

I. Dynasty 383

Chapter 383: Family Feast

As the red sun slowly sank below the horizon, lanterns on both sides of the palace roads were lit one by one by the palace attendants.

As the night grew darker, the palace glowed brightly under the light of the lanterns, giving the palace a beautiful and majestic appearance. The ancient beauty of it all made Xiao Ming feel a bit more at peace.

After talking about some family matters with Consort Zhen in the Bi Shui Pavilion, Feng Deshui came in to urge them to head to the Fulin Hall.

By now, all the princes, concubines, and princesses had already arrived at the Fulin Hall, and the royal banquet was about to begin.

As Consort Zhen led the way toward Fulin Hall, the palace maids who passed by often cast flirtatious glances at Xiao Ming.

Consort Zhen smiled but said nothing. She understood palace matters well. Now that Xiao Ming was at the peak of his power, these maids hoped to catch his attention. If they did, they would have a life of comfort and security.

After all, there had been palace maids who had been favored by princes, rising from humble beginnings to become powerful figures. This showed how much Xiao Ming's status had changed—he hadn't received this kind of attention before.

It didn't take long before they arrived at Fulin Hall, and as Feng Deshui had said, all the royal family members were already there.

Upon Xiao Ming's arrival, some of the younger princes and princesses stood up to greet him.

Xiao Ming was no longer the same person as before. Although these princes and princesses were younger, their mothers were very clever. Before the banquet even started, they had already instructed their children on how to treat Xiao Ming.

In such a lively setting, Xiao Ming couldn't help but feel good as he returned their greetings.

At that moment, a lively figure appeared in front of him, extending a delicate little hand.

"Seventh Brother, did you bring me a gift? My perfume is all used up," Princess Xiangcheng pouted and insisted on getting a gift from Xiao Ming.

Her request was quickly followed by other young princes and princesses, all of them rushing over and eagerly extending their hands, looking at Xiao Ming with longing.

Many of the concubines couldn't help but smile at the scene.

At that moment, Xiao Ming's mood shifted from dark to bright. At least in the palace, some of his younger siblings had no ill intentions toward him.

Li San's list wasn't entirely filled with enemies. For example, Princess Xiangcheng, whose mother had passed away when she was young, had been taken in by Consort Zhen after Xiao Ming left for Qingzhou. Consort Zhen raised her as her own daughter. At that time, Princess Xiangcheng had only been seven years old.

Now, six or seven years later, Princess Xiangcheng had grown into a little beauty. She still regarded Xiao Ming as an older brother.

That's why Princess Xiangcheng was so affectionate with him.

"The gifts are all outside, don't worry, I haven't forgotten you," Xiao Ming rolled his eyes with a smile.

"Hehe, Seventh Brother, you're the best to me," Princess Xiangcheng said with a smile, showing her dimples before skipping back to her seat.

For a princess without a powerful background, her situation was quite pitiful. In the palace, a lack of background meant being easily manipulated. Many princesses sent to marry the barbarian tribes were in such a situation—without strong family support.

Once Princess Xiangcheng left, a 14-year-old boy appeared next to Xiao Ming.

"Seventh Brother, can I join you in fighting the barbarians?" he asked.

“You’re Ziyan?” Xiao Ming studied the boy carefully and tried to recall. This seemed to be the Ninth Prince.

“Wow, I didn’t think you’d remember me, Seventh Brother,” Xiao Ziyan said with a smile.

Xiao Ming smiled wryly. This boy, Xiao Ziyan, wasn’t closely related to him at the moment, but soon their relationship would deepen.

That’s because Xiao Ziyan would call Fei Yue’er “cousin.” His mother was Fei Ji’s sister, Consort Gong.

Xiao Ming patted Xiao Ziyan’s shoulder and laughed. He realized he wasn’t alone in Chang’an—he had powerful connections, and now he understood Consort Zhen’s careful planning.

He said to Xiao Ziyan, “Sure, as long as Father Emperor agrees, I’ll take you to see what a battlefield looks like.”

Xiao Ziyan excitedly turned to Xiao Wenxuan, who was sitting at the main seat. “Father Emperor, Seventh Brother said he’ll take me to fight the barbarians!”

Since Xiao Ming entered Fulin Hall, Xiao Wenxuan had been watching him closely. When he saw Xiao Ming’s expression soften, he knew his approach had worked.

In the past, Xiao Ming had always seemed isolated, almost as if rejected by this large family. Now, Xiao Ming would understand that he was not just the Seventh Prince—he was the older brother of all these princes and princesses.

He also had a responsibility to protect the royal family's honor.

“Ha ha ha... Well, when you're a bit older, I'll let you go,” Xiao Wenxuan laughed.

Xiao Ziyang danced with joy and ran back to his seat.

After playing with some of the younger princes and princesses for a while, Xiao Ming finally found his seat.

Once everyone had seated, Xiao Wenxuan clapped his hands, and the family banquet officially began.

The sound of music and dancing filled the air, and the entire Fulin Hall became lively and joyful. Xiao Wenxuan's mood lightened as he drank more.

Xiao Ming enjoyed the performance while observing the scene across from him. The Kings of Wei and Yong were also present.

When his eyes met with the King of Wei, the King's eyes flickered, and he immediately raised his glass, pretending to drink. The King of Yong raised his glass and nodded in acknowledgment.

Xiao Ming smiled. This visit to Chang'an was just the beginning. The real drama was still to come.

The banquet seemed to be purely social. Xiao Wenxuan was enjoying himself, and there was no mention of state affairs.

As other princes and concubines raised their glasses to toast Xiao Wenxuan, Xiao Ming did the same. An hour passed, and the banquet was nearing its end. Then, Xiao Ming suddenly remembered something and said, "Father Emperor, the New Year is in a few months. After this wedding, I will return to Qingzhou and won't be able to spend the festival with you. So, I've brought a small gift for you."

"Xiao Ming, you're truly filial. Always thinking about bringing gifts for your father. What is it? Let me see," Xiao Wenxuan said, smiling broadly and becoming even more affectionate toward Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming smiled. "I've already brought it, Father. Please follow me outside the hall. I'd like to use this item during the wedding, and I hope you'll approve and have it delivered to the Ministry of Rites."

Xiao Wenxuan was even more surprised. He turned to the other princes and concubines and said, "Come, let's go see what Seventh Brother has brought this time."

By now, the sky had turned completely dark.

As soon as Xiao Wenxuan finished speaking, the younger princes cheered and rushed outside. They all knew that this Seventh Brother of theirs was someone very impressive.

The Crown Prince, Second Prince, Third Prince, and Fourth Prince all showed displeasure. Whenever Xiao Ming came to Chang'an, they lost their chance to shine.

Especially the Crown Prince, whose gaze turned venomous as he glared at Xiao Ming. However, he suddenly gave a strange smile, as if he had some secret plan.