

I. Dynasty 399

Chapter 399: The Test

A giant hot air balloon slowly rose above the palace.

Standing on the balloon, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan relaxed as he looked through a telescope over Chang'an — like a fierce tiger patrolling his territory.

"Father, if you buy this balloon, you won't regret it. It can scout and watch over the whole city from high above. And if there's danger, you can escape by balloon. One hundred thousand taels is really cheap," Xiao Ming kept persuading.

Xiao Wenxuan had already been tempted, and now Xiao Ming's words made him more determined.

"You'll return to Chang'an after your wedding. Then I'll send you the silver. But you must train operators to control the balloon," the Emperor said.

"Father, you can rest easy about that," Xiao Ming smiled secretly. "By the way, does the army need balloons?"

"Of course. Give one to my left and right guards — they're my personal protectors. Also, how much does each musket cost?" Xiao Wenxuan asked directly, raising all questions at once.

"The muskets are cheap — one hundred taels each," Xiao Ming replied. He didn't dare ask for a higher price since muskets were needed in much larger quantities than cannons.

By his calculations, making one matchlock musket cost about six taels of silver. Unlike flintlocks, matchlocks were simple tubes without complex firing mechanisms. A hundred taels was already a high price — a greedy merchant's price.

"So five thousand muskets cost five hundred thousand taels," Xiao Wenxuan frowned, thinking about cannon and musket materials. One cannon could produce over a hundred muskets.

The musket price should be closer to thirty or forty taels, so Xiao Ming was definitely marking up the price.

Although aware, Xiao Wenxuan wasn't going to haggle. "One hundred taels it is. Buy five thousand first. If they work well, we'll buy more."

Xiao Ming was very happy. "Father, that's just the musket price — not including ammunition."

"I understand. Isn't that how your cannons are priced?" Xiao Wenxuan's eyes shone. Suddenly he said, "Your price is high, but I accept it. Do you know why?"

Xiao Ming was surprised. He expected the Emperor to bargain down to around forty taels.

"Father, you are wise and see through everything. I'm ashamed," Xiao Ming said humbly.

Looking over Chang'an's bustling scene, Xiao Wenxuan said, "Because of your merits, from today on, I no longer have to pay tribute to the northern tribes. That yearly millions of taels of silver is better spent on you."

Xiao Ming suddenly understood the Emperor's thoughts and smiled.

"Father, your insight is admirable," Xiao Ming said happily. "As long as you support me, I guarantee no tribe will cross Shanhai Pass again. And if the tribes dare attack Zhao Region, I will lead cavalry to cut off their supplies."

"Good. That's exactly what I want. You're the only one who can fight the tribes head-on. With strong forces at Shanhai Pass, the tribes dare not move. Ming'er, the empire's safety rests on you. Whatever you want, as long as it's not too much, I'll give it to you. Just don't let me down," Xiao Wenxuan said earnestly. This was his true feeling now.

He was old and worn out, wanting only a peaceful rest of life, no more upheavals.

"I promise, Father. I will protect the Great Yu Empire thoroughly," Xiao Ming said secretly rejoicing. The Emperor's words meant he was officially the favored court insider — he could ask for almost anything.

Xiao Wenxuan nodded with satisfaction and continued, "Lijing Gate has traced the assassin's link to merchants from Liang Kingdom — Jin merchants. The answers are only two: either the Second Prince did it, or the tribes conspired with the Jin merchants. The investigation is ongoing and will soon reveal the truth."

"The Second Prince..." Xiao Ming thought deeply. Everything made sense now.

If the assassination succeeded, the Second Prince benefited most. Whether or not it succeeded, the Crown Prince's incompetence would be exposed. If the Crown Prince was deposed, the Second Prince would be next in line.

If the assassination worked, he'd eliminate a powerful rival — killing two birds with one stone. His plan was very clever.

But no plan was perfect, or Xiao Wenxuan wouldn't suspect the Second Prince.

"Very likely him. But we can't conclude yet. That's the cleverness of the assassination plan," Xiao Wenxuan said, troubled. "If it is your Second Brother, what do you want me to do?"

Xiao Ming almost said "execute by law" but remembered historical examples and swallowed his words. Respectfully, he said, "Father, you are the Emperor. He is my brother. If he is cruel, I cannot be unkind."

Xiao Wenxuan's pupils narrowed as he stared at Xiao Ming long and hard. Then he smiled, "Ming'er, you're very good. Now I am at ease."

A cold sweat ran down Xiao Ming's back — the Emperor was testing him.

If Xiao Ming insisted on killing the Second Prince, the Emperor would think him ruthless and unbrotherly. If he could kill one brother, he wouldn't spare the Crown Prince later.

This would affect how the Emperor treated him.

Now Xiao Ming showed great righteousness, and the Emperor was reassured. This made him a strong enforcer of the blood oath.

Xiao Ming escaped the test skillfully but felt bitter inside, unsure what to say.

Xiao Wenxuan didn't explain further and said, "Let's go. You've brought many surprises. Your wedding is in ten days. Forget other matters and focus on the wedding. Feiyue'er is famous in Chang'an for her beauty and talents in chess, calligraphy, and painting. She will be a good wife. You should treat her well.

The Fei family has many officials and talents. Your territory lacks talent, so through this marriage you can attract some of their best."

Xiao Ming sighed in relief. "I'll prepare at once."