

## **I. Dynasty 214**

### Chapter 214: Secret Arrangements

The atmosphere at the poetry gathering grew tense.

The scholars stood frozen, afraid of being implicated, quickly distancing themselves from Pan Yu.

The Prince of Shu's face darkened, but there was nothing he could do.

"Pan Yu, any last words?" Zhu Yushu sneered, cracking the whip in his hand.

Pan Yu glanced desperately at the Prince of Shu, but the prince remained indifferent. Pan Yu seethed inwardly—it was the Prince of Shu who had goaded him into this! Without his backing, he would never have dared provoke the Prince of Qi. A hundred lashes would kill him!

"It was the Prince of Shu!" Pan Yu blurted. "He told me to do it!"

Gasps filled the room. All eyes turned to the Prince of Shu. Xiao Ming smirked. The scholars of Chang'an had no backbone—he had known Pan Yu would crack under pressure.

Pan Yu was just a pawn. The real target was the Prince of Shu.

Though he had mobilized the people of Qingzhou to collect saltpeter, it wasn't a long-term solution. His demand for gunpowder would only grow—not just for his own armies, but to sell to other feudal lords. Relying on scattered civilian sources wouldn't suffice.

The Prince of Shu's presence in the capital surely meant he was behind the saltpeter obstruction. Now that Xiao Ming had caught him red-handed, he could appeal to Emperor Xiao Wenzuan, forcing the Prince of Shu to lift the restrictions.

"Liar!" The Prince of Shu roared, kicking Pan Yu to the ground. He rained down blows, venting his fury.

"Enough!" Princess Pingyang's voice cut through like ice. "Prince of Shu, you dare cause trouble at my gathering? I will report this to your father."

The Prince of Shu paled. Even he feared the Emperor. "Aunt, this snake deceived me! I had nothing to do with it!"

"Silence! I've heard enough. Leave at once. We will settle this later."

The Prince of Shu clenched his fists but dared not disobey. As he stormed past Xiao Ming, he hissed, "This isn't over."

Xiao Ming didn't even turn his head—just spat on the ground.

"As for Pan Yu," Princess Pingyang declared, "stirring strife among imperial princes is an insult to the royal family. Guards! One hundred lashes!"

Pan Yu collapsed like a corpse.

With the conflict resolved, Princess Pingyang turned to Xiao Ming. “Prince of Qi, as today’s victors, you and your friends shall join me on the lake cruise. I have matters to discuss.”

The other scholars sighed and dispersed.

Zhu Yushu, Du Boyuan, and Qin Rui were overjoyed, gazing at Xiao Ming with gratitude. After five years, he was still their protector.

Xiao Ming exhaled. His efforts today weren’t just for show.

First, he had hoped to catch a glimpse of his betrothed.

But more importantly—this was about strategy.

The battle against the barbarians had been a narrow victory. In truth, the enemy commander, Bei Shan, had used Xiao Ming to weaken a rival tribe. Had Beishan committed fully, Qingzhou’s limited ammunition would never have held.

The “glorious” victory had drained Xiao Ming’s resources. A few more such battles, and his fiefdom would starve.

Thus, he had devised a two-pronged plan, first to develop Qingzhou’s industry and commerce, and second build a pro-Qingzhou faction in Chang’an.

Both served one goal—capital accumulation.

He needed allies in the court to shield Qingzhou from political storms.

Moreover, Chang’an sat atop vast coal reserves—critical for future steam engines. Local mines alone wouldn’t sustain industrialization.

Most crucially, without political backing, his trade ventures would face endless sabotage.

Economically, blocked exports would strangle Qingzhou’s industries. No profits meant no investments—just as Western powers had once forced open markets with cannons. Even today, trade wars sparked global conflicts.

By winning over Zhu Yushu and others, Xiao Ming was carving out his influence in Chang’an—just like other feudal lords.

These men were his first pieces on the board. More would follow.

His true mission in Chang'an was only beginning.

Lost in thought, Xiao Ming barely noticed the bead curtains parting.

Princess Pingyang sat at the center. Below her, Princess Xiangcheng smirked.

And across from them—a veiled woman met his gaze.