

I. Dynasty 121

Chapter 121: An Awkward Situation

Unlike the usual tranquility, the entrance of the Prince of Qi's mansion was unusually lively today.

A small sedan chair with green embroidered curtains was parked in front of the mansion, and the sound of a woman's soft weeping could be heard from inside.

Outside the sedan chair stood two fierce-looking matrons, who were cursing and scolding.

Zíwǎn stood at the entrance of the mansion, her hands on her slender waist, her willow-like eyebrows furrowed, exuding an air of unyielding determination.

"Miss, do you even know who is inside this sedan chair? When His Highness the Prince of Qi and our young lady were inseparable, you probably didn't even know where you were!" one of the matrons said, waving a handkerchief with an arrogant expression.

"That's right! At this time last year, His Highness would always send a sedan chair to fetch our young lady. Hmph, you have quite the nerve to block us. When His Highness arrives, you'll regret it!" the other matron snapped angrily.

Zíwǎn's delicate face turned pale. "Shut up! Who do you think you are, daring to make a scene in front of the Prince's mansion? If you keep spouting nonsense, I'll tear your mouths apart!"

“Oh ho, you little brat, try it! Come on!” one of the matrons taunted, putting on a shameless face.

Zǐwǎn was furious and turned to the servants behind her. “Slap their mouths!”

At that moment, a man on horseback approached the mansion. It was Qián Dàfù, returning from the mines.

Although Qián Dàfù was now in charge of mining operations, he still lived in the Prince of Qi’s mansion. Every time he returned, he would come to see Xiao Ming.

When the two matrons saw Qián Dàfù, their faces lit up with joy. One of them scurried over to him and leaned in close. “Steward Qián, you’re finally back!”

The other matron quickly added, “Steward Qián, look at this maid from the Prince’s mansion. She’s utterly lacking in discipline!”

When Qián Dàfù saw the two matrons, his expression turned strange. Unlike Zǐwǎn, he didn’t seem angry but instead wore a polite smile.

“Aren’t you the matrons from Miss Hóngyún’s entourage?” Qián Dàfù said with a smile.

Seeing Qián Dàfù’s courteous demeanor, the two matrons immediately became more emboldened. One of them turned to the sedan chair and said, “Young lady, Steward Qián is here. Now we don’t have to deal with this wicked maid.”

Zǐwǎn was even more furious. The sedan chair had arrived at the mansion's entrance an hour ago, and the two women had tried to barge in without explanation.

When Zǐwǎn came out, the two matrons had immediately started berating her, acting as if they were the mistresses of the Prince's mansion.

Zǐwǎn was initially frightened, but she was not one to back down. She stood her ground and refused to let them in.

Now she asked, "Steward Qián, what exactly is going on?"

Qián Dàfù chuckled and pulled Zǐwǎn aside. "The young lady in the sedan chair is named Hóngyún. She was His Highness's... ahem, acquaintance from the pleasure houses. Just leave this matter alone. When His Highness returns, let him handle it. We servants shouldn't meddle in our master's affairs."

Zǐwǎn's anger subsided slightly. She snorted and turned back into the mansion. She couldn't believe that in the past six months, Xiao Ming had never mentioned having such an acquaintance.

She wasn't afraid. Even though they were maids serving Consort Zhēn, their status was still higher than that of a pleasure house woman.

The gates of the Prince's mansion opened, and the two matrons exclaimed with joy, "Young lady, the gates are open. Let's go in."

A woman in a red dress stepped out of the sedan chair. Though not stunningly beautiful, she had a certain charm. She glanced at the gilded plaque of the Prince's mansion and gracefully walked inside.

With Zǐwǎn stepping aside, Qián Dàfù had no choice but to lead the woman to the main hall to wait.

Not long after, Xiao Ming and Zǐwǎn returned to the mansion.

When Zǐwǎn told him that a woman named Hóngyún had come looking for him, Xiao Ming's heart nearly sank. This was a debt left behind by his predecessor.

He had no obligation to take on this burden and felt no emotional attachment to this woman.

On the way back, all he could think about was how to send her away.

"Your Highness," Qián Dàfù greeted as Xiao Ming entered the mansion.

After bowing to Xiao Ming, Qián Dàfù gestured toward the main hall. "Your Highness, Miss Hóngyún is waiting for you inside."

Xiao Ming sighed in frustration. "Couldn't you have found an excuse to send her away? Why did you bring her into the mansion?"

“Your Highness, this...” Qián Dàfù was at a loss for words. Had he been away for so long that he no longer understood Xiao Ming’s temperament? In the past, Xiao Ming would have given him an approving look at a time like this.

Frowning, Xiao Ming said, “Never mind, I’ll handle it myself.”

Zǐwǎn, standing beside Qián Dàfù, was beaming with joy. She said, “Your Highness, there’s no need to trouble yourself. I’ll have someone drive her out right away.”

“Yes, drive her out,” Zǐwǎn chimed in.

As they spoke, a voice called out, “Your Highness...”

The voice carried a tone of melancholy. Xiao Ming looked over and saw Hóngyún, his predecessor’s former lover.

Hóngyún was once the top courtesan in Qingzhou, with both beauty and charm. In a small place like Qingzhou, even a mediocre woman could be appealing, and Hóngyún was far from mediocre.

Back then, Xiao Ming had spent his days frolicking with Hóngyún. To the current Xiao Ming, those memories felt like scenes from a cheesy romance novel.

However, no matter how one looked at it, this was just a fling from his predecessor's life. Moreover, Hóngyún had been recommended by Wáng Shìjié. After that, Hóngyún had returned to her hometown for a visit and had been gone for over half a year.

"Miss Hóngyún," Xiao Míng forced the words out of his throat.

Hóngyún looked at Xiao Míng, a smile in her eyes. But to Xiao Míng, the smile seemed fake—the kind of smile one puts on for show.

He had seen plenty of such smiles in his previous life.

"Your Highness, it's been half a year. Why are you calling me 'Miss Hóngyún' now?" Hóngyún said.

Although Hóngyún had been Xiao Míng's lover in the past, it wasn't like her to come running to him as soon as she returned.

Moreover, their relationship had been purely transactional. His predecessor had paid for entertainment, and to put it bluntly, Hóngyún had been nothing more than a plaything. After all, the previous Xiao Míng had been a product of his time, deeply entrenched in feudal thinking.

Therefore, Xiao Míng felt no emotional burden. But as he thought about it, he found it strange. He decided to cut to the chase. "Miss Hóngyún, you must have come here for a reason."

Hóngyún nodded. "I never expected that in just half a year, Qingzhou would have changed so much. On my way here, I heard about Your Highness's efforts to govern diligently. Today, I came to share a secret about the Wáng family."

"What is it?" Xiao Ming asked.

Hóngyún glanced at Qián Dàfù and Zǐwǎn. "Your Highness, may we speak in private?"

Zǐwǎn said, "Your Highness, be careful."

Hóngyún smiled lightly. "Don't worry, Miss. I'm just a weak woman. I couldn't possibly harm His Highness."