

I. Dynasty 37

Chapter 37: Li San Enters Chang'an

Tn: Sorry for just getting back to translating this novel. I was busy for the past four days catching up on my thesis deadline.

"Li San, are you coming into the city with me, or are you going to pay your respects to Consort Zhen first?" Qin Mu asked, his eyes still heavy with sleep. The long journey had been monotonous, and he had spent most of his days dozing.

Li San replied, "Before I left, His Highness mentioned that he had sent a letter to Her Ladyship. Someone will be waiting for me at the dock, so I won't trouble you, Master Qin."

Qin Mu chuckled, "That's fine. You're unfamiliar with Chang'an, so having someone to meet you will save you from getting lost. If you were to go missing, I wouldn't know how His Highness would reprimand me."

Li San smiled in agreement. After spending fifteen days together on the ship, Qin Mu had been quite courteous to him. Li San knew this courtesy was directed more at Prince Qi and Consort Zhen than at him personally.

According to Qin Mu, the Qin family had shops in Chang'an as well. Though Qingzhou was thousands of miles away, Prince Qi couldn't oversee everything, so sometimes the Qin family had to invoke Consort Zhen's name for protection.

As they were talking, a young maid in a pink palace dress approached them and asked, "Is this the merchant ship from the Qin family of Qingzhou?"

"Yes, it is," Qin Mu replied respectfully. The maid's attire clearly indicated she was from the palace, so he didn't dare be careless.

The maid glanced at Qin Mu and then at Li San, who was dressed as a servant. After Consort Zhen received Prince Qi's letter, she had instructed the maid to wait at the dock every day. When she saw a ship bearing the Qin family's flag docking, she immediately came over to inquire.

"Are you Li San?" the maid asked, now certain it was the Qin family's ship.

Li San bowed and said, "Yes, that's me."

"Ah, wonderful! I've been waiting here for three days. I'm Liu Li, a maid serving Consort Zhen. Her Ladyship sent me to wait for you here. Now that you've arrived, follow me into the palace," the maid said, visibly relieved.

Li San nodded, his face reddening as he avoided looking directly at Liu Li.

Both Ziyuan and Luluo were considered top beauties in Qingzhou, but Liu Li was equally stunning. Li San couldn't help but think to himself: No wonder His Highness was willing to risk his life to return to Chang'an. It seems all the beauties of the world are gathered in the resplendent Bright Palace.

"Then I'll trouble you to lead the way, sister," Li San said politely. "But His Highness has asked me to bring quite a few things."

“That’s simple. I’ve brought people to help you load them onto the carriage,” Liu Li said with a light laugh, leading Li San toward Chang’an. “You look a few years older than me, yet you call me sister?”

“Sister, you serve Her Ladyship and are far more noble than a lowly servant like me. It’s only right to call you sister,” Li San flattered.

Liu Li had a peach-blossom face, and her smile was as radiant as a blooming flower. She said, “His Highness mentioned in his letter that you have a silver tongue, and it seems he wasn’t wrong. But in the palace, you’ll need to be more restrained. Be careful with your words, or you might lose your tongue.”

“Ah!” Li San shuddered in fear.

The Bright Palace was the emperor’s residence, and even the thought of it made Li San nervous. Liu Li’s warning only heightened his anxiety, making him feel like he might lose control of his bladder.

Seeing Li San’s reaction, Liu Li couldn’t help but smile mischievously. “But don’t worry too much. Just follow me, don’t speak out of turn, and don’t look around carelessly.”

Li San quickly said, “Sister, for His Highness’s sake, please look out for me.”

Mentioning Prince Qi, Liu Li frowned slightly. Truth be told, she wasn’t particularly fond of that troublemaker either.

At the edge of the dock, a carriage was waiting. Without answering Li San's plea, Liu Li simply said, "Get in."

Once inside the carriage, Liu Li began asking about Ziyuan and Luluo. Learning that they were doing well in Prince Qi's estate seemed to lift her spirits, and she started telling Li San about Chang'an.

The carriage left the dock and, after about half an hour, reached the city gate. The guards at Zhengde Gate checked Li San's servant registration before allowing them to enter Chang'an.

Sitting inside the carriage, Li San couldn't resist pulling back the curtain to peek outside at the bustling sounds of the city.

"There are so many people in Chang'an," Li San remarked, looking out at the throngs of people crowding the wide avenue leading from Zhengde Gate. It was even busier than the busiest market days in Qingzhou.

Liu Li said, "This isn't even the busiest time. By noon, the streets will be so packed that carriages won't be able to move."

Li San was awestruck. He continued to look out and saw that, aside from their carriage, the fifty-meter-wide stone-paved avenue was filled with luxurious carriages adorned with gold and jade. Inside the carriages were officials in purple, red, and green robes, wealthy merchants in fine silks, and occasionally, behind beaded curtains, the strikingly beautiful faces of noblewomen.

Glancing down at his own coarse blue clothing, Li San suddenly felt a pang of inferiority. Even the common folk in Chang'an dressed better than he did.

"No wonder His Highness says Chang'an is the most prosperous place in the world," Li San sighed.

"Of course," Liu Li said. "But why didn't His Highness prepare you with more presentable clothing for this trip? This..." She had easily recognized Li San earlier because of his shabby attire.

Li San scratched his ear. "His Highness said I had to dress like this. Otherwise, how could I 'cry poor'?"

"'Cry poor'?" Liu Li looked puzzled.

"It means being so poor that you cry," Li San explained.

"Is that a Qingzhou saying? How amusing," Liu Li laughed, her beauty making Li San blush again.

He was about the same age as Prince Qi, and at that age, thoughts of romance were never far away.

As they chatted, the carriage traveled for another hour before reaching the gates of the Bright Palace. Here, everyone—from high-ranking officials to commoners—had to proceed on foot.

After getting out of the carriage, Li San gazed in awe at the magnificent, golden-roofed palaces within the Bright Palace complex.

Liu Li explained that Chang'an stretched sixty li from north to south, with three hundred and sixty residential wards—three times the size of Qingzhou. This gave a sense of the city's wealth and prosperity, and the splendid Bright Palace was the crowning jewel of Chang'an.

Entering through a side gate, Liu Li led Li San into the palace.

"The main gate leads to the Wuji Hall, where the emperor and his ministers discuss state affairs. We can't go there," Liu Li explained as they walked. "This side path will take us directly to the inner palace."

Once inside the palace, Li San grew visibly more nervous. The passing maids and eunuchs kept glancing at him, making him increasingly anxious. He could only nod repeatedly.

They were now walking through a narrow alley between two high walls. At the end of the alley was an arched gate, beyond which lay a red-painted wooden corridor.

On either side of the corridor were large lotus ponds. At this time of year, the lotus flowers had withered, but many carp swam lazily in the water.

Li San didn't have time to admire the scenery. After passing through the hundred-meter-long corridor, they turned onto another long hallway that curved westward. He looked up and saw that the hallway twisted and turned, with various palaces lining its path.

Above the palaces were golden plaques, but Li San couldn't read the characters inscribed on them.

As they went deeper, the number of maids bustling along the corridor increased. Some carried delicate pastries, while others held incense burners or hot water.

"Up ahead are the living quarters of the consorts. Don't look around carelessly," Liu Li instructed.

Li San nodded again. The corridor suddenly opened up into a large garden. On one side was the lotus pond they had seen earlier, with a stone bridge arching gracefully over the water like a crescent moon.

On the other side of the bridge were numerous pavilions and courtyards, each marked by an arched gate. This was the area Liu Li had mentioned—the residences of the imperial consorts.

Crossing the stone bridge, Liu Li stopped in front of a courtyard with a plaque that read "Bishui Pavilion." She said, "This is Consort Zhen's residence. Follow me inside."