

THE MIRROR LEGACY

Chapter 14: Changhu and Xiangping

“Because he’s ruthless enough.”

As Li Tongya finished speaking, a shiver ran down Li Changhu’s spine. His body tensed and goosebumps prickled his skin. He gazed at his younger brother’s smirking face, a sense of unease gripping his heart.

“Hahahahahahahaha...”

Giving Li Changhu’s shoulder a push, Li Tongya tossed the wooden slips aside and looked at him with a smile.

“Sheesh.” Li Changhu exhaled deeply, assuming Li Tongya was jesting. He waved his hand lightly and said, “I should be preparing for Xiangping’s wedding.”

Straightening his clothes, Li Changhu left for the Tian Residence.

The smile on Li Tongya’s face faded as he sat down at the wooden table and began to speak, “Father.”

Li Tongya then saw his father standing on the stone steps, lost in his own thoughts with a distant expression. It was only when Li Tongya called out to him that he seemed to snap back to reality.

The previous night, Li Mutian had sat by the door, watching the moon. Seeing Li Xiangping rushing to the back mountain, he followed his son quietly out of concern.

Unbeknownst to him, Li Tongya was equally worried for his younger brother and had also followed him up the mountain. The two, meeting unexpectedly, gazed at each other awkwardly.

They silently watched Li Xiangping murdering someone, then watched as wild beasts cleared the scene. Only then did they return from the mountain.

“Xiangping only did that to protect the family. There’s no need for anger, Father,” Li Tongya urged.

“Who the hell said I’m angry?” Li Mutian with a turmoil of emotions in his heart, spoke bluntly.

He narrowed his eyes and added, “That fool deserved his fate. If Xiangping had just scared him off, I would have stepped in to deal with him myself! He did the right thing, so why should I be angry? And don’t bother making excuses for Changhu!”

Li Tongya exhaled a deep sigh and said, “Changhu is generous and kind-hearted. The villagers and tenants all respect him. He’s definitely the one who can safeguard the family business.”

“Nonsense!” Li Mutian slammed his hand on the table, visibly irritated.

“It’s me, Li Mutian, whom they respect! Their regard for your older brother is merely due to the lower rents he offers! These people respect power and never virtue! Think about it—if I were gone today, wouldn’t Li Yecheng dare to cause trouble tomorrow? Do you think Changhu would have the guts to kill him?”

Observing Li Tongya’s silence, Li Mutian’s tone softened.

“In the past, I wasn’t concerned. With both of you supporting Changhu, his generosity was a strength, showing grace and mercy. But times have changed. Our family is walking on thin ice, with secrets of our own. A leader who isn’t ruthless enough can easily bring disaster to our family!”

He paused, then continued with a troubled look on his face, "I've been feeling uneasy lately. It's almost as if a calamity is on the horizon."

After finalizing the wedding arrangements at the Tian Residence, Li Changhu sat on the ridge in the fields with a conflicted look on his face. He had roamed the village but saw no sign of Li Yecheng.

Reflecting on what sounded like a hint from Li Tongya last night, Li Changhu suspected that Li Yecheng had likely been killed by Li Xiangping.

Pain surged in his heart. As children, Yecheng and Tongya, the two younger ones, had always followed him obediently, fishing in the river.

He faintly remembered Cheng'er holding a large blue fish, beaming with joy and calling, "Look, Big Brother!"

Tongya, though envious, always feigned indifference and ignored him. When the three of them were exhausted from playing, they would stand by the river, competing to see who could pee higher and further.

Then, their aunt passed away, and their second uncle fell ill. In just a few months, Yecheng changed drastically. He was no longer the boy he once was. *RaNOBÈş*

"He didn't deserve to end up this way!" Tears welled in Li Changhu's eyes.

He had always believed he could guide Yecheng back on track, help him learn, and live a good life.

"Changhu!"

A voice roused Li Changhu from his thoughts. He quickly lowered his head, wiping away tears from the corners of his eyes, and looked toward the source of the sound.

There stood an elderly farmer with white hair and an honest demeanor, his skin weathered and tanned, dressed in simple garb made of homespun cloth and wide pants.

“Uncle Xu.” Li Changhu stood up and dusted his pants.

“How are things at home? Do you have enough to eat?” he asked with genuine concern.

“Yes, there’s plenty!” The old man’s tears rolled down his face as soon as he heard Li Changhu’s question.

Despite his age, he remained robust. His only son, however, was bedridden and unable to tend to the fields.

Li Changhu had granted them a rent reduction and provided food, helping them in getting through the tough times.

Old Xu, who had watched Li Changhu grow from a boy to a man, perceived him as if he were his own child. Having experienced such kindness, he felt a deep sense of gratitude toward Li Changhu.

The conversation had quickly distracted Li Changhu from his sorrow.

“Please don’t hesitate to tell me if you need anything! My father reminded me just a few days ago to look after Uncle Xu’s fields, so I came to check on you,” he said.

Old Xu, wise with age, chuckled, knowing full well that Li Changhu’s acts were favors from Li Mutian. He cupped his fist and said with a laugh, “Please thank your father for me! Our family is truly grateful.”

“Oh, it’s nothing really. We’re just doing what’s right,” Li Changhu replied, dismissing the gratitude with a wave of his hand.

As they conversed in the field, Li Xiangping approached the reeds with a cloth bag and observed Li Yesheng sitting on the riverbank.

Li Yesheng was counting on his fingers, murmuring to himself, "I visited our third uncle the day before yesterday, our eldest uncle before that, and was turned away by our fourth uncle yesterday. Today, I'll have to settle for wild greens and catch a few shrimps home for soup."

He gazed at the swaying reeds, reflecting on the places that had fed him. If not for these reeds, he believed he would have long perished in some forgotten corner.

I'm indebted to Big Uncle and his family too, he reminded himself, only to be startled by a figure emerging from the reeds.

"Brother Xiangping!"

Li Yesheng stood up in surprise. Ever since the main family built the high-walled courtyard, Li Xiangping rarely ventured out, rumored to be absorbed in reading. Li Yesheng only saw him occasionally during meals at the main house.

"Here, take this."

Li Xiangping smiled and pulled a white bun from his cloth bag, handing it over.

Li Yesheng eagerly grabbed it, biting into it hungrily and exclaiming with gratitude, "You're the best, big bro!"

"Hahahahahaha."

Li Xiangping had a history of sneaking treats for Li Yesheng during their childhood. Li Mutian had always known about it but pretended not to notice.

Li Xiangping had indeed given him many things.

"Take this too," Li Xiangping said with a rather conflicted look.

He pushed the cloth bag into Li Yesheng's hands, adding, "These are some books I read during my early learning. You can read them while watching the ducks."

“Thank you, Brother!”

Li Yesheng, visibly moved, scooped up some river water to wash his hands before carefully accepting the cloth bag.

“I’ll talk to Father in a few days. Let’s see if he can convince the scholar to let you study at his place when you have the time. If you have questions, you can always ask us.”

“Huh, I really shouldn’t trouble Big Uncle like that!” Li Yesheng was elated yet hesitant, and his heart was filled with a mix of anxiety and anticipation as he kept waving his hand, trying to decline the generous offer.

“Besides, I heard studying costs money. My big brother will never pay for me.”

Li Xiangping looked at him for a moment, then said teasingly, “You don’t need to worry about that, I’ll ask Father to cover it.”

“But...” Li Yesheng hesitated, overwhelmed by Li Xiangping’s offer.

A sense of respect welled up in him, and he thought to himself, *Brother Xiangping really takes after Big Uncle!*

Unaware of Li Yesheng’s thoughts, Li Xiangping patted his shoulder, encouraging him to focus on his studies, before heading home.