

## I. Dynasty 289

### Chapter 289: The Performers

The snow in Qingzhou had gradually melted, and a trace of warmth spread under the midday sun.

At the Eastern Market, crowds of people surrounded the stage, layer upon layer, watching the play. Waves of cheers erupted from time to time.

When the villain Huang Shiren appeared, the audience gritted their teeth in anger, wishing they could rush the stage and beat him to death.

In this drama, they saw a reflection of their own past—how they, too, had once been oppressed by powerful landlords and forced to sell their sons and daughters.

“Kill Huang Shiren! Kill him!”

As the play reached its climax, the crowd shouted loudly. The thunderous voices made Xiao Ming’s eardrums buzz.

Zhao Long and Zhao Hu, like the rest of the crowd, mirrored the emotions of the plot—at times joyful, at times sorrowful, and at times furious.

When the play ended and Huang Shiren was beaten to death, a huge cheer erupted throughout the Eastern Market.

“That felt so good! That bastard finally got what he deserved!”

“Ah, it’s good to be in Qingzhou. No one else would dare put on such a performance—only our prince is so magnanimous!”

“Exactly! Huang Shiren was a powerful landlord. In the past, no one dared to perform this kind of story in public. We have to thank His Highness. If he hadn’t driven out the landlords from the six prefectures, we’d all still be living like Yang Bailao!”

“You’re right! This play is great. They deserve a reward!”

Saying that, a commoner reached into his sleeve and threw three copper coins onto the stage.

As soon as those coins hit, it was like rain—the audience began showering the stage with copper coins. The three performers on stage froze in shock.

They had performed in Qingzhou before, but never had they seen such generosity. In the past, earning thirty coins in a day was already considered good.

Yet in just a moment, the stage floor was covered in coins. Within a short while, they had collected over a thousand coins.

The people at the front who had tipped them left, and those in the back stepped forward and also threw coins onto the stage.

“You performed really well! This was way better than those old plays!”

“Your Highness, may I give them a reward too?” Zhao Long asked.

Xiao Ming was momentarily stunned, then smiled and nodded. Zhao Hu teased, “Hey, did you fall for that little actress? She is quite pretty.”

Zhao Long’s usually blank expression turned red. He quickly defended, “Don’t say nonsense like that—you’ll ruin her reputation.”

Zhao Hu scoffed, “She’s just a performer. What reputation is there to ruin?”

Zhao Long glared sharply at Zhao Hu, who instantly fell silent.

Xiao Ming watched the two brothers banter with great interest. The girl playing Xier was indeed charming. Falling for the heroine of a stage play was common even in modern times.

Zhao Long seemed to be the Great Yu Empire’s version of a fanboy. But unlike the modern world, performers in this era held very low social status—even lower than craftsmen.

That was why Zhao Hu had spoken so bluntly.

Xiao Ming watched as Zhao Long placed his copper coins on the stage, sneaking a shy glance at the girl. Both Xiao Ming and Zhao Hu chuckled quietly.

Still, jokes aside, Xiao Ming felt it was time to speak with the troupe. He said, “Zhao Hu, have the troupe come to the palace. I want to meet them.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Zhao Hu replied.

After returning Xiao Ming to the palace, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu went back toward the Eastern Market.

On the way, Zhao Long asked anxiously, “Why is His Highness summoning Chen Laoshi’s troupe? Did the play upset him?”

“When did you get so slow? The play was written by His Highness. Why would he be upset?”

“Exactly because it was his creation! Maybe they didn’t perform it well enough,” Zhao Long replied.

Zhao Hu sighed, hands on his hips. “Er Lang, don’t tell me you’re really into that girl? What business is it of yours what His Highness wants with the troupe? Just carry out the order.”

Rebuked, Zhao Long could only nod.

At the Eastern Market, the troupe was counting the day's earnings. The young woman who played Xier had already changed out of costume and into a plain hemp dress. She spoke to a frail middle-aged man who was gleefully stacking copper coins.

"Father, how much did we make?"

The man—Chen Laoshi—squinted his narrow eyes into a line and smiled. "You're called Xier, and the girl in the play is also Xier. Looks like fate wanted you to play this role. We've struck gold today—three thousand copper coins! That's three taels of silver!"

The others in the troupe were overjoyed. Earning three taels in one day? That meant they could make over a hundred taels in a month!

They had once lived on the brink of starvation, but now they were living a dream.

"It's all thanks to Miss Ziyuan. If she hadn't taught me, we wouldn't be here. Father, how about I buy something to give Miss Ziyuan tonight—as a small token of thanks?"

"Hmm, you're right. We should show our gratitude."

At that moment, the man who played Huang Shiren said, “Miss Ziyuan is from Prince Qi’s palace. What could she possibly need? Let’s not make fools of ourselves. Let’s just divide the money.”

“Wu San, that’s not right. Whether she needs it or not is her business. Showing gratitude is ours. How can we act like we have no sense of decency?”

“Decency? We’re barely surviving. Let’s just split the money,” Wu San replied, his triangular eyes glaring.

Just then, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu entered the backstage area.

“Chen Laoshi, His Highness Prince Qi requests your presence!” Zhao Hu announced.

“Prince Qi?” Chen Laoshi blinked in disbelief. “And you are...?”

“We are personal guards to Prince Qi. Please come with us,” Zhao Long explained.

As he spoke, Zhao Long glanced at Chen Xier. His gaze softened—he had been moved by her performance, and now he felt like she was the very character from the play.

Pale-faced, Chen Laoshi nervously scooped up some coins. “Sirs, why does His Highness wish to see us?”

Zhao Hu said firmly, "You'll know once you get to the palace. Keep your money. We don't accept bribes at Prince Qi's palace."

"Father, let's listen to the gentlemen," said Chen Xier gracefully. "With Sister Ziyuan there, they won't mistreat us."

Chen Laoshi, still pale, nodded. Wu San, however, looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"This way, please."

Zhao Hu gestured forward and led the group toward the palace. The troupe hurriedly packed up and followed.

Upon arriving at Prince Qi's palace, Zhao Hu led them into the main hall. When Chen Laoshi saw the man seated in the center, he froze.

He was certain he had seen that face earlier among the crowd watching the play.

And now, worry filled his heart.