

I. Dynasty 98

Chapter 98: A Battle of Wits

Qi Prince's Residence.

Princess Pingyang stepped down from her carriage and, upon seeing the scenery within the prince's residence, frowned slightly.

In Chang'an, she was accustomed to luxurious mansions. Compared to those, the Qi Prince's residence was indeed rather shabby.

The residence lacked the auspicious qilin statues at its entrance, the plaque above the gate wasn't gilded, and even the door knockers were rusted—details that seemed unbecoming of a prince's status.

Noticing Princess Pingyang's unusual expression, Xiao Ming asked, "Auntie, is something wrong?"

"Ming'er, you've suffered these five years in Qingzhou. The Emperor is too harsh. No matter what, you're still a prince. How could he be so biased? When I return to Chang'an, I will definitely speak up for you," Princess Pingyang said, feigning concern for Xiao Ming.

Had Xiao Ming not known his aunt's true nature, he might have been moved. However, Princess Pingyang was notorious for her acting skills, and he wasn't about to fall for her act.

“Thank you, Auntie, but there’s no need. Father has already sent me the one million taels of silver,” Xiao Ming replied.

Princess Pingyang’s eyes flickered. If it weren’t for the glass and other goods from Qingzhou, she would have completely forgotten about this nephew of hers.

In Chang’an, the other princes often visited her, bringing lavish gifts. But Xiao Ming was far away, and his maternal family lacked influence, so she had never paid him much attention.

“Is that so? I heard the Emperor’s impression of you has improved recently. It seems to be true.”

“I’m not sure about that. Father has never been fond of me, but since he sent the silver, perhaps it’s true,” Xiao Ming evaded.

Princess Pingyang chuckled. “Congratulations, then. Perhaps the Emperor will even allow you to return to Chang’an for a visit. Consort Zhen misses you dearly.”

“I miss Mother as well,” Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

By now, they had reached the garden behind the main hall. Princess Pingyang sat down in the pavilion and gestured for Xiao Ming to join her.

“I came here this time to see you on behalf of Consort Zhen. Seeing that you’re doing well here, I can reassure her when I return,” Princess Pingyang played the emotional card again.

Xiao Ming couldn't help but admire her. Princess Pingyang was indeed a shrewd woman, able to make others feel close to her with just a few words.

However, he wasn't the same Xiao Ming from before. Blood ties alone weren't enough to make him lose his composure. The old Xiao Ming might have been moved to tears, but not him.

As Princess Pingyang spoke, she kept observing Xiao Ming's expression. Seeing that he remained calm, she was slightly surprised. This Prince of Qi was quite interesting.

"That's good. Please tell Mother that I'm doing well here and not to worry," Xiao Ming said. "By the way, Auntie, do you have any other plans for your visit? If not, I can show you around Qingzhou's scenic spots."

Princess Pingyang had seen nothing but rural poverty on her way here. There were no scenic spots to speak of.

Seeing the dilapidated state of the Qi Prince's residence, she had no intention of staying long. "I'll only be here for a few days. After that, I plan to visit your Uncle Wei in Jinling City."

"That's a bustling place. I've always wanted to visit, but my duties keep me too busy," Xiao Ming said, giving himself an excuse not to accompany his aunt.

"No matter. The Emperor will be pleased to hear that you're diligent in your duties," Princess Pingyang said. After some probing, she found Xiao Ming unyielding. Since charm and beauty didn't work on him, she hesitated before finally revealing her true purpose. "Ming'er, the reason I came this time is actually about the glass. The glassware you sent to the palace has caused quite a stir in the inner court. Even

your father couldn't put it down. He asked me to come to Qingzhou to inquire about the glass-making technique so that craftsmen in the palace can produce it for the consorts."

"So it's come to this," Xiao Ming thought to himself. His aunt's appetite was truly insatiable.

He had expected Princess Pingyang to ask for some glassware, which he could have easily given her. But he hadn't anticipated that she would demand the entire glass-making technique.

As Princess Pingyang spoke, she watched Xiao Ming closely. To her surprise, he remained as calm as ever. Little did she know, Xiao Ming's mind was in turmoil.

"Auntie, I'm afraid that's not possible."

Xiao Ming believed Princess Pingyang's words. If she whispered in Emperor Xiao Wenxuan's ear, the Emperor would undoubtedly agree to her request for the glass-making technique—or even the production methods for all of Qingzhou's goods.

This was the Great Yu Empire, where the greed of the nobility was brazen, and they saw such demands as entirely justified.

Princess Pingyang's expression shifted, her eyes darting around. "Auntie doesn't agree with this either. It's all your father's idea. You know his temperament. Once he takes an interest in something, he must have it."

Xiao Ming frowned. Princess Pingyang was essentially threatening him.

Emperor Xiao Wenxuan was known throughout the Great Yu Empire for his ruthlessness and tyranny. Otherwise, how could a prince like Xiao Ming have been reduced to such a state?

Princess Pingyang was waiting for his response. This was the worst-case scenario he had anticipated.

If he refused, the Emperor would be furious. If he complied, it would set a precedent, and every opportunistic noble would come demanding things under the Emperor's name.

Therefore, he couldn't give in this time, and he had to avoid offending both Princess Pingyang and the Emperor.

"I understand Father's temperament, but Auntie, a person without integrity cannot stand. I cannot reveal the glass-making technique because I've already made an agreement with the merchants in the guild. Aside from supplying them with goods, the glass-making technique will only be disclosed to them once they reach a certain membership level. If I break my word now, it would not only disgrace me but also tarnish the royal family's reputation. No matter what, I am still a prince. My dignity may not matter, but the royal family's honor does. Father wouldn't be pleased if that were compromised, would he?"

"Oh? Is that so?" Princess Pingyang asked, puzzled.

Xiao Ming nodded firmly and proceeded to explain the guild's structure to her.

As Princess Pingyang listened, her expression grew increasingly grim. She had intended to monopolize the profits from the glass trade, but she hadn't realized that the glass involved so many people's interests—including those of several feudal lords.

If that were the case, this matter wouldn't be so easily resolved. While the imperial princes might be manageable, the non-imperial feudal lords would be a different story.

Living in Chang'an, she knew these feudal lords were restless, eager to support a new emperor who aligned with their interests, just as they had supported Xiao Wenxuan in the past.

"Exactly. The main issue is that I've already taken their silver and spent most of it. If Auntie is willing to repay them on my behalf, I'd be happy to share the glass-making technique with you," Xiao Ming said, feigning regret.

"How much silver are we talking about?" Princess Pingyang asked, sensing a glimmer of hope.

"Not much, just around fifteen million taels," Xiao Ming said nonchalantly.