

## I. Dynasty 208

### Chapter 208: Qujiang Lake

Qujiang Lake, hailed as one of the Eight Scenic Wonders of Chang'an, was the city's inner lake.

Every spring and autumn, noble youths and highborn ladies gathered here for leisure. Painted pleasure boats crowded the waters like schools of fish, while scholars and beauties met on the lake, indulging in wine, poetry, music, and revelry.

Each year, after the imperial examinations, successful candidates would flock to Qujiang in groups, hosting grand banquets and drinking freely—giving rise to the famed tradition of “Floating Cups on Qujiang.”

In Xiao Ming's memory, Qujiang Lake was the liveliest place in Chang'an.

When the three of them arrived, the scene matched his recollections perfectly. The lake shimmered with rippling blue waves, dotted with countless painted boats from which the melodies of strings and flutes drifted, accompanied by the enchanting songs of women.

Along the lakeshore, autumn chrysanthemums bloomed in dazzling hues, competing in splendor. Scholars and ladies strolled arm in arm, while vendors hawked their wares, street performers drummed up crowds, and the aroma of snacks and delicacies filled the air.

“Your Highness.”

On the arched bridge spanning Qujiang Lake, Xiao Ming spotted Lu Fei and Luo Xin, both now dressed in plain clothes.

“Has the poetry contest started yet?” Xiao Ming cut straight to the point.

His purpose here was simple: to catch a glimpse of Fei Yue'er's beauty.

Everything else was secondary.

“Not yet.” Luo Xin pointed ahead beneath the bridge. “But it seems quite a crowd has gathered.”

Xiao Ming followed his gaze. The area Luo Xin indicated was now cordoned off with silk drapes, guarded by soldiers clad in golden armor.

No one but Princess Pingyang could muster such an extravagant display.

Outside the drapes, scholars craned their necks, straining for a look inside.

“Your Highness, with so many people, why bother with this poetry nonsense? Let's just board a pleasure boat and enjoy some tea,” Lu Fei grumbled, already itching to leave.

Ignoring Lu Fei's impatience, Luo Xin continued, “They say the winners of the contest will join the princess for a lakeside excursion. Those scholars are practically salivating at the chance.”

Xiao Ming scoffed. “Then this contest is pointless. I’ve no interest in touring the lake with my aunt.”

“Your Highness, I haven’t finished. I checked earlier—the rules state that the winners include both men and women. That means if a lady excels, she’ll also accompany the princess. Fei Yue’er’s literary talent is renowned in Chang’an. Who knows? Maybe she’ll...” Luo Xin trailed off with a suggestive grin.

Xiao Ming frowned. “Why go through the trouble? If I ask my aunt directly, would she really refuse me?”

“She would. Last year, even the Crown Prince was turned away.” Luo Xin spoke with conviction.

Princess Pingyang’s temperament was well-known. If Luo Xin said so, it was likely true.

“Fine. You two go do whatever you want. I’ll scout the situation.”

Lu Fei needed no further urging, dragging Luo Xin away immediately.

The three descended the stone bridge, arriving at the contest site. A sign read, “Entry by Poetry.” Many scholars clutched scrolls of their compositions, waiting to submit them once the event began.

Peering past the drapes, Xiao Ming glimpsed a line of women on the other side—presumably also awaiting the contest.

“Your Highness, what now? It seems we need poems to enter,” Ziyuan and Lüluo observed.

“Simple. I’ll teach you a few poems now. Memorize them, and slipping in will be easy. Remember—your priority is gathering intel on Fei Yue’er. Observe her appearance.”

Xiao Ming was playing it safe. If recognized by a prince or noble, word might reach Princess Pingyang, prompting Fei Yue’er to avoid him entirely.

So, he would send Ziyuan and Lüluo in first, joining them later.

“Understood, Your Highness.” The two maids smiled.

Though they dabbled in poetry, they doubted their skills could rival true scholars. But with Xiao Ming’s guidance—whose verses had already stunned Chang’an—success was assured.

After consideration, Xiao Ming selected two Tang Dynasty poems by female poets.

The first was “Lament of the Painted Letter” by Shangguan Wan’er:

“Leaves fall upon Dongting’s shores,

Longing for you across endless miles.

Dew thickens, scent chills the quilt,

Moon fades, embroidered screens stand hollow.

I yearn to sing of southern rivers,

Yet clutch letters from northern frontiers.

The pages hold no other meaning—

Only sorrow for time lost apart.”

The second was “Lament of the Chu Consort” by Yao Yuehua:

“Beneath the parasol leaves, a golden well,

The pulley creaks, drawing up silken rope.

The beauty rises before dawn,

Her hand brushes a silver vase—autumn’s chill.”

After reciting these, Ziyuan and Lüluo stared in astonishment. These were unmistakably a woman’s verses—melancholic and introspective.

“Your Highness, this...” Recovering, the maids eyed him with strange expressions.

Were it not for his burning curiosity about his future bride, Xiao Ming would never have shared such poems. Their looks made him feel like a modern man caught wearing stockings.

Coughing, he said, “I copied these from my mother’s collection. Now hurry!”

Only then did the maids snap to attention, memorizing the lines swiftly. Xiao Ming then taught Ziyuan Li Qingzhao’s “Slow Song: Searching, Seeking”—a famously poignant lyric.

Ziyuan, being sharper than Lüluo, would handle the contest while Lüluo observed from within.

Once the maids had memorized the poems perfectly, the crowd suddenly stirred—submission time had arrived.

“Go on,” Xiao Ming urged.

Nodding, Ziyuan and Lüluo linked arms and headed for the women’s section beyond the drapes.

Xiao Ming lingered beneath a willow tree at the rear, watching the scene unfold.

“Your Highness?”

“Halt!”

Two voices rang out abruptly—the first vaguely familiar, the second belonging unmistakably to Zhao Long and Zhao Hu.

Turning, Xiao Ming saw a graceful young man in a blue round-collared robe. A mole between his eyebrows triggered a name in Xiao Ming’s memory.

“Qin Rui!”

The young man laughed brightly. “Your Highness! Five years apart, and I almost didn’t recognize you!”

Xiao Ming quickly recalled Qin Rui’s background—and his father, Qin Chengming, a target for alliance on his list.

“Zhao Long, Zhao Hu, stand down. This is the eldest son of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices’ director, Qin Chengming.”