

Rise 178

Chapter 178: The Imperial Examination Period Has Come

"Zhu Ping'an, you can come in, but that fat pig is not allowed to enter."

While Zhu Ping'an looked at the red-nosed fat man with a headache, the study door opened, and the scheming girl Li Shu peeked out from inside. With a pout, she reluctantly called out to Zhu Ping'an, her face full of unwillingness.

"If it weren't for Father telling me to make sure you use the study before leaving, I wouldn't let you in!" The scheming girl pouted and rolled her eyes at Zhu Ping'an.

The fat man, whose head had been caught by the door, upon hearing this, cast a creepy, gleaming little look back and forth between Zhu Ping'an and the scheming girl.

"Then you wait for me outside."

Zhu Ping'an originally didn't want to leave the fat man alone inside, but seeing the state of the fat man, he immediately left with a parting remark and a pat on his behind. Though the scheming girl had a stinky face, she was still much easier to look at than the fat man's creepy one. Moreover, since he was there to return and borrow books, it was better to be practical.

Zhu Ping'an entered the study, returned the book, quickly borrowed two more, and was about to leave when the scheming girl stopped him.

"Something wrong?" Zhu Ping'an asked, looking at the scheming girl.

"Of course, if nothing was wrong, why would I stop you!" The scheming girl said with disdain. "Next time you come to borrow books, you must bring me a story of at least five thousand, no, at least six thousand characters, and it must be handwritten. The handwriting must be neat, consider it as practice for you."

After saying that, the scheming girl stared at Zhu Ping'an, waiting for his response.

"Alright, I'll try my best." Zhu Ping'an nodded.

"What do you mean by try your best? It must be done!" The scheming girl complained, showing her little tiger teeth.

On the way back to Zhu Ping'an's house from the Li family, the fat man's face was full of gossip expressions. He kept asking if the study was where they met secretly, and what they had been doing in there for so long...

"You were born in the wrong era," Zhu Ping'an glanced at the fat man's face, saying in a dull tone.

"Huh?" The fat man didn't understand.

"Some things can only be understood, not said," Zhu Ping'an shook his head, pretending to be mysterious.

"Heh, you're just changing the subject. Speaking of which, what were you two doing in the study..." The fat man began gossiping again.

The sounds of frogs croaking, birds chirping, and the fat man's gossip filled the air...

By evening, the village head of Xiahe Village, with two young men carrying bags of rice, flour, oil, and meat, entered Zhu Ping'an's house.

"Village head, what's this for?" Zhu Ping'an's father came out of the room upon hearing the sound and was surprised when he saw what the village head and the young men were carrying.

"Brother Zhu, this isn't something I'm doing, it's a stipend from the county for your second son, as per the regulations."

The village head smiled broadly and gestured for the young men to place the items in the yard of Zhu Ping'an's house.

"That's quite a lot of stuff." Zhu Ping'an's mother, Chen, came out of the room and looked at the rice, flour, oil, and meat the young men were carrying. She couldn't stop clicking her tongue. There was a sack of rice, a jar of oil, a small bag of flour, and a large piece of meat—enough to last a long time.

Zhu Ping'an, the fat man, and his older brother Zhu Pingchuan came out as well. When the village head saw Zhu Ping'an, he smiled and cupped his hands, congratulating him, "I haven't congratulated you yet. His Majesty has graciously extended a great favor through the Enke (Imperial Examination) , and now Master Zhu can show his skills."

"Oh, I almost forgot. This is something the county sent to the town. The town asked me to pass it to Master Zhu," the village head continued, tapping his head, and pulled a red paper with a seal from his sleeve. He handed it to Zhu Ping'an.

"Thank you, Village Head," Zhu Ping'an said as he took the red paper and cupped his hands in gratitude.

"You're welcome. It's just a little something on my way," the village head waved his hand, all smiles.

The village head chatted for a while in Zhu Ping'an's yard before leaving. Zhu Ping'an opened the red paper in his hand and found that it contained specific details about the upcoming Enke. The front was filled with praises like qilin and other such accolades, and the back listed the exact date for the Enke—the fourth of November.

The fourth of November?

At first glance, when Zhu Ping'an saw the time, he was somewhat confused, because the number four has always been considered an unlucky number in our country, and people in the common folk tend to avoid it, let alone in the imperial court. However, after thinking about Emperor Jiajing's character, Zhu Ping'an was relieved.

Emperor Jiajing was known for his deep affection for alchemy and immortality practices. He also liked to consult with gods and immortals about matters of fortune, in a rather unique way. He would write his questions on paper, seal it, and have a eunuch deliver it to a Taoist priest, who would then burn the paper as an offering to the gods. Then, two eunuchs would place two branches on a sand table, using their fingers to hold them in place. When the gods manifested, the two eunuchs would close their eyes and, while holding the branches, make random marks on the sand table. The Emperor would then interpret the "divine script" shown on the sand table to understand the gods' will.

It is possible that the date, the fourth of November, came from such a practice.

When the fat man saw the time, he jumped up like his bottom was on fire, shouting, "Why this year? I thought it would be next year. Does that mean I have to go back and prepare for the imperial examination?"

The imperial examination, as mentioned by the fat man, refers to the selection process before the provincial examination, which happens the year before the main exams. The examination is held by the education officials to select candidates from students, scholars, and others eligible to participate in the provincial exams. Normally, the examination is conducted after the annual tests, and the education official oversees it. However, Zhu Ping'an and his group are special, as they are scholars this year, so they only need to take the imperial examination.

The imperial examination has six ranks, with the education officials typically giving out third rank. It's rare for anyone to receive below third rank. Only those who rank first or second are eligible for the provincial exams.

The chubby man was so anxious because the first and second ranks in the imperial examination are limited in number. Every county and prefecture has a fixed quota. If memory serves correctly, it will be about five or six years before the quotas for the provincial examination are adjusted according to previous years' numbers.

In the entire South Jiangsu province, there are around two to three thousand spots allocated across various counties, with each county only having about ten places, no more, no less. Each county usually has hundreds of scholars, but only about ten can go to the provincial exams.

Even the qualification examination for the provincial exams is difficult, but according to custom, the top candidates usually pass the imperial examination and are able to participate in the provincial exams.

Therefore, Zhu Ping'an wasn't too worried about it.

Soon, the bodyguard who had accompanied the chubby man to Xiahe Village arrived with a message sent overnight from the fat man's family in Fengyang Prefecture, urging him to hurry home and prepare for the imperial examination.

The fat man reluctantly left the Zhu family...

"Godmother, that pickled cucumber..." It must be said, the fat man's way of being reluctant was also quite unique.

"Godmother will give you a whole jar." Chen, from the courtyard, brought out a freshly pickled jar and placed it on the fat man's cart. She genuinely liked this fat godson, who had only stayed with the Zhu family for a few days.

"That's too much..." The fat man said this with his mouth, but his hands didn't slow down. In a few moves, he quickly stuffed the jar of pickles into the carriage.

"What's wrong with that? I can pickle another jar in a few days." Chen waved her hand nonchalantly.

"Godmother, what about the dried mushrooms..." The fat man pointed to the dried mushrooms in the yard, still reluctant. Last night, the chicken soup stewed with the mushrooms had been so delicious.

"Godmother will pack them for you..." Chen was very generous.

"Godmother, then..." The fat man took the mushrooms, and once again, became reluctant...

"Enough already, at least leave me something!" Zhu Ping'an stepped forward and shoved the reluctant fat man into the carriage.

Zhu Ping'an's actions made Chen laugh and scold him at the same time. She then gathered up more of the fat man's favorite foods and stuffed them all into the cart. The fat man was so happy that he kept giving Zhu Ping'an playful winks.

"Childish. Don't just eat and sleep all the time, read more books, so you don't embarrass yourself in the imperial examination and provincial exams."

Zhu Ping'an scoffed at the fat man's childish behavior.

"Do you think I'll embarrass myself? Just wait and see!" The chubby man puffed out his face and rode off in the carriage.