

## I. Dynasty 290

### Chapter 290: Let Me Tell You a Story

“You are Chen Laoshi?”

Seated calmly in the main hall, Xiao Ming’s voice echoed across the room. Ziyuan stood beside him, smiling warmly at Chen Xier.

“This humble one is indeed,” Chen Laoshi replied nervously.

In his mind, people like them—stage performers—were no better than ants in the eyes of the powerful.

Back when the Wang and Qin clans still held influence, they were often summoned to perform, and a single misstep could result in beatings or curses.

Because of this, members of acting troupes were always cautious and timid, afraid to speak or act too boldly.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” Ziyuan said softly. “His Highness summoned you regarding the play, not to punish anyone.”

Hearing this, everyone in the troupe let out a collective sigh of relief.

Xiao Ming hadn’t brought Chen Laoshi’s troupe here for idle conversation. He was planning for a cultural renaissance and needed a grassroots acting troupe to assist him.

Previously, performances in the royal palace were carried out by the palace's own songstresses. But these women weren't suitable for performing in public on streets and markets—it would damage the dignity of the palace.

Even though Xiao Ming possessed modern thinking, he still had to respect local customs. He couldn't act too radically for a prince.

"Ziyuan is right. I didn't summon you to scold anyone. In fact, I want you to work for me—but you mustn't tell anyone you're working for me."

"Work for Your Highness?" Chen Laoshi nearly jumped in shock, trembling and unsure how to respond.

Just then, Chen Xier stepped forward and said, "Your Highness has always treated the people of Qingzhou equally, like his own children. We deeply admire you. Whatever Your Highness instructs, our troupe will follow."

"You're quite the quick-tongued girl," Xiao Ming said with a smile. No wonder Ziyuan had chosen Chen Xier—the two really did share a resemblance.

"I only speak the truth, Your Highness," Chen Xier replied sweetly.

Shaking his head, Xiao Ming said, "Chen Laoshi, to have such a daughter is your good fortune. She's quite brave."

Flattered, Chen Laoshi scratched his head and chuckled foolishly.

Xiao Ming continued, "Very well then, I'll speak plainly. I plan to build a theater here in Qingzhou. I'll have you manage it. But if I want you to perform something, you must perform it."

"Theater? What's that?" Chen Xier asked curiously.

"A theater is like the stage in the Eastern Market, except it's indoors. From now on, your sole job will be performing plays. The government will fund you, pay your salaries every month, and manage the theater's finances," Xiao Ming explained.

"You'll pay us wages?" Chen Xier gasped, stunned.

Ziyuan also looked puzzled. Xiao Ming was being unusually generous to a group of performers.

"Your Highness, may I ask why?" Chen Xier asked once she'd calmed down.

"It's not that I don't want to explain," Xiao Ming said, "but even if I did, you wouldn't understand it right now. One day you will. For now, just tell me whether you agree or not. If you don't, I won't force you."

Chen Laoshi was still in a daze, but Chen Xier quickly answered, “We agree. We trust that Your Highness would never treat us unfairly.”

“Do your words speak for your father too?” Xiao Ming asked, turning to the still-confused Chen Laoshi.

“My father will listen to me,” Chen Xier replied confidently.

Xiao Ming frowned slightly. Sometimes, communicating with people of this era felt exhausting. “Fine then. Go back and discuss it among yourselves. Give me your answer tomorrow.”

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed them.

After the troupe left, Ziyuan asked, “Your Highness, why do you value this troupe so much?”

“It’s not that I value them in particular,” Xiao Ming said. “They’re the only grassroots troupe in Qingzhou. Not everyone is willing to expose themselves in public. That makes them rare.”

“That’s true,” Ziwan agreed. “Especially the girl. It’s rare to find a woman like Chen Xier who’s willing to perform in public.”

“Exactly. I don’t want to search again. Besides, I saw her performance in the Eastern Market—it was genuinely good.”

“That’s because her teacher was excellent,” Ziyuan said playfully.

Xiao Ming took her hand and gently traced her palm, letting out a quiet hmph. “So arrogant. Fine then. Since you trained Chen Xier, you’ll keep teaching her. Let Lu Luo manage the textile workshop—you’ll oversee the theater. I still have plenty of scripts left.”

“Really? You have more exciting stories?” Ziyuan’s eyes sparkled.

Xiao Ming chuckled. With his wealth of modern knowledge, he had no shortage of drama ideas.

For him, the cultural renaissance would begin with drama. Plays were a perfect medium to transmit values and reshape thinking over time—a subtle but powerful transformation.

Even in the modern world, nations paid close attention to culture and the arts. A single great play could influence an entire generation. That was the true power of the arts.

Once the theater was complete, he would use the troupe to spread a wave of new thinking through their performances.

And he wouldn’t limit himself to traditional stage plays—songs, storytelling, and other performance formats would be included too.

Looking at Ziyuan's lovely and curious expression, Xiao Ming said, "How about I tell you the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai?"

"Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai—are those names?" she asked.

"Yes," Xiao Ming said seriously. "The story is about a girl and a boy meeting in secret."

"Secretly meeting? Isn't that against the Three Obediences and Four Virtues? What a shameful girl! Your Highness, I bet she was drowned in a pig cage, wasn't she?" Ziwan asked innocently.

Xiao Ming opened his mouth awkwardly. "...Something like that."

"She deserved it! A proper woman must follow the rules. Your Highness, these things happen all the time in Great Yu. I've heard many palace maids say that women caught meeting men in secret are drowned."

"And do you think they deserve that?" Xiao Ming asked cautiously.

"Of course! Secretly meeting men brings shame to their families," she replied firmly.

Xiao Ming swallowed hard. He had only meant to tease Ziyuan, but he had run headfirst into her deeply rooted Confucian morals. This made him realize that the cultural renaissance would face serious resistance. He would need to take small steps—too much change at once could backfire.

With a sigh, he said, “Then maybe I won’t tell that story.”

“Then what story will Your Highness tell?” Ziwan asked eagerly.

“How about Jin Ping Mei?” Xiao Ming said with a mischievous grin...