

I. Dynasty 212

Chapter 212: Conflict

The poetry gathering fell into dead silence at these words. All eyes turned to Xiao Ming and his three companions.

Then another voice rang out, “Pan Yu, you mustn’t make baseless accusations. What evidence do you have that the Prince of Qi cheated?”

“What a surprise—I didn’t expect the Prince of Shu to be in Chang’an as well,” Xiao Ming said, looking at the speaker. It was none other than the Fifth Prince, the Prince of Shu.

“Your Highness, I am not speaking recklessly. Qin Rui, Zhu Yushu, and Du Boyuan—are they not all talentless fools? How could their poems possibly catch Her Highness’s eye? I saw the Prince of Qi whispering to them earlier—he must have fed them the lines!” Pan Yu declared.

Zhu Yushu frowned. “Pan Yu, what grudge do you hold against us? How dare you slander us like this? Explain yourself—what exactly do you want?”

The Prince of Shu interjected with a smile, “Pingshan, there’s no need for anger. If Pan Yu doubts your talent, simply compose another poem in front of Her Highness to prove yourself.”

Xiao Ming’s gaze shifted between the Prince of Shu and Pan Yu. It was clear they were putting on an act—one playing the villain, the other the mediator.

Xiao Ming had already been furious with the Prince of Shu for obstructing his access to saltpeter. Combined with their past enmity in Chang'an, his anger flared even hotter.

Had he not mobilized the entire population of his fiefdom to search for saltpeter, the siege of Cangzhou might have ended very differently.

And now this bastard had the audacity to stand before him and cause trouble again?

At the Prince of Shu's words, Zhu Yushu grew uneasy. Qin Rui and Du Boyuan were the same—after all, they had cheated.

Seeing their silence, Pan Yu grew even bolder. "Hah! To think such frauds have infiltrated the Autumn Outing Poetry Gathering—what an insult to the eyes of all present! And for the Prince of Qi himself to abet such deceit—how laughable! This brings shame upon the imperial family!"

The Prince of Shu added, "Pan Yu, you mustn't say that. The Prince of Qi has long been a disgrace to the imperial family."

Malicious laughter rippled through the gathering.

Xiao Ming watched coldly. The Prince of Shu had finally shed his mask of false benevolence. He turned to Zhu Yushu and asked, "Pingshan, what is the punishment for a nobleman who slanders a feudal prince?"

Zhu Yushu hesitated, then replied, "Your Highness, the law dictates one hundred lashes for a noble who defames a prince."

“Good. Go outside and fetch a whip,” Xiao Ming said, narrowing his eyes at Pan Yu.

The Prince of Shu was his equal in rank—their feud was one thing. But who did this Pan Yu think he was, daring to humiliate him? If he didn’t teach these people a lesson today, they would never realize that the Prince of Qi was no longer the laughingstock of old.

“Uh...” Zhu Yushu gave Xiao Ming a strange look.

“Go, now!” Xiao Ming glared. Nodding, Zhu Yushu hurried out.

The Prince of Shu and Pan Yu were now thoroughly confused.

After a moment of silence, the Prince of Shu sneered, “Prince of Qi, surely you don’t intend to brawl with me? Though I suppose you could always run crying to your mother again, as you used to.”

Pang Yukun had warned him that his recent achievements would provoke jealousy among the other princes. Now, those words had come true—the Prince of Shu was clearly eager to be the first to strike.

If Xiao Ming endured this humiliation, he would become a laughingstock. But if he fought the Prince of Shu, the matter would inevitably reach Emperor Xiao Wenzuan, leading to reprimands and further censure from the court officials.

Yet Xiao Ming was not one to suffer in silence. “While I was shedding blood on the walls of Cangzhou against the barbarians, you were still suckling at some courtesan’s breast. You think you’re worthy of crossing blades with me?”

The Prince of Shu’s face flushed crimson.

Back in Chang’an, he and Xiao Ming had always been at odds—both notorious troublemakers, their clashes were frequent.

Now that Xiao Ming had earned such glory, the Prince of Shu couldn’t bear it. Summoned to Chang’an by the Emperor, he had been waiting for an opportunity to humiliate Xiao Ming.

After all, in the past, Xiao Ming had always been the one bullied.

Younger and with a mother of no significant influence, Xiao Ming could only complain to the Emperor and Consort Zhen after a beating.

And to Emperor Xiao Wenzuan, such quarrels had only ever warranted a stern scolding.

“Say that again if you dare!” the Prince of Shu roared.

“You’re beneath me,” Xiao Ming shot back, unflinching. In his eyes, the Prince of Shu was even more despicable than the barbarians—while the barbarians were sworn enemies, the Prince of Shu was actively sabotaging the Great Yu Empire from within.

Just as the two were about to roll up their sleeves and fight, a sharp voice cut through the tension.

“Who dares to cause trouble at my poetry gathering?”

The curtain was drawn back, revealing layers of beaded screens shielding Princess Pingyang and the other noblewomen.

“Greetings to Her Highness,” the scholars chorused, bowing.

As their elder, Princess Pingyang received the respect of both princes. “Prince of Shu. Prince of Qi. So it was you two. Have you brought your brawling to my gathering now?” she said sternly.

Xiao Ming replied, “Aunt, the Prince of Shu has falsely accused me of cheating and repeatedly insulted me. I could not endure such slander, hence our quarrel.”

“Prince of Shu, is this true?” Princess Pingyang’s voice turned grave. “Your childish squabbles were one thing—but now, as feudal lords, how can you still act so recklessly?”

“Aunt, I only spoke out because I could not tolerate his cheating! I did this for your sake. Zhu Yushu, Qin Rui, and Du Boyuan—everyone in Chang’an knows they are talentless fools. How could they possibly have been selected?”

“You mean to say these four poems belong to the Prince of Qi and these three?” Princess Pingyang frowned. She, too, knew of their reputations.

“Xiao Ming, as the Prince of Qi, how could you act so shamelessly? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Xiao Ming had cheated—but so had many of these scholars. Plenty had prepared chrysanthemum-themed poems in advance, only to be caught off guard when the theme changed to war poetry.

Compared to them, he was no worse.

He neither admitted nor denied it. “Aunt, how can you be certain they are incapable of composing such poems? If you doubt them, test them publicly. If they succeed, will you name them the winners?”

Princess Pingyang hesitated. Xiao Ming’s confidence gave her pause. “Very well. I shall test them myself. Prince of Shu, if you have falsely accused them, I will have words with your father.”

“Understood, Aunt,” the Prince of Shu said smugly. “And if I am right, I hope you will expose the Prince of Qi’s disgraceful conduct.”

At that moment, Zhu Yushu returned with a horsewhip in hand.

Princess Pingyang said, “Yue’er, you shall set the challenge. Let us see their true skill.”