

Rise 268

Chapter 268: Old Yan's Happy Life

Before dawn, the sky still held a few scattered fading stars.

A sedan chair carried by eight men appeared on West Chang'an Street, heading all the way toward the Western Garden where Emperor Jiajing practiced cultivation and alchemy.

A gust of wind blew past, lifting the sedan's curtain to reveal the face of a kindly white-bearded old man. If Zhu Ping'an were here, he would surely recognize this old man as that savvy fellow from the city the other day. However, this old fellow was no ordinary person—he was the second most powerful figure in the Ming Dynasty, the current Grand Secretary Yan Song.

Yan Song, the Grand Secretary, was already 72 years old this year. In the Ming Dynasty, most people of this age would have been long past their prime. But our Grand Secretary Yan was still in excellent health, eating heartily and feeling great, his eyes not dimmed nor ears dulled, and at night he could still enjoy some interesting little activities with his wife.

Especially in recent days, Grand Secretary Yan's life had become even more comfortable. That disobedient troublemaker, Qiu Luan, who wanted to set up his own faction, had died. No official in the entire court dared to disrespect him now. Though the political rising star Xu Jie had been emerging recently, it didn't matter—newcomers just needed a little discipline.

The day before yesterday, his godson Wen Hua sent him a priceless golden silk canopy from the southeast, and also nearly ten thousand taels of silver.

Additionally, the imperial examination was about to start, and the East Tower had been storing several carts of silver in the basement these days.

Sitting inside the sedan chair, Yan Song thought of these things and his face flushed with pride. From time to time he urged the sedan bearers to move faster.

Compared to those matters, this was the thing Yan Song was most proud of.

Yan Song got up early every day—not to exercise, but to go to the Western Garden to meet Emperor Jiajing. The Emperor had been devoted to cultivation and alchemy for over ten years and no longer attended court. Besides Yan Song, very few had the privilege to meet the Emperor daily. Could he not feel proud?

Moreover, Yan Song's meetings with the Emperor were not like ordinary "court sessions" — he took alchemical pills together with the Emperor. Across the entire Ming Dynasty, only Yan Song did this.

In Yan Song's heart, he believed that being able to eat well, sleep well, and still be vigorous and active at over seventy years old, even able to enjoy some "exercises" with his spouse at night, was surely the merit of these pills. Otherwise, why would he still be so energetic at this age?

Therefore, every time he took the pills early in the morning at the Western Garden, Yan Song's face would glow red with health, and he would trot briskly without getting winded. This enthusiastic "lab rat" spirit also moved Emperor Jiajing.

Between ruler and minister, there was a tacit understanding.

Yan Song's sedan chair stopped only at the Western Garden palace gate, and just as it stopped, the gate slowly opened.

Yan Song was already a familiar guest at the Western Garden, and the palace eunuchs liked this generous and warm Grand Secretary. For example, this time, as soon as Yan Song's sedan arrived at the palace gate, several bills of moderate but not small silver notes appeared in the eunuch's pouch.

The eunuch led Yan Song inside the Western Garden, which was extremely familiar to him.

"Lord Yan, please wait here a moment."

However, just as Yan Song was about to enter the palace where the Emperor cultivated and refined pills, a man without a beard wearing a python robe and jade belt came out from the palace. He had a smiling face and blocked Yan Song's way.

"Very good, very good. I wonder how Master Huang rested yesterday?"

Yan Song was momentarily taken aback, then smiled warmly and stepped forward, grabbing the beardless man's hand, exchanging pleasantries while discreetly slipping several hundred-tael silver notes into the man's sleeve without leaving a trace.

"Thanks to Lord Yan's blessing, I slept well last night, very soundly," the beardless man said as he invisibly returned the silver notes from his sleeve back into Yan Song's sleeve. The speed and stealth were much faster than Yan Song's.

"Master Huang's integrity is truly admirable," Yan Song praised.

"You flatter me, Lord Yan. Please, come in and rest a moment," the beardless man said, extending his hand with a smile, inviting Yan Song to rest in a nearby palace hall.

"Not at all, not at all. Please, Lord Yan," Yan Song, already over seventy but quick-witted, half-bowed and returned the polite gesture.

As the Grand Secretary, Yan Song treated this beardless man with such respect because this man was no ordinary person. This man was Huang Jin, the Emperor Jiajing's favorite eunuch and head of the imperial harem's eunuchs.

Emperor Jiajing despised eunuchs, believing these castrated men were only fit to sweep toilets and empty chamber pots, and thus generally imposed strict control on eunuchs. But Huang Jin was an exception, trusted very much.

Huang Jin entered the palace in the early years of Emperor Zhengde, studied at the Imperial Library, and soon was assigned to be a companion reader to the Crown Prince at Prince Xing's Mansion. In the sixteenth year of Zhengde (1521), Emperor Wuzong died childless, and the heir ascended the throne as Emperor Shizong. Because of Huang Jin's meritorious service as companion reader, he was promoted to imperial eunuch. He later successively served in charge of the Imperial Banquet, the Supervisory Office, and the Internal Affairs Office.

A capable, powerful man who could also self-discipline was certainly not an ordinary person.

Especially recently, Yan Song had received news that the Emperor intended to appoint Huang Jin as superintendent of the Eastern Depot (the secret police).

Hence, Yan Song's warm attitude—even when stopped outside the palace gate—was all because of Huang Jin.

After about half an hour, the palace where Emperor Jiajing cultivated and refined pills opened its doors. A fair-skinned official of about forty or fifty years old, short in stature and always smiling, came out. He gave a kindly impression.

This official nodded with a smile to the eunuch on duty outside the hall and then left the main hall.

Seeing this man, Yan Song's expression darkened. Xu Jie had come and was even summoned in advance by the Emperor. Last time, in the "Gengshu Incident," Xu Jie had made a scene here. Yan Song had thought this political rising star could be handled with some discipline, but now... looks like a stronger medicine was needed.

"Your servant greets Lord Yan. Lord Yan looks very well today," Xu Jie said from afar, slightly bowing with hands clasped—a typical subordinate greeting his superior, without the sycophantic manner other officials used.

Xu Jie's days had also been comfortable. After the Gengshu Incident, although he was not admitted to the cabinet, his treatment was the same as cabinet members, and he was now a Grand Guardian of the Crown Prince. These days, the Emperor often summoned him to the Western Garden for tea and to discuss state affairs. His colleagues in the court flattered him considerably.

Especially today, the Emperor had entrusted him with the important duty of overseeing the imperial examinations. Others had not noticed the power behind this, but Xu Jie understood deeply. Controlling the exams and the examinees meant these rising talents would become his disciples. These people might seem insignificant now, but in the future...

Thus, in Xu Jie's eyes, he was close to success, close to avenging Master Xia and those oppressed by Yan Song.

"Oh, Minister Xu," Yan Song nodded slightly, then looked Xu Jie over. "This kid's tail is trying to wag—time for a spanking."

After brief greetings, Xu Jie stepped aside, making way. Yan Song then entered the palace for cultivation and alchemy under Huang Jin's escort.

"Just wait and see—it won't be long."

Xu Jie watched Yan Song's retreating back, the smile fading from his face. Then, turning around, he smiled again and headed toward the Western Garden's main gate.