

I. Dynasty 280

Chapter 280: A New Kind of Drama

“Her graceful neck extended, her fair beauty exposed. Fragrant without embellishment, unadorned by makeup. Hair in lofty coils, eyebrows finely arched...”

The elegant singing of Ziyuan and Luluo floated gently through the grand hall. Their movements flowed with the rhythm of the music—at times their sleeves fluttered like waves stirred by a sudden wind across a calm lake, and at other times they twirled like drifting autumn leaves. Their dance steps were light and graceful, like spring swallows taking flight—sometimes quick like the pulse of drums, other times slow like the toll of a distant bell. In moments of brilliance, they sparkled like dancing fireflies, while in sorrowful passages they wilted like falling petals.

As they danced, Ziyuan and Luluo occasionally cast glances toward Xiao Ming, their shy expressions lending a delicate charm to the performance.

Xiao Ming had not expected their performance to be so breathtaking. He, too, became lost in the beauty of it.

The dance was “The Frightened Swan Dance”, choreographed by Xiao Ming himself and set to the lyrics of “Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River”. He had personally sketched the choreography beforehand, and the girls’ execution of it left him thoroughly impressed. Even the assembled officials and generals were entranced.

When the song and dance ended, Ziyuan and Luluo bowed gracefully before Xiao Ming and retreated from the hall.

Pang Yukun sighed in amazement. “Even within the imperial palace, such exquisite music and dance are rarely seen. This rendition of Ode to the Luo River Goddess set to such moving melody is truly divine. As the saying goes, ‘This song belongs in Heaven—how rare to hear it on Earth.’

Zhan Xingchang added, “Pang Lord is right. But I must say, the tune has some similarities to the Qingzhou military anthem. Your Highness, might this composition be of your own creation?”

Lu Fei chimed in, blunt as always, “You bookworms are too fussy. Your Highness, this song and dance were both great to watch and great to hear!”

Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang shook their heads with a chuckle. Xiao Ming smiled and admitted, “Yes, the melody is mine. The dance is called ‘The Frightened Swan Dance’.”

The tune and choreography were adapted from the television drama *Empresses in the Palace* of his past life, whose instrumental soundtrack relied heavily on traditional instruments. Thus, the music could be recreated with ease in this era.

Judging by the captivated reactions of his audience, Xiao Ming felt his efforts had paid off. He had chosen this combination of dance and poetry as an entry point for introducing his own cultural movement within the territory. As a soft yet powerful beginning to a broader cultural renaissance, it was perfect.

While everyone was still immersed in the elegance of the performance, two more actors stepped onto the stage—an old man and a young girl, both dressed in shabby clothes.

Suddenly, the girl sang out, “The north wind blows, the snowflakes fall, snowflakes drifting, the new year arrives...”

The officials looked at each other in confusion. What was this? But when they saw Xiao Ming's calm expression, they focused their attention again.

After the girl finished singing, the old man began to speak. The drama began.

Xiao Ming watched from above with a satisfied smile. What they were performing was a heavily adapted version of the modern drama "The White-Haired Girl". But in this version, it was localized to the customs of the Great Yu Empire. The girl's father, originally a peasant oppressed by a landlord, had become a poor tenant crushed under the heel of Qingzhou's former aristocrats.

The play still depicted the young girl being sold and exploited by the rich, but unlike the original tragic ending, this version concluded with the Qingzhou army arriving to drive out the corrupt elites, leading to a joyful resolution.

Xiao Ming paid close attention to the reactions in the hall. Lu Fei and others were clearly drawn in, clenching their fists and gritting their teeth at the right moments. Meanwhile, Pang Yukun and Zhan Xingchang seemed to be deep in thought.

As the drama ended, Lu Fei suddenly leapt to his feet and shouted, "That bastard Yang Bailao deserves a beating!"

Before he could storm off, Niu Ben quickly pulled him back into his seat. "You fool, it's just a play! Don't take it so seriously."

Lu Fei finally realized, and chuckled sheepishly. The actor playing Yang Bailao, however, looked thoroughly alarmed.

When the drama concluded, Pang Yukun said, “Your Highness, I’ve never seen a play quite like this. It’s unpretentious, straightforward—it will surely resonate deeply with the common people.”

“No kidding—I thought it was real!” Lu Fei added with a laugh.

Xiao Ming looked around and asked, “What do you all think about sending this play on tour throughout the territory?”

Zhan Xingchang responded, “The people will certainly come to despise their local tyrants and appreciate Your Highness for removing the aristocrats from Qingzhou. But if I may speak frankly—this isn’t just about Qingzhou, is it? I suspect Your Highness intends for this play to be seen in other provinces.”

Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow in surprise. Zhan Xingchang had seen through him completely.

Indeed, the true purpose of this play wasn’t to win more hearts within Qingzhou—his achievements were already widely known. The real goal was to spread it beyond, into the neighboring regions.

Its messages—resentment toward local tyrants, admiration for Qingzhou’s justice—would take root among the people of other domains. It would entice refugees to migrate to Qingzhou and allow Xiao Ming to establish a grassroots reputation in far-off lands—useful for any future plans.

Such drama would also become the foundation of a broader cultural awakening. In the future, Xiao Ming planned to adapt other tales like “Sang Zhongyong” or “Encouragement to Study”—simple stories that taught powerful lessons.

He knew that ordinary folk didn’t respond well to flowery speech or lofty treatises. A direct, emotional play would lodge itself in their hearts and minds far more easily.

Xiao Ming smiled faintly, “My intentions are pure, Xingchang. Don’t overthink it.”

Zhan Xingchang caught the hint immediately and nodded, “Of course, Your Highness. We’ve never even seen such a play before.”

Pang Yukun laughed heartily, quickly catching on.

Meanwhile, Niu Ben and Lu Fei looked at each other, utterly confused. They had no idea what any of that was about.

The earlier dance had been brief, but this drama lasted a long while. When it finally ended, the night was already deep.

Xiao Ming rose and said, “Let us raise one last glass. After tonight, a new year begins. I ask you all—let us strive forward together.”

Niu Ben and Pang Yukun took the lead, lifting their cups with solemn reverence. "We pledge our lives to assist Your Highness in revitalizing Qingzhou!"

"Cheers!"

Xiao Ming, stirred with emotion, drank the wine in his cup in one gulp. In his heart, he whispered:

"The 18th century—I'm ready."