

## I. Dynasty 221

### Chapter 221: My Honor is Loyalty

“Your Highness, next time you return to Chang’an, we’ll be able to toast at your wedding feast!”

Outside the gates of Chang’an, a thousand cavalymen clad in fine plate armor stood in formation on either side. Lu Fei and Luo Xin, also in full military attire, waited nearby.

At the city gate, Chen Yushu, Qin Rui, and Du Boyuan had come to see Xiao Ming off. Before leaving the city, Xiao Ming had already bid farewell to Emperor Wenxuan and Consort Zhen. Though the Emperor could not come in person, he had sent Fei Ji and Luo Quan to see him off, along with He Zhong, Yu Ming, and Chao Jun.

When Xiao Ming saw this lineup, he couldn’t help but feel a little helpless. It seemed his every move in Chang’an these past few days had not escaped the Emperor’s notice—this was a clear message: I’m watching you.

“Haha, next time I return, I’ll take you all boating on Qujiang Lake again,” Xiao Ming said, clasping his hands in salute.

Chen Yushu and the others returned the gesture.

At this moment, Luo Quan spoke up. “Luo Xin, from now on, you are the family general of His Highness, the Prince of Qi. Do not betray the trust he has placed in you. Do you understand?”

“Father, don’t worry. I won’t bring shame to the Luo family,” Luo Xin replied, saluting firmly.

Over the past two days, Luo Quan had indeed petitioned Emperor Wenxuan to grant Luo Xin to Xiao Ming as a family general. Now, Luo Xin no longer had to wrestle with conflicting loyalties.

Fei Ji wore a faint smile, while He Zhong and the other two appeared deep in thought. Though they had come under the Emperor’s orders, by seeing Xiao Ming off, they had inadvertently aligned themselves with him in the eyes of the other princes.

The Emperor has really thrown us to the wolves.

Consort Zhen glanced at the sun and said, “It’s getting late. You should set off soon—it’s still dozens of li to the next town.”

“Yes, Mother.” Xiao Ming nodded. Consort Zhen’s eyes were slightly red, clearly suppressing the pain of parting.

Not wanting to prolong her sorrow, Xiao Ming mounted his horse and rode east.

Consort Zhen turned to Ziyuan and Lü lu and instructed, “You two are the ones I trust the most. You must take good care of the Prince.”

“Your Majesty, rest assured,” Ziyuan and Lü lu replied with a curtsy.

After her final words, Consort Zhen turned away, unable to bear watching Xiao Ming leave.

With a sigh, Xiao Ming flicked the reins and galloped ahead. Lu Fei and Luo Xin followed, and the thousand cavalymen thundered after them, their hooves kicking up dust.

As the group gradually disappeared into the distance, Fei Ji turned to Luo Quan. “What were you thinking? Are you so certain Luo Xin will achieve great things in Qingzhou?”

“Honestly?” Luo Quan asked.

“Of course.”

“Luo Hong is already in the Imperial Army. If Luo Xin stays, he’ll always be overshadowed by his elder brother. In Qingzhou, at least he can reach his full potential,” Luo Quan said.

Fei Ji chuckled helplessly at this and turned back toward the city gates.

Seven days later, Xiao Ming and his party arrived in Qingzhou.

As the familiar scenery of Qingzhou’s official road came into view, Xiao Ming felt a warmth in his chest—home. Ziwan and Lüluo also relaxed, pointing out familiar sights from the carriage.

This trip to Chang'an, including the journey there and back, had taken nearly a month.

Commoners and merchants along the road whispered among themselves, some even recognizing Xiao Ming. A few stood by the roadside, bowing respectfully. From horseback, Xiao Ming returned their greetings. These are my people, my subjects.

"His Highness has returned! His Highness has returned!"

Before they even reached the city gates, excited shouts erupted. The guards on duty, spotting Xiao Ming's group from afar with their telescopes, were cheering loudly.

"Those damn brats! No discipline at all—shouting like that, what kind of military conduct is that? I've only been gone a month, and they've already lost their minds!" Lu Fei grumbled from his horse.

Luo Xin smirked. "You're just jealous. Those boys only recognize His Highness now, not you."

"Luo Xin, don't think just because you treated me to a few brothel girls in Chang'an that I won't beat you up! I, Lu Fei, am a man of principle!" Lu Fei glared at him.

Luo Xin scoffed. "Now that I'm His Highness's family general, I won't hold back just because you're an outsider."

“Oh yeah? Let’s see you try!” Lu Fei cracked his knuckles.

In Chang’an, the two had been inseparable, drinking and carousing together. Now, they were back to their old bickering, the same camaraderie they’d shared during the battle at Cangzhou.

Xiao Ming cut in, “Both of you, listen up. In Chang’an, I indulged you because of your merits, letting you blow off steam. But back in Qingzhou, you’d better not act like that again—unless you want me to discipline you.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” they replied in unison.

As they reached the city gates, the guards stood ramrod straight, eyes forward, all traces of their earlier chaos gone. In unison, they placed their right fists over their left chests.

This was the military salute of the Qingzhou Army—a clenched fist for unity, pressed to the chest for loyalty.

“My honor is loyalty!”

The moment Xiao Ming entered Qingzhou, the guards roared the slogan in unison.

“My honor is loyalty!”

Xiao Ming mirrored the gesture, fist to chest. Behind him, Lu Fei, Luo Xin, and the cavalry echoed the cry, their voices ringing through the city.

This was now the battle cry of the Qingzhou Army—a pledge to defend the principality with Xiao Ming at its core, unto death.

The commotion at the gates quickly spread, and news reached the Governor's residence. Pang Yukun emerged with a crowd of Qingzhou officials to welcome him.

"Your Highness, you've finally returned!" Pang Yukun said with a smile.

Li Kaiyuan flattered, "In Your Highness's absence, we've had no energy for governance. The people were uneasy, fearing you might not return. Now they can finally rest easy. Truly, Your Highness's prestige in Qingzhou is unmatched."

"Hahaha... Is that so? Your skill at flattery has improved in prison, it seems. Maybe a stint behind bars did you some good," Xiao Ming laughed.

Lu Fei smirked darkly. "He's not wrong. This bastard nearly got Your Highness killed—serves him right."

Li Kaiyuan wore a pained expression. "Commander Lu, must you bring up such old grievances?"

The group burst into laughter.

After the Qin family was dealt with, the war in Cangzhou had erupted, and in the chaos, Li Kaiyuan had been forgotten—left to rot in prison for over a month. Convinced Xiao Ming meant to execute him, he had nearly died of fright.

It wasn't until the merchant guilds descended into chaos and appealed to the Governor's residence that anyone remembered to release him.

Back on his own turf, Xiao Ming felt a weight lift from his shoulders. With his initial power network in Chang'an now established, maintaining those connections would suffice. From now on, his business ventures in the capital would have allies.

Now that he was back, he could finally focus on development.

Amid the clamor, Pang Yukun spoke up. "Your Highness, since your return, a joyous event has occurred."