

## Rise 208

### Chapter 208: Deer Cry Banquet

Today is the Luming Banquet, the grand banquet of the Ming Dynasty dedicated to honoring talent.

"Ten years of hard study go unnoticed, but one success brings fame across the land."

Having passed the imperial examination, they could now bask in glory and recognition. A bright future lay at their feet. The newly appointed scholars were filled with ambition and excitement.

The banquet was of the highest standard, with luxurious and exquisite dishes. It was said that one dish, called "Honey-Preserved Zhubi Fish," took over a hundred days to prepare. The lamb served at the banquet was of the finest quality—only half a pound of the best meat from the leg of each sheep was used. There were as many as fifty-eight different dishes, including hot and cold appetizers, desserts, and soups...

Musicians played the se and sheng while singing "Luming" (Deer Cry).

Yet, as Zhu Ping'an sat before the table full of lavish delicacies, listening to the festive melodies of the Luming music, he found that he had no appetite. Scenes from the previous afternoon replayed in his mind—those weak, pleading, and helpless eyes he had seen in a small alley...

Everyone else was in high spirits, drinking and composing poetry, enjoying the fine food and wine while engaging in lively discussions. However, Zhu Ping'an simply held his chopsticks but hardly ate a bite.

Back in his childhood, Zhu Ping'an had been nicknamed "Rice Bucket" for his large appetite. Now, faced with such a grand feast, he hadn't touched his food at all, which was extremely unusual. Some people even speculated that he was too ashamed to eat because he had ranked last in the examination. Guo Ziyu, who harbored envy and resentment toward Zhu Ping'an, was among those who thought this way.

The seating arrangement at the Luming Banquet was based on ranking. Zhu Ping'an, along with the other bottom ten scholars, sat at the outermost table.

Guo Ziyu sat at the table in front of Zhu Ping'an. Although they were close in position, Guo Ziyu's seat was one level higher. Watching Zhu Ping'an, who usually had a great appetite, not even touch his food, Guo Ziyu couldn't help but feel a sense of superiority.

"So what if you ranked first in the college examination? So what if high-ranking officials admire you? In the end, you're still behind me! A prodigy? Just another lucky fool like Fang Zhongyong."

"Brother Zhu, why take it to heart just because you placed last? You passed at the age of thirteen—other than the famous Grand Secretary Yang, who else can compare to you?"

"Exactly! You're different from us. We are like autumn cicadas at the end of our days, but you are still young and full of potential."

"Yes, the entire city of Yingtian now knows that the Ming Dynasty has produced another thirteen-year-old scholar!"

The scholars at Zhu Ping'an's table noticed his lack of appetite and assumed he was upset about ranking last. Wanting to comfort him, they offered words of encouragement.

Hearing their kind words, Zhu Ping'an found it both amusing and touching.

"Thank you, brothers, for your concern. I am already satisfied with passing the exam. Perhaps I caught a chill last night and am feeling unwell. Please enjoy the feast—I wouldn't want you to miss out on this grand occasion."

Zhu Ping'an clasped his hands in gratitude and politely used illness as an excuse, urging them to enjoy the banquet.

Hearing his explanation, the others were relieved. It made sense—after all, he had passed at the age of thirteen. What more could he ask for?

With that, the scholars at the table resumed their drinking and chatting, reveling in the atmosphere. There was a sense of bold ambition in the air, as if they were dismissing the noble titles of the past with their words.

The Luming Banquet was a literary feast, so poetry and prose were naturally an essential part of the event.

As they enjoyed the banquet, the scholars engaged in literary games, such as composing couplets. For those who could write eight-legged essays well, such games were no challenge.

Although Zhu Ping'an had no appetite, he didn't want to dampen the mood. When it was his turn, he participated without standing out—his responses were smooth and natural, neither outstanding nor lackluster.

The atmosphere remained lively and joyous.

As the banquet reached its peak, a wave of admiration and applause erupted from the main table. It turned out that Cao Jieyuan (the top scorer in the provincial exam) had composed a poem that impressed the examiners and officials, including the Prefect of Yingtian.

The highest-ranking table was the focal point of the banquet. Seated there were influential figures such as the Prefect of Yingtian, the Provincial Education Officer of Southern Zhili, the two chief examiners, and the top three scorers of the provincial examination.

The poem quickly spread to the surrounding tables. Upon reading it, the scholars couldn't help but express their admiration, exclaiming in praise.

"Bamboo"

Bamboo grows in the open wilderness, towering towards the clouds, reaching hundreds of feet.

No one admires its noble character, yet it steadfastly holds onto its purity.

It scorns being stained by the tears of the Xiang River goddess, and is ashamed to be played in the palace zither.

Who will craft a long flute from it? Let it sing with the sound of dragons.

A few copies of the poem were made, and one found its way to Zhu Ping'an's table. A gentleman beside him read it aloud with rhythmic intonation, drawing endless praise from the crowd.

However, after hearing it, Zhu Ping'an was unimpressed. The poem was undoubtedly excellent, full of allusions and sentiment, using bamboo to express the poet's own virtues—purity, integrity, elegance, and nobility—while lamenting the lack of a discerning patron. It painted a picture of one who disdains bowing to wealth and power, refusing to be tainted by decadence, harboring grand ambitions with an air of lofty pride.

But this poet, at the age of twenty-five, had accepted the marriage arrangement set up by Zhao Tongzhi, leaving his wife and children at home. How could he claim to be someone who would rather break than bend?!

"What does Brother Zhu think? You seem unimpressed?"

A voice laced with ill intent came from a nearby table. Zhu Ping'an looked up to see Guo Ziyu gazing at him mockingly.

This question immediately drew the attention of the surrounding guests. Everyone had agreed that Scholar Cao's poem was exceptional. But now, someone seemed to scoff at it—how could that not attract interest? And upon noticing that the skeptic was the youngest of the examinees present, and also from the very last-ranked table, their curiosity only deepened.

"Scholar Cao's talent is extraordinary. His poetry is excellent—I feel ashamed in comparison, that's all."

With a self-deprecating smile, Zhu Ping'an effortlessly defused the situation.

At these words, the crowd relaxed, smiling in understanding. Guo Ziyu, however, was unwilling to let it go but chose to bide his time for a better opportunity.

And as fortune favors the prepared, that opportunity soon arrived.

Since Scholar Cao's poem "Bamboo" was so well-received, the leading scholars at the main table proposed a challenge: the new candidates were to compose a poem based on the Three Friends of Winter (pine, bamboo, and plum), selecting one of the three as their theme.

This was an incredible chance for recognition—anyone who stood out here would soon become known across Southern Zhili, reaping countless benefits. Naturally, all the new scholars were eager to make an impression.

Guo Ziyu quickly penned a poem titled "Ode to Bamboo", then turned his gaze toward Zhu Ping'an. Noticing that Zhu had yet to pick up his brush and wore a troubled expression, Guo Ziyu became excited. Poetry might be easy to write, but composing a truly remarkable poem was difficult. Seeing Zhu Ping'an's furrowed brows, Guo was certain that even if Zhu managed to write something, it wouldn't be any good.

Indeed, Zhu Ping'an showed no intention of writing at all.

Looking at the future leaders of the Ming Dynasty sitting around him, racking their brains to craft elegant verses, carefully choosing each word, he found it all rather ironic.

Poetry?

What use would even Li Bai have in this world?

What people truly needed wasn't flowery poetry, nor lofty ideals of unwavering virtue refusing to serve the powerful.

The countless souls struggling to survive needed food. They needed clothing. They needed houses to shield them from the wind and rain.

What they needed was simple—only two words: warmth and sustenance.

Yet even this simplest of needs was nearly impossible to attain.