

I. Dynasty 382

Chapter 382: Sudden Rise in Status

On the bustling streets of Chang'an, people moved like flowing water, and the streets were full of carriages.

Compared to last year, the prosperity of Chang'an had not changed. It still looked like a peaceful, prosperous era. The war in Jizhou hadn't reached here.

Outside the city gates, Li Zhong, the Vice Minister of Rites, was waiting to greet Xiao Ming and his party.

"Your Highness, the Emperor has ordered me to wait here for a long time. Please allow me to escort you to the palace," Li Zhong said.

Xiao Ming nodded lightly, and as his eyes briefly met Li Zhong's, he noticed a hint of discomfort in Li Zhong's gaze.

The secret guards had compiled lists of influential figures across the Great Yu Empire, and Li Zhong was listed as a part of the Chu Wang faction, along with the Empress Dowager and the Third Prince Xiao Zhen.

Xiao Ming was cautious during this visit to Chang'an. He had arranged for the military workshop to craft a short-barrel firearm for self-defense.

Li San had already infiltrated Chang'an to gather intelligence, ensuring Xiao Ming wouldn't be caught off guard.

Just like last time, once they entered Chang'an, Luo Hong appeared before him. He arranged for Luo Xin and Qi Guangyi's soldiers to rest at the Jinwu Guard's camp.

Xiao Ming's residence hadn't changed either, but now the plaque on the door read "Qi Wang Mansion."

"Your Highness, the Emperor has said that this will be your official residence in Chang'an from now on," Feng Deshui said with a smile.

"Father truly is considerate," Xiao Ming responded with a smile.

As a prince from another territory, Xiao Ming wasn't supposed to have his own palace in Chang'an. But now, Xiao Wenxuan had made an exception, giving him a palace. This showed how much Xiao Wenxuan valued him now.

Li Zhong also smiled, though his smile seemed somewhat forced.

While Xiao Ming's role in the war at Cangzhou had changed Xiao Wenxuan's view of him, after the successful defense of Jizhou and the capture of Shanhai Pass, Xiao Ming's reputation was now close to that of a prince with backing from his own faction.

Xiao Ming had gone from a low-profile prince to someone whose influence could rival that of other royal sons.

After instructing Ziyuan and Luluo to settle in at the mansion with the servants and maids, Xiao Ming followed Li Zhong directly to the palace.

Inside the Bi Shui Pavilion, he met with Xiao Wenxuan and Empress Zhao.

“Your son greets Father Emperor and Mother Empress,” Xiao Ming said, bowing.

When Li Zhong led Xiao Ming into the Bi Shui Pavilion, Xiao Ming was surprised. Typically, Xiao Wenxuan only met with his sons and officials in the study.

However, when he saw that his mother and Empress Zhao were sitting beside Xiao Wenxuan while the other concubines were seated at the lower ranks, it made sense.

His father was very clever. Xiao Wenxuan clearly understood that nothing was more effective than building a closer father-son bond. Any rewards or honors were secondary.

“Xiao Ming, no need for formalities. I’m sure you’re exhausted from the long journey. Come, sit and rest,” Xiao Wenxuan said with a warm smile, acting like a kind father, not an emperor.

Empress Zhao also waved at him and said, “Xiao Ming, don’t stand. This is the inner palace, no need for too many formalities. Just treat this as a family gathering.”

If it had been the old Xiao Ming, he would have been deeply touched. He had never received such warmth from Xiao Wenxuan before, nor had Xiao Wenxuan spoken to him so kindly.

“Thank you, Father Emperor, and thank you, Mother Empress.”

While speaking, Xiao Ming glanced at Consort Zhen, who was looking at him with pride and affection in her eyes.

Now, Consort Zhen was in a position of power thanks to her son. In the past, she had always had to endure in the palace, but now, every concubine dared not offend her. Even Empress Zhao treated her with courtesy, as if they were sisters.

After offering his thanks, Xiao Ming sat at the lower rank where Consort Zhen was seated.

Xiao Wenxuan smiled lightly and said, “Xiao Ming, it’s rare for you to return to Chang’an. With your wedding soon, it’s a double joy. Tonight, I’ve arranged a banquet at the Fulin Hall in the palace. All the princesses and princes will be present, as well as your Third and Fourth Uncles. It will be a chance for the royal family to gather together. After all, in the Great Yu Empire, only we royals remain united.”

“Yes, Father Emperor. I truly miss my relatives in Chang’an,” Xiao Ming replied, playing along with Xiao Wenxuan’s words. He now understood that Xiao Wenxuan was using emotion to strengthen their bond.

From another perspective, when an emperor used emotion, it showed how much he valued someone.

This had been the case throughout history.

Xiao Wenxuan smiled with relief. He knew he had been strict with Xiao Ming in the past. While it was for Xiao Ming's good, Xiao Ming had never seen it that way.

So, he wanted to use this opportunity to rebuild their father-son relationship.

"Well then, since we're not discussing state affairs today, let's focus on family matters. You and your mother can chat for a while. I'll talk to you more at the banquet tonight," Xiao Wenxuan said as he stood up. His goal had already been achieved.

He had arranged for Xiao Ming to meet him in the Bi Shui Pavilion, and the way he had positioned Consort Zhen next to him was a clear sign of his current attitude.

Xiao Wenxuan left, and the other concubines followed him. Consort Zhen and Xiao Ming escorted them out of the pavilion before returning to their seats.

"Wow, this is quite a spectacle," Xiao Ming sighed, feeling the pressure.

He was used to the freedom in Qingzhou, but now, in the palace, there were rules everywhere.

Consort Zhen sighed and sat Xiao Ming down on the chair. "All this trouble is for you. With all your achievements, how could your father not value you? Before, only princes with other territories would

come to the capital, and your father would meet them with the corresponding royal princes and concubines.”

Pausing for a moment, Consort Zhen continued, “But now, I am in a stronger position as your mother. Xiao Ming, you’ve really become successful.”

“Thank you, Mother. It’s just that I happened to take advantage of the Jinwu Guard. Otherwise, fighting the nomads wouldn’t have been so easy,” Xiao Ming replied honestly.

Consort Zhen nodded. She didn’t focus much on state affairs and instead said, “Now that you’ve finally come back, let’s not talk about battles and wars. Let’s talk about your wedding to Fei Yue’er instead.”

With a teasing smile, Consort Zhen suddenly asked, “Did you take in Ziyuan and Luluo?”

Xiao Ming froze for a moment, then helplessly said, “Mother, wasn’t that your command?”

Consort Zhen smiled and nodded. “That was to help you understand matters in advance, but you need to know your priorities. Ziyuan and Luluo are just maids, and they will always be maids. Fei Yue’er is the only true princess. You’re no longer the Xiao Ming of six years ago. The princes in Chang’an are watching you, eager to harm you. Marrying into the Fei family gives you a voice in the court. That’s why this marriage has happened. I know you didn’t want to be involved in such matters, but now you have no choice.”

Consort Zhen, ever perceptive, had seen right through Xiao Ming’s situation.

Her words were exactly what Xiao Ming had been thinking. He said, "Mother, I understand."