

I. Dynasty 83

Chapter 83: Is Lian Po Still Strong Enough to Eat?

“Hahaha, how could a newspaper delivery boy be someone reporting military intelligence? With your frail arms, could you even endure the hardships of travel?”

From the crowd, a man suddenly burst into laughter.

The scholars turned to look and saw an elderly farmer with white hair and a youthful complexion. He was carrying a medicine basket on his back and laughing heartily, as if he had just heard the funniest joke.

The scholar who had spoken earlier was immediately angered. “You old man, how dare you mock us?”

The old man waved his hand. “My apologies, my apologies. I just have a different perspective. The notice says they’re recruiting people who can read and write. It doesn’t require any official titles, which means the job only requires basic literacy. From this, it seems the role is similar to the clerks who read notices aloud at the city gates.”

Upon hearing this, the crowd nodded in agreement. The scholar who had spoken earlier also said, “That makes sense.”

In the Great Yu Empire, when notices were posted, there were clerks specifically tasked with reading them aloud to the common people.

“But if that’s the case, isn’t it a bit beneath us? We’ve all studied the classics for over a decade,” another scholar said.

“Exactly, this is too menial for us.”

“Forget about the newspaper delivery boy, but the Chief Secretary position might be worth considering.”

“ ... ”

As the scholars debated, the old man shook his head and sighed. These scholars were all ambitious but lacked the ability to achieve their goals. It was precisely because they were too proud to take on humble tasks that many of them ended up accomplishing nothing and living in poverty.

He himself was like that. It wasn’t until he was fifty-five that he finally understood this truth, but by then, it was too late.

“If you won’t go, I will!” the old man said, stepping forward to the notice. In front of the clerk responsible for the notice, he wrote down his name.

He knew he was too old to be considered for the Chief Secretary position, but the newspaper delivery boy role was just a job to earn some silver. It was better than gathering herbs in the mountains.

“Hey, old man, can you even read?” someone called out.

Someone in the crowd took a closer look at the old man and suddenly laughed. "I know who this is. It's Fan Zeng, the old scholar. They say he's been taking the imperial exams every year but still hasn't earned a title."

"At his age, he must be at least sixty. What a waste."

"Pah, and he had the nerve to mock us earlier," the scholar who had spoken earlier seized the opportunity to retaliate.

Fan Zeng's face, already flushed, turned even redder with anger. But in the end, he just sighed and silently picked up his medicine basket, heading home.

When he returned to his home in Ankang Lane, Fan Zeng threw the medicine basket to the ground in frustration. "Hmph, just you wait. Even if I have to take the exams until I'm eighty, I'll earn a title."

At that moment, an old woman came out. Seeing the scattered herbs on the ground, she scolded, "What nonsense is this? Why are you throwing the herbs on the ground? We were counting on selling them to buy rice, you old fool."

This old woman was Fan Zeng's wife. Hearing her words, he angrily retorted, "I'm not going to gather herbs tomorrow. I'm going to be a newspaper delivery boy."

The old woman grew even more furious and cursed a few more times. “If you don’t gather herbs, how are we going to eat? What even is a newspaper delivery boy? You’re old and toothless—no one would even want you to collect manure!”

“You... Hmph, such narrow-mindedness. I may not know what a newspaper delivery boy is, but the notice says all you need is to be literate. It pays one tael of silver a month,” Fan Zeng said.

“One tael of silver?” The old woman’s eyes lit up.

Fan Zeng had been poor and without a title in his youth, so he had married a notoriously sharp-tongued woman from a nearby village. He was naturally meek and often bore the brunt of her scolding at home.

“Yes, one tael,” Fan Zeng said.

One tael of silver a month would be enough to keep their family fed and clothed.

The old woman’s eyes darted around. “Then go. At least it’s not a waste of all those years you spent studying. But if you don’t get the job, you’d better go back to gathering herbs.”

Fan Zeng still felt a bit unsure, but he was increasingly aware that his physical strength was no longer sufficient for gathering herbs in the mountains.

Moreover, his family was struggling financially, and his son was also studying for this year's imperial exams. The cost of traveling to Chang'an was a problem. Thinking of this, he decided that even if it meant losing face, he would go and see.

With this in mind, he ate a quick dinner and set off for the command headquarters before dawn the next day. He was the first to arrive.

Although many scholars had scoffed at the idea of being a newspaper delivery boy the day before, Fan Zeng wasn't surprised to see quite a few of them show up today.

Having been through it himself, he knew that young scholars were very concerned about their reputation. Even if they secretly thought differently, they would go along with the crowd in public. But upon reflection, they would come around.

After waiting for an hour, the sound of hoofbeats roused Fan Zeng from his drowsiness. He looked up and saw a handsome young man in a dark brocade robe and a jade belt riding toward them on horseback.

Behind the young man were two burly, fierce-looking guards who appeared to be seasoned veterans.

"Prince Qi!"

"Yes, it's Prince Qi!"

“...”

Some of the scholars recognized Xiao Ming and began whispering among themselves.

Fan Zeng was stunned and extremely nervous. If Prince Qi himself had come for the newspaper delivery boy position, it must be an important role. He suddenly felt that he had no chance.

As Prince Qi approached, the scholars waiting in front of the command headquarters bowed excitedly and chorused, “Greetings, Prince Qi.”

Xiao Ming dismounted and said to the crowd, “No need for formalities. Your presence here today shows your trust in me. Please follow me.”

Xiao Ming was pleased to see so many people coming to apply. It meant that Qingzhou still had some talent reserves, at least enough to meet urgent needs.

The group followed Xiao Ming into the command headquarters, where Pang Yukun also arrived. The two of them took their seats, with Xiao Ming in the main seat and Pang Yukun beside him.

Xiao Ming began, “First, let me explain what a newspaper delivery boy is.”

Once seated, Xiao Ming got straight to the point. He disliked wasting time with unnecessary words. “To understand the role of a newspaper delivery boy, we must first talk about newspapers...”

Facing the over two hundred applicants, Xiao Ming explained. In modern times, newspaper delivery boys were children who delivered newspapers. Here, Xiao Ming extended the role to include both delivering and reading newspapers.

As he spoke, Xiao Ming took out a newspaper. It was the first issue printed overnight by the Machinery Department.

“This is a newspaper. Feel free to pass it around and take a look,” Xiao Ming said, handing the newspaper to the person closest to him. He was momentarily surprised to see that it was an elderly man with graying hair.

The old man also noticed Xiao Ming’s surprised expression and immediately lowered his head, focusing on the newspaper and reading it aloud with a rhythmic cadence.

Pang Yukun also noticed the old man. When Fan Zeng began reading, he nodded appreciatively and said to Xiao Ming, “His pronunciation is quite clear, but his age...”

Fan Zeng, hearing the discussion about him, pricked up his ears.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Jiang Ziya met King Wen of Zhou at the age of eighty. Is Lian Po still strong enough to eat? I don’t see a problem with his age.”

Hearing this, Fan Zeng’s spirits lifted, and he read even more loudly.

