthly distribution requires my approval. With cannons crucial against barbarians, this resource is paramount.”

“Father is wise!” Xiao Ming rejoiced inwardly. The Prince of Shu’s self-destruction had solved his saltpeter crisis.

Yet he recognized the Emperor’s shrewdness—controlling gunpowder ingredients tightened his grip on regional powers.

With major affairs addressed (Cangzhou’s victory dwarfing routine matters), Xiao Ming seized the moment.

“Father, I must return to Qingzhou in two days—unable to attend the military tournament.”

The tournament’s flashy drills would either expose Qingzhou’s capabilities or invite sabotage. With the Blood Wolf Tribe now in Youzhou, every day counted—he needed to oversee new defensive walls personally.