

## I. Dynasty 99

### Chapter 99: The Banquet

“Fifteen million taels!”

Princess Pingyang nearly jumped to her feet in shock.

Xiao Ming nodded silently.

Her expression stiffened for a moment before Princess Pingyang forced a smile and said, “I didn’t realize that the Prince of Qi is now so wealthy.”

“Compared to you, Auntie, I’m still far behind. I’ve heard that your assets in Chang’an are quite substantial,” Xiao Ming flattered her. “So, what do you think about this matter...?”

“Forget it. Since you’ve already made agreements with so many merchants, I can’t force you to break your word. But could you prepare some glassware for me to bring back to the Emperor and the consorts?”

Initially, she had wanted to secure the glass-making technique for herself. However, after hearing Xiao Ming’s explanation, she was unwilling to risk offending so many people.

After all, Xiao Ming had already taken their silver. If this matter were to fall entirely on her shoulders, she would have a hard time dealing with those people in Chang'an. While Xiao Ming was far away from the Emperor's reach, she would have to face these people daily.

Princess Pingyang's greed caught Xiao Ming off guard. He knew that this situation had likely arisen because she had secretly influenced Emperor Xiao Wenxuan to agree to her demands.

In the letter from Consort Zhen, it was clear that Emperor Xiao Wenxuan was pleased with Xiao Ming and had even praised him, with no mention of demanding the glass-making technique.

However, for Xiao Ming, Princess Pingyang's greed was something he could exploit. It's not a person's flaws that are worrisome, but their lack of vulnerabilities.

"That's not a problem," Xiao Ming said. "But I have a better idea."

Princess Pingyang, who had been feeling somewhat disgruntled about not getting the glass-making technique, now perked up slightly. "What idea?"

"I can give you a high-level membership in the guild. How about that? It's worth a million taels of silver," Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Princess Pingyang's face lit up with joy. "You're always so thoughtful, Auntie's favorite. Let's settle it this way," she said, fearing that Xiao Ming might change his mind.

"Of course," Xiao Ming replied, thinking to himself that this membership was essentially a free gift. He could create as many memberships as he wanted, and he wouldn't lose anything. On the contrary, once Princess Pingyang became a member, she would have to purchase goods from him, allowing him to profit from her.

Each harboring their own thoughts, Xiao Ming instructed Ziyuan to arrange a banquet. Since Princess Pingyang had arrived, it was customary to invite local officials and influential families to pay their respects.

However, the Prince of Qi's residence had no singers or dancers, so Xiao Ming had to borrow some from the Wang and Qin families.

That evening, the Qi Prince's residence was filled with the sounds of music. The Wang, Qin, Sun, and Wei families, along with Pang Yukun and other Qingzhou officials, were all in attendance.

With Princess Pingyang present, the banquet was far more orderly than the chaotic gatherings at the Wang family's events.

Xiao Ming and Princess Pingyang sat at the head of the table, with Pang Yukun seated below them, followed by Lu Fei, Chen Wenlong, and others. The Wang and Qin families were seated at the lower end.

"Prince of Qi, what is this dish?"

During the banquet, Princess Pingyang had little interest in the mediocre performances, which she found unbearable. In her own residence, such singers and dancers would have been punished.

The only thing that caught her attention was the array of unfamiliar and delicious dishes.

Despite having tasted countless delicacies in Chang'an, these exquisite dishes still managed to captivate her.

"This dish is called abalone," Xiao Ming explained.

"Abalone? What is that? It looks so strange," Princess Pingyang said in surprise.

Xiao Ming smiled. "Auntie, although the abalone may look unappealing, it's incredibly delicious. Why don't you give it a try?"

In modern times, abalone was a delicacy that only became popular after the Song Dynasty, and even then, it was mostly consumed by coastal residents. Inland people rarely had the chance to taste it.

Since his industrial projects were progressing smoothly, Xiao Ming had devoted some of his energy to improving his quality of life.

He had inquired about abalone and found that no one had tried eating it before. So, when he sent Zhang Liang to Dengzhou to scout locations for shipbuilding workshops, he also asked him to look for abalone.

To his surprise, Zhang Liang sent him a jar of abalone the very next day, claiming that these creatures were abundant in the sea.

Xiao Ming was overjoyed. In a place with such rich natural resources, he would never have to worry about seafood.

Seeing that Princess Pingyang was still hesitant, Xiao Ming picked up an abalone and ate it himself.

Instantly, a tantalizing aroma filled the air.

Princess Pingyang sniffed the briny fragrance and swallowed hard. After a moment's hesitation, she took a bite.

"Mmm, it's delicious," Princess Pingyang said, her hesitant expression turning to delight.

Seizing the opportunity, Xiao Ming added, "Not only is abalone delicious, but it's also a medicinal ingredient. It's very nourishing."

Hearing this, Princess Pingyang ate even more.

Soon, more dishes were served: clay pot chicken, roasted duck, and others—some traditional Great Yu Empire dishes, and some modern ones.

Princess Pingyang was overwhelmed by the variety but found her appetite growing.

Xiao Ming rarely hosted banquets, so many of the dishes were unfamiliar to the guests, who eagerly dug in.

For a while, the music and dance performances became mere background entertainment.

However, one person stood out from the crowd, staring intently at Princess Pingyang with a look of infatuation.

This person was none other than Wang Shijie, a man notorious for his lustful nature.

In Chang'an, Princess Pingyang's beauty was widely known, and Wang Shijie had heard rumors about her. Like many other scholars, he had fantasized about catching her eye and becoming one of her favored companions.

Unfortunately, he had never had the chance to approach her in Chang'an. Now, with this rare opportunity, he couldn't help but feel restless.

Moreover, Princess Pingyang was Emperor Xiao Wenxuan's younger sister, only twenty-eight years old—a vibrant age exuding a mature charm that Wang Shijie found irresistible.

Combined with her striking beauty, Wang Shijie was utterly captivated.

However, his behavior did not go unnoticed. Standing behind Princess Pingyang was a golden-armored guard named Ouyang Mu, who had once been an instructor for the 400,000 imperial guards in Chang'an and was a formidable warrior.

He had been gifted to Princess Pingyang by Emperor Xiao Wenxuan as her personal guard, though rumors circulated that Ouyang Mu and Princess Pingyang shared a questionable relationship.

"How dare you! Who do you think you are? How dare you act so disrespectfully? Guards, seize him!"

Just as everyone was enjoying the meal, Ouyang Mu suddenly shouted. Two golden-armored guards rushed forward and grabbed Wang Shijie by the arms.

Only then did Wang Shijie realize his grave mistake. His face turned pale—staring at the princess in such a manner was a serious offense.

Wang Chengchou, who had been unaware of what was happening, looked up and was equally shocked.

Princess Pingyang, who had been chatting with Xiao Ming, frowned at the commotion. "Ouyang Mu, what's going on?"