

## I. Dynasty 97

### Chapter 97: Princess Pingyang

“Forget it, forget it. If she wants to come, just make sure to receive her properly when she arrives.”

Xiao Ming let out a deep sigh.

This Princess Pingyang was neither Xiao Ming’s half-sister nor his elder sister, but rather his aunt—Xiao Wenxuan’s biological younger sister.

Xiao Wenxuan doted on his young sister to an extreme degree, almost to the point of indulgence.

As a result, Princess Pingyang had grown up spoiled and became utterly lawless in Chang’an. Especially after her consort passed away, her reputation for beauty became well known to all.

She associated with people ranging from first-rank officials to street vendors, but with one common requirement—anyone in her circle had to be handsome.

Rumor had it that she even kept male concubines in her residence. In an era like this, Princess Pingyang could be considered a pioneer among women.

It was precisely because of her influence that the women of Chang'an were somewhat more open-minded compared to those elsewhere, which spoke volumes about her impact.

Despite her messy private life, Princess Pingyang was extremely shrewd. It was said that she had amassed great wealth—equivalent to that of a modern-day rich woman. Utilizing her renowned beauty, she maneuvered skillfully in this male-dominated era, which in turn gave her business ventures considerable advantages. While she might not be the wealthiest person in Chang'an, she could certainly rank among the top.

To Xiao Ming, this clever and somewhat modern socialite-like aunt was a difficult person to deal with—she was an expert at adapting to any situation.

Yet, he couldn't refuse her visit, as he needed an ally in Chang'an.

The imperial princes were currently at each other's throats, and he was far away in Qingzhou. If chaos erupted in Chang'an, extracting Consort Zhen from there would be a major problem.

Meanwhile, this aunt of his was resourceful and had numerous admirers under her influence. She was an undeniable force in Chang'an, and he might very well need her help in the future.

"In that case, I will make arrangements for the residence," Ziyuan said. "When Her Majesty sent this letter, the princess had already departed. Judging by the timeline, she should be arriving soon."

Xiao Ming waved his hand, signaling Ziyuan to prepare. He no longer had the mood to tease the young maid.

No matter whether it was Prince Wei or Prince Yan, he could easily brush them off. But dealing with this particular guest? That was truly a headache.

Two days later, a magnificently luxurious carriage slowly made its way down the official road leading into Qingzhou City. The escorting guards on either side of the carriage numbered over a thousand. Each wore golden armor, a golden-plumed helmet, and bore a solemn and dignified expression.

The carriage was draped in purple silk, intricately embroidered with golden vine patterns, and exquisite jade ornaments dangled from all four corners of the roof—each piece worth a fortune.

Seeing such an ostentatious display, the common folk along the road quickly stepped aside. Some merchants couldn't help but let their greedy gazes linger on the jade and gold-thread embroidery.

But the moment they saw the fierce and imposing golden-armored guards, they immediately lowered their heads.

As the city gates drew closer, a knight at the front rode up to the carriage and spoke, "Your Highness, we have arrived in Qingzhou City."

"Is that so? Take a look at the city gate. Is anyone there to welcome me? Speaking of which, I haven't seen King Qi for five years now. I wonder if that brat still gives his dear aunt any face?"

A languid, sultry voice came from within the carriage. Then, a delicate hand, smooth and fair like lotus root, lifted the curtain, revealing an exquisitely alluring face.

Upon seeing her, the knight's eyes flashed with fervor. He replied, "I see many people gathered outside the city gate—most likely King Qi himself."

Princess Pingyang then leaned out for a glance. At once, she spotted Xiao Ming standing at the gate in his purple robe, accompanied by Luoluo and Ziyuan.

"Indeed, it's Xiao Ming." She leaned back into the carriage and chuckled. "At least this nephew of mine still knows to show me some respect. Let's move faster."

The knight nodded, gave a loud command, and the carriage driver cracked his whip. The horses sped up, closing the distance in the blink of an eye.

At that moment, Xiao Ming stood at the city gate, forcing a wry smile at the approaching entourage. Golden armor—such an impractical, flashy thing—was something only his aunt would have the nerve to use.

When the curtain lifted, a regal and elegant woman emerged. Xiao Ming immediately stepped forward and said, "Your nephew greets Aunt."

"Hehehe... Ming'er, it's been five years, and you've only grown more handsome. Come, let Aunt take a good look at you."

Before she even descended from the carriage, Princess Pingyang was already laughing. A fragrant breeze followed her as she approached Xiao Ming.

The scent was unmistakably that of peony perfume.

“Aunt remains as beautiful as ever,” Xiao Ming said, though the overpowering fragrance made him wrinkle his nose slightly.

Princess Pingyang chuckled. “Your flattery has improved as well.”

Xiao Ming smiled. “Thank you for your praise, Aunt. Please, let us continue our conversation inside the palace.”

Princess Pingyang nodded. By now, many commoners had gathered at the city gate, watching the scene unfold. She turned back, stepped into her carriage again, and the entourage proceeded into the city, following Xiao Ming’s lead.

As they passed through the city gate, Princess Pingyang lifted the curtain once more and examined the gate guards.

These soldiers wore silver armor—completely different from the armor of the Great Yu Dynasty. Every part of their bodies was covered, making them look like steel-clad beasts, exuding an intimidating aura.

The long spears in their hands gleamed with silver light, their tips razor-sharp—clearly top-quality weapons.

“How strange... What kind of armor is this?” Princess Pingyang mused.

Back in Chang’an, whenever Qingzhou was mentioned, the imperial princes and ministers always scoffed at it, as if it were some barbaric backwater.

Even though Qingzhou’s products had repeatedly caused a sensation in Chang’an over the past six months, this perception hadn’t changed. After all, engaging in commerce was something scholars despised.

Thus, while many imperial princes secretly engaged in trade, they did so through subordinate merchants, merely providing them with connections and privileges. But Xiao Ming, a dignified vassal king, personally running businesses? This only made Chang’an’s nobility look down on him even more.

As the carriage moved further into the city, Princess Pingyang continued observing Qingzhou. She noticed the streets bustling with merchants, many transporting goods such as soap, perfume, and Drunken Qingzhou wine.

On the roadside, she occasionally saw groups of scholars engaged in heated debates over sheets of paper covered in writing, as if they were discussing something of great importance.

What puzzled her even more was the high number of slaves in Qingzhou. Every now and then, a group of people bearing slave marks would pass by, yet they did not have the usual downcast, sorrowful expressions. Instead, they chatted and laughed while transporting minerals and coal.

Scene after scene unfolded before her eyes, and suddenly, Princess Pingyang felt she had made the right decision in coming here.

She had originally come for the exquisite glass, but now, it seemed Qingzhou had far more to offer.