

I. Dynasty 41

Chapter 41: Empress Zhao's Thoughts

"Cough, cough! I have no son who is so unruly, lacks ambition, and abandons his fief to flee." Xiao Wenxuan slammed his jade cup on the table and coughed heavily.

"Your Majesty, please take care of your health!" Empress Zhao said with concern, patting Xiao Wenxuan's back.

At over fifty years old, Xiao Wenxuan's health was deteriorating day by day. Despite the imperial physicians prescribing countless remedies, his condition showed no improvement. This decline in health had led to growing ambitions among the princes in Chang'an, each harboring their own schemes.

Empress Zhao's willingness to help Consort Zhen wasn't solely due to the perfume. As the Empress, she was far from shallow. Her true intention was to secure an additional ally for the Crown Prince, who was gradually losing ground in the struggle for the throne.

Among the nine princes of the Great Yu Empire, the Third and Fifth Princes, born of the same mother, naturally supported each other. The Second, Sixth, and Ninth Princes had formed their own faction. The Fourth Prince, a highly intelligent man, was currently close to the Eighth Prince and was also trying to win over the Seventh Prince, Xiao Ming.

However, due to Xiao Ming's remote fief, the Fourth Prince maintained a distant relationship with him. Empress Zhao saw this as an opportunity to secure an external ally for the Crown Prince.

She knew that the support of the Zhao family alone wouldn't be enough to ensure the Crown Prince's ascension to the throne. When Xiao Wenxuan had ascended the throne, he had not only been the Crown Prince but had also gained the support of most of the feudal lords. Even so, some princes had rebelled.

Upon ascending the throne, Xiao Wenxuan had personally led his army to quell the rebellion, defeating the strongest of the feudal lords, the Prince of Ming, after five years of war.

This experience had made Xiao Wenxuan deeply suspicious of his brothers, leading to the unjust case of Prince Ning. However, no one dared to mention this case in his presence.

"None of the princes give me peace of mind. Sooner or later, they'll be the death of me. How can I take care of my health? Take the Crown Prince, for example. He's over thirty, yet he spends his days indulging in pleasure, showing no sign of a future ruler. This morning, I asked him what should be done if the people have no food. Do you know what he said?"

"Your Majesty, though Yier may lack talent, he is kind-hearted," Empress Zhao defended her son. To her, no other prince could compare to him.

"Kind-hearted! Hmph, indeed he is. He said that if the people have no food, they can eat lamb and beef instead. What nonsense! How can I entrust the empire to such an incompetent Crown Prince? Every day, ministers petition me to depose him and appoint a new heir!" Xiao Wenxuan fumed.

Empress Zhao's face turned pale. She said sternly, "Your Majesty, the Crown Prince is the eldest son. Even if he is incompetent, he cannot be deposed so easily. If the Crown Prince is deposed, the princes will vie for the throne, leading to fratricide. Each prince is backed by powerful families. If this escalates, it could lead to widespread conflict."

Xiao Wenxuan sighed deeply. "That's precisely why I haven't deposed him. Moreover, I've received a secret report from Pang Yukun. Not long ago, Prince Qi was assassinated."

“Assassinated!” Empress Zhao exclaimed. “Why didn’t Consort Zhen mention a word of this to me?”

“Prince Qi probably didn’t tell Consort Zhen. At least he’s considerate enough to spare her feelings,” Xiao Wenxuan said. “Though Pang Yukun’s report was brief, it pointed directly to the Third and Fifth Princes.”

Empress Zhao’s eyes narrowed. This was an opportunity she could exploit. She said, “Your Majesty, the Crown Prince hasn’t even been deposed, yet the other princes are already turning on each other. If the Crown Prince is deposed, the consequences would be unimaginable.”

Having experienced fratricide on his path to the throne, Xiao Wenxuan dreaded the thought of his sons repeating his history. He said, “Don’t worry. I won’t depose the Crown Prince. However, he is isolated among the princes. If he wants to secure his position, he needs support.”

“Your Majesty, isn’t Prince Qi the perfect candidate? Among the princes, he is the only one who hasn’t openly supported anyone. Moreover, Prince Qi and Consort Zhen have no powerful families backing them, posing little threat to the Crown Prince.”

“I’ve been considering this as well. In his letter, Pang Yukun mentioned that Prince Qi has changed significantly and seems to be genuinely governing his fief. Pang Yukun wouldn’t lie to me. If this is true, we could use Prince Qi to counterbalance the other princes,” Xiao Wenxuan said.

Empress Zhao was pleased. Xiao Wenxuan’s thoughts aligned with hers. Since the Crown Prince was incapable of winning over the other princes, she had to step in. “In that case, Your Majesty, why not allocate funds to Prince Qi, just as you have with the other feudal lords?”

Before coming here, Xiao Wenxuan had been hesitant. If Xiao Ming was incompetent, any funds allocated to him would be squandered. Being naturally suspicious, he hadn't fully trusted Pang Yukun's report.

However, after his trusted envoy returned from Qingzhou with confirmation of Pang Yukun's claims, Xiao Wenxuan began to reconsider. Still, he hadn't considered supporting Xiao Ming, as the more powerful princes were already causing him enough headaches. Empress Zhao's reminder made him realize the need for balance.

With the princes' rivalries already taking shape, he had to maintain equilibrium among them. The Crown Prince was the weakest, and though he wasn't sure if Xiao Ming had truly reformed, he had to try.

He said, "I know Prince Qi's nature well. He might just be putting on a show. I'll allocate a portion of funds to him for now. If he uses the money wisely, I'll seriously consider supporting him. If he remains as he was, don't expect him to be of any help to the Crown Prince. He'll be beyond saving."

"Understood, Your Majesty," Empress Zhao said, relieved. For the Crown Prince's sake, she would have to help Xiao Ming.

Xiao Wenxuan sighed and drained his cup. Suddenly, he smiled. "I must admit, the wine Prince Qi sent is quite to my liking. Let's hope he doesn't disappoint me."

"If Your Majesty is pleased, Prince Qi will surely be overjoyed," Empress Zhao said, refilling Xiao Wenxuan's cup.

Thanks to the fine wine, Xiao Wenxuan spent the night in Fengming Palace. The next day, Empress Zhao personally visited Bishui Pavilion to inform Consort Zhen that the Emperor had agreed to allocate funds to Prince Qi.

However, she didn't reveal her deeper motives to Consort Zhen. She trusted that Consort Zhen, being astute, would understand why she was so eager to help Xiao Ming.

With the influence of the perfume and wine spreading in the palace, and Xiao Wenxuan agreeing to allocate funds, both of Xiao Ming's goals had been achieved.

Upon receiving the good news, Li San purchased some items, reunited with Qin Mu, and eagerly set off back to Qingzhou.