

I. Dynasty 213

Chapter 213: Astonishment

“Fei Yue’er?”

“Is it really her? Fei Yue’er actually came?”

“Heavens! Ever since I saw her portrait, I couldn’t eat or sleep. I never thought I’d see her today—but curse these bead curtains, I can’t see a thing!”

“ ... ”

As soon as Princess Pingyang finished speaking, excited whispers erupted among the scholars and nobles. Everyone craned their necks, trying to catch a glimpse of the figure behind the beaded curtain.

But the thick layers of beads only showed blurred shadows, making it impossible to see clearly. The golden-armored guards standing on either side further crushed any hopes of reckless attempts to peek.

Pan Yu trembled at the name, his eyes burning with hatred—directed squarely at Xiao Ming.

This was why he had dared to insult Xiao Ming so boldly.

Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow, wishing he had X-ray vision to see Fei Yue'er's legendary beauty. But thanks to the Prince of Shu's interference, that hope was now dashed.

"Since Her Highness has asked me to set the challenge," a clear, melodious voice came from behind the curtain, "how about each of you compose a poem on one of the Four Noble Plants—plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum?"

Xiao Ming's heart skipped a beat at the sound of her voice—like a nightingale's song, enchanting and pure.

Meanwhile, Zhu Yushu and the other two looked ready to faint. They knew nothing about poetry! Was Xiao Ming setting them up for humiliation?

"Your Highness, this..." Zhu Yushu swallowed hard. They had hoped to impress Princess Pingyang, but now they were about to embarrass themselves beyond repair.

Xiao Ming feigned seriousness. "Don't panic! Believe in your own talent. Since the theme is set, you go first, Zhu Yushu—take the plum blossom."

Zhu Yushu wanted to bang his head against the wall. His mind was blank—how could he possibly improvise a poem?

The Prince of Shu and Pan Yu smirked at his panicked expression.

Xiao Ming, however, smirked back. The knowledge crystal in his mind wasn't just for show. Silently, he transmitted a poem to Zhu Yushu:

"I hear the plum blooms brave the morning wind,

Snow blankets the mountains, peak to peak.

If only I could split into a thousand selves,

To stand by each plum tree, a poet unique."

The crystal's function was knowledge transfer—and as Zhu Yushu concentrated, the verses gradually surfaced in his mind. His panic turned to delight. After a moment of "deep thought," he suddenly brightened and recited the poem loudly.

The crowd fell silent. Even the Prince of Shu and Pan Yu were stunned.

"Hmm, another masterpiece," Princess Pingyang mused from behind the curtain, sounding intrigued. "Who's next?"

Ignoring Zhu Yushu's barely contained glee, Xiao Ming said, "Qin Rui, you take the bamboo."

Qin Rui, still shocked by Zhu Yushu's performance, paled. He glanced desperately at Xiao Ming, who ignored him.

Just as Qin Rui started sweating, inspiration struck. He blurted out:

"Bamboo grows wild in empty fields,

Its tips pierce clouds, towering high.

No one admires its noble pride,

Yet it stands firm—unbowed, untied."

Qin Rui beamed and bowed. "My humble offering, gentlemen."

The scholars' mocking smirks vanished, replaced by envy.

Next was Du Boyuan, who recited:

"Autumn frost paints the chrysanthemum's hue,

Its grace outshines the sunset's glow.

Casual verses, yet heaven-sent,

Its charm lingers wherever it goes.”

Three flawless poems in a row. The trio exchanged triumphant grins. Zhu Yushu gripped the horsewhip and smirked at Xiao Ming. “Your Highness, allow me to handle the lashing later.”

His glare landed on Pan Yu, whose face drained of color. He looked pleadingly at the Prince of Shu.

But the Prince of Shu, having only used Pan Yu as a pawn, coldly abandoned him. “Pan Yu, how could you spout such nonsense? You almost made me doubt their integrity.”

Pan Yu turned ghostly pale.

Behind the curtain, Princess Pingyang smiled. “So many exquisite verses in one gathering—how rare! Prince of Qi, since plum, bamboo, and chrysanthemum are covered, why not complete the set with an orchid poem?”

Xiao Ming shot a taunting glance at the Prince of Shu and recited:

“A lone orchid blooms in hidden glades,

Lost among weeds, unseen, unknown.

Though touched by spring’s warm golden rays,

It dreads the autumn’s frosty throne.

Early frosts may strip its grace,

Its verdant pride undone.

Without a breeze to bear its scent,

For whom will its fragrance be spun?”

The Prince of Shu’s jaw dropped. Since when could Xiao Ming compose poetry on the spot?

Behind the curtain, Princess Pingyang turned to Fei Yue'er, moved.

“Without a breeze to bear its scent, for whom will its fragrance be spun?” she repeated softly. “Prince of Qi, I never knew you possessed such depth. This poem... speaks of a woman’s sorrow. Without the right wind, her fragrance goes unnoticed. How tragic.”

Fei Yue'er's expression shifted. She understood the hidden meaning—Princess Pingyang had not always been so stern. After her husband's death, she had changed. The poem's lament mirrored her own unspoken grief.

And now, the princess's gaze at Fei Yue'er carried a silent warning: A woman's life is defined by her choice of husband. One mistake, and all is lost.

“Aunt, we’ve proven our innocence,” Xiao Ming said. “The Prince of Shu and Pan Yu falsely accused us. Will you honor your promise?”

Princess Pingyang snapped out of her melancholy. “Of course. You and your friends shall join me on the Qujiang Lake cruise. Princess Xiangcheng is here too—we can all chat.”

Xiao Ming's face fell. “Aunt, I just remembered—I have urgent business this afternoon.”

“Seventh Brother,” came Princess Xiangcheng's icy voice, “if you refuse, perhaps I should visit your residence instead?”

Xiao Ming winced. Princess Xiangcheng was the one person in Chang'an he dreaded most—back in the day, she had extorted him relentlessly.

“Fine, fine, I’ll go!” he relented. “But first—” He turned to Pan Yu.

A mere noble had dared insult a prince. If he didn’t reclaim his dignity now, the entire court would laugh at him.