

## Rise 206

Chapter 206: Zhao Wenhua

At the market in Kaoshan Town, Chen was preoccupied with thoughts of her second son. Meanwhile, under the Yingtian examination list, half of the Qinhuai River was in an uproar.

"I come from a humble background. If I can marry into a high-ranking family, that would be wonderful. However, how about you wait for me to go home and discuss it with my wife first? What do you think?"

Under the Yingtian examination list, a thirteen or fourteen-year-old boy curved his lips into a smile and spoke these words cheerfully.

After more than ten seconds of silence, a burst of laughter erupted.

Amidst the laughter, the steward with a distinctive goatee, who had never expected such a response, flushed red with anger. He had come as a representative of a high-ranking third-rank official's family to recruit a son-in-law. Naturally, he assumed that this young scholar would be ecstatic and agree without hesitation. Yet, the unexpected reply left him fuming.

"You... Hmph!"

Embarrassed and frustrated by the crowd's laughter, the steward, with his face burning red, led a dozen servants away.

Watching the steward leave in humiliation, Zhu Ping'an narrowed his eyes slightly. Being given a hard time was still better than losing his head. Becoming the son-in-law of Minister Zhao Wenhua was absolutely out of the question. Others might not know what kind of madness Zhao Wenhua would commit in the future, but Zhu Ping'an certainly did.

When this man got heated, he could shake heaven and earth! Zhu Ping'an had no intention of being dragged down with him.

However, it was said that Zhao Wenhua had an exceptional eye for talent. Back when Yan Song was just a university headmaster, Zhao Wenhua had already recognized his boundless potential and addressed him with a term equivalent to "godfather" in modern times—"adoptive father." Sure enough, within a few years, Yan Song had risen all the way to the position of Grand Chancellor, standing second only to the emperor. Zhao Wenhua's foresight was evident.

Now, this same Zhao Wenhua had sent someone to recruit Zhu Ping'an as his son-in-law. This surprised Zhu Ping'an. Could it be that Zhao Wenhua had recognized his future potential? That seemed a bit far-fetched. After all, Zhao Wenhua had only seen him once during the imperial examination, and even then, he had made things difficult for him. Moreover, Zhu Ping'an had barely passed the exam, ranking at the very bottom. He couldn't quite understand it.

"You actually turned down such a great opportunity?! That's a third-rank official we're talking about! With a father-in-law like that, you'd be promoted three ranks in no time!" The chubby boy beside Zhu Ping'an chattered on, exasperated. Then, in a hushed voice, he added, "I know for a fact that you're not married yet. You're still so young!"

"A path walked by one's own feet is the most secure. Depending on others is like swallowing a three-foot sword; relying on others is like climbing to the highest heavens." Zhu Ping'an smiled faintly.

Hearing this, Xia Luoming seemed to have an epiphany. He subtly distanced himself from Guo Ziyu and the others, now looking at Zhu Ping'an with newfound respect.

"Such pretentious virtue-signaling!"

Guo Ziyu muttered sourly, his heart filled with jealousy and frustration. His eyes were brimming with the bitterness of an unrecognized talent. That brat was just the last on the list! I ranked dozens of places higher than him, and I'm way more handsome! Why was he chosen and not me?!

Full of resentment, Guo Ziyu and his group left the scene.

That day, under the Yingtian examination list, everyone remembered a name—Zhu Ping'an. Though he was at the bottom of the list, he was now more dazzling than the top scholar himself due to the third-rank official's attempt to recruit him as a son-in-law.

Not far away, in a restaurant, two chief examiners were watching the scene unfold.

"It seems we have underestimated Zhao Wenhua," Chief Examiner Wang remarked softly while glancing at Chief Examiner Zhang across from him.

"Anyone valued by Yan Song must not be underestimated. But I must admit, I'm surprised by his keen judgment," Zhang nodded in agreement.

"Then..." Chief Examiner Wang hesitated.

Stroking his beard, Chief Examiner Zhang smiled confidently. "I have a clear conscience, and Minister Xu of the Ministry of Rites is overseeing matters..."

After two rounds of marriage recruitment attempts under the Yingtian examination list, the crowd gradually dispersed. Zhu Ping'an and the chubby boy took another look at the rankings. The chubby boy, especially, was delighted to find his name on the secondary list. He patted his belly contentedly, boasting that it was full of scholarly knowledge. Then, pointing at the secondary list, he declared that next year, his name would surely be transferred to the honor roll.

Having been up and about since early morning, the chubby boy, feeling satisfied after seeing his name on the list, swayed his head and announced that he was going home for a nap.

Zhu Ping'an was also thinking of returning to pack his things and prepare to go back home, so he followed the crowd toward the inn. Once at the inn, the fat man went back to his room to catch up on sleep, while Zhu Ping'an returned to his own room to pack up, planning to head home once everything here was settled.

Once the Luming Banquet was over, there wouldn't be much else to do, and he could return home. The Luming Banquet was a feast stipulated by the imperial examination system, originating in the Tang Dynasty. It was held the day after the provincial examination results were announced, inviting the newly successful scholars and examiners to attend while performing the Luming chapter from the Book of Songs, hence the name "Luming Banquet."

While Zhu Ping'an was packing, the goatee-bearded steward of the Zhao household was fervently embellishing his report to his master about the incident of selecting a son-in-law from the ranked scholars.

"My lord, if you ask me, that boy is simply too ignorant of what's good for him," the steward concluded after adding his own spin to the story.

Zhao Wenhua sat in his chair, listening to his steward's report with an expression as calm as still water. He gently blew on the hot tea in his hands and said indifferently, "Arrogance is a common flaw among young prodigies."

The steward was slightly surprised by his master's reaction. Normally, wouldn't the lord give that boy a harsh lesson to teach him his place? Had he not exaggerated the story enough?

"My lord, there's something I still don't understand. That boy was barely at the bottom of the rankings—aren't you giving him too much credit?"

The steward stroked his goatee, bent over slightly, and asked cautiously.

Hearing this, Zhao Wenhua lightly placed his teacup on the table, narrowed his eyes, and countered, "Too much credit? Do you know why I have been able to reach my current position?"

Under Zhao Wenhua's piercing gaze, the steward felt a slight sweat break out on his back. He quickly responded, "Of course, it's because my lord has great foresight and has rendered immense service."

"Rubbish. It's because of my eyes!" Zhao Wenhua sneered. "Back then, my adoptive father was just the Rector of the Imperial Academy. And now... I refuse to believe that those who mocked me for recognizing him as my adoptive father are still laughing now."

"He's nothing compared to the Grand Chancellor. He's just the last-ranked scholar on the secondary list," the steward muttered resentfully, seizing the chance to sow more doubt about Zhu Ping'an.

"This is exactly why you're just a steward, while I am a third-rank official!" Zhao Wenhua blew on his tea, took a slow sip, and said with satisfaction, "You only see the bottom of the list, while I see an unparalleled young genius."

"Bottom of the list? Do you know what it means for a thirteen-year-old to become a juren?" Zhao Wenhua placed his teacup down with a bit of force, making a loud sound that startled the steward.

"....." The steward broke out in a cold sweat, his mind momentarily blank.

"No need to look far—just take the recent past as an example. You've heard of Grand Chancellor Yang, who held power through three reigns, haven't you? He passed the imperial examination at thirteen! Such a monster cannot be judged by common standards."

"Besides, what I truly value is his strategy against the Japanese pirates. The coastal raids by these pirates have only grown more rampant over the years. Future victories against them will be recorded as great achievements. I've had my eye on this for years..."