

I. Dynasty 211

Chapter 211: Selected

“Your Highness, this humble girl is of limited talent and dare not casually offer any commentary.”

Fei Yue’er spoke softly, her voice clear and melodious.

Princess Pingyang smiled. “Among the women of Chang’an, if even you claim to be of limited talent, then others might as well be illiterate. You rarely step out—this time, don’t be as modest as Grand Secretary Fei.”

A white veil covered half of Fei Yue’er’s face, her exposed eyes curving into crescent moons as she replied, “As you wish, Your Highness.”

At that moment, the golden-armored guard entered again, holding a piece of paper. “Your Highness, there’s only one person left outside.”

A maidservant stepped forward to retrieve the poem. Princess Pingyang said, “Very well. Those who arrive late shall not be admitted. It’s time to begin the poetry gathering.”

The maidservant handed the poem to Princess Pingyang, who skimmed it and revealed a faint look of surprise. She signaled to the maidservant, who then presented the poem to Fei Yue’er.

“Yue’er, what do you think of this poem?” Princess Pingyang asked.

“Wait till the Double Ninth Day comes,

My blooms alone will shame all flowers.

Their scent will pierce the Chang'an skies,

The city drowned in golden armor.”

Fei Yue'er recited slowly, then paused in thought. “This poem appears to praise chrysanthemums, yet its words carry an overwhelming aura of slaughter.”

Princess Pingyang nodded. “Indeed, I thought the same. The author must surely be someone accustomed to the brutality of the battlefield.”

Princess Xiangcheng suddenly laughed. “This poem reminds me of Seventh Brother's ‘Frontier Song.’ Both are steeped in the air of slaughter.”

“You mean ‘The moon still shines on mountain passes as of yore...’?” Princess Pingyang asked with a smile.

“...But our warriors return no more.

Were the winged general of Dragon City here,

The Tartar steeds would not dare cross the frontier.”

“Exactly,” Princess Xiangcheng said.

Princess Pingyang chuckled. “Could it be that the Prince of Qi has come to this poetry gathering? When he was in Chang’an before, he never missed a single one. Now that he’s finally returned this year, perhaps he couldn’t resist joining in the fun.”

Princess Xiangcheng’s eyes sparkled. “If Seventh Brother were here, this gathering would be far more interesting.”

“More interesting than the gathering, or more interesting than your seventh brother?” Princess Pingyang teased, her lips curling into a smile.

Princess Xiangcheng laughed. “Of course, Seventh Brother is more interesting. I’ve been meaning to ask him for some of those Qingzhou glass bottles of perfume!”

“That’s true. Since the Prince of Qi has come to Chang’an so rarely, he ought to leave something behind before he goes.”

After a pause, Princess Pingyang continued playfully, “But if the Prince of Qi were here, there’s someone here who should be worried.”

With that, she glanced at Fei Yue’er and giggled.

Fei Yue’er immediately lowered her head, her cheeks flushing like rosy clouds. Softly, she said, “Your Highness jests.”

“Giggle, I won’t tease you anymore. Don’t worry—even if the Prince of Qi were here, I’d protect you. Besides, he’s quite busy these days and may not even come.”

Then she announced, “Now that everyone is here, let the poetry gathering begin. You talented ladies must help me decide on the theme.”

“Today is the Autumn Outing Festival—naturally, we should compose poems about chrysanthemums,” one woman suggested.

“We write about chrysanthemums every year—how dull! Let’s choose something else.”

“ ... ”

The women below immediately began debating.

Princess Pingyang nodded slightly. "The Autumn Outing Festival need not be limited to chrysanthemums. Yue'er, Xiangcheng, what do you think?"

Fei Yue'er looked at Princess Xiangcheng. Aside from Princess Pingyang, she held the highest status here. "Princess Xiangcheng is multi-talented—let her decide."

"No, Yue'er sister should choose. Who knows, I might soon have to call you sister-in-law!" Princess Xiangcheng teased.

Fei Yue'er blushed even harder, her tone turning slightly indignant. "If Your Highness continues jesting like this, I shall take my leave."

Princess Pingyang shot Princess Xiangcheng a reproachful look. Princess Xiangcheng was one of Emperor Xiao Wenzuan's three daughters and his most beloved. At just thirteen years old, she was rather mischievous.

"Enough of your nonsense," Princess Pingyang chided.

Princess Xiangcheng stuck out her tongue. "Fine, Yue'er sister, I apologize. You choose the theme."

Fei Yue'er, having lived a sheltered life, was naturally shy about matters between men and women. But with two princesses present, she couldn't act too willfully and storm off.

“Very well. Since the great victory at Cangzhou has brought glory to our nation, why not compose poems about war?”

“War poems?”

Princess Pingyang looked at Fei Yue’er in surprise, thinking to herself: Outwardly delicate, yet inwardly strong-willed—any prince who marries her would gain a truly capable partner.

In her view, the notion that “a woman’s lack of talent is a virtue” was nonsense. A woman’s intellect could equally assist her husband in managing affairs.

Moreover, as a daughter of the Fei family, if the Prince of Qi married her, he would only flourish further.

“What does Your Highness think?” Fei Yue’er asked.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Princess Pingyang replied, “An excellent idea. Then let the theme be ‘war poems,’ to celebrate the victory at Cangzhou.”

With that, Princess Pingyang took brush and paper, wrote down the theme, and had a maidservant deliver it to the guards for transmission to the other side of the curtain.

Meanwhile, Xiao Ming and Qin Rui were mingling at the gathering.

The moment he entered, Xiao Ming was recognized by many, who eagerly sought his company.

He couldn't help but feel frustrated—it seemed his cover was blown. There'd be no chance to catch a glimpse of Fei Yue'er now.

Knowing he was here, Princess Pingyang would never allow him to join her on the lake tour. Otherwise, her year-long effort to recruit talent would be ruined.

While socializing with the scholars, the guards brought in the theme. "Her Highness declares that today's theme is 'war poems.' You may begin writing. The time limit is one incense stick's worth. The poems will be judged by Her Highness."

At once, the scholars ceased their idle chatter. Even the noble youths who had been crowding around Xiao Ming scattered, muttering to themselves as they racked their brains.

Qin Rui and the other two looked at Xiao Ming, their eyes conveying a clear message.

Xiao Ming had no choice but to give each of them a poem, keeping the best one for himself.

The time limit of one incense stick—roughly half an hour—passed quickly. The guards came to collect the compositions.

With Xiao Ming's poems in hand, Qin Rui and the others chatted leisurely at the back, confident that his work would secure their selection.

Sure enough, soon after, the guards announced the results: "The winning poems are 'Song of Liangzhou,' 'The Year of Jihai,' 'Spring View,' and 'Song of the Frontier.'"

"Hahaha! We humbly accept!" Zhu Yushu burst into laughter—these were their four poems. With that, he prepared to follow the guards to the other side of the curtain.

"Wait! Prince of Qi, how dare you cheat at Her Highness's poetry gathering? Do you even deserve to cross the curtain?" A scholar in white robes sneered sarcastically.