

Rise 270

Chapter 270: Waiting in Line for the Exam

Xu Jie was feeling a bit unsettled.

Just yesterday morning, he had been appointed by His Majesty to preside over the metropolitan examination. On his way out of the palace, he ran into Yan Song and even took the opportunity to provoke that old scoundrel a bit. Just as he was feeling like he was on the verge of rising to prominence, the very next day, he was suddenly summoned back to the palace for no apparent reason, only to be harshly scolded in a confusing and cryptic tirade by the Jiajing Emperor.

Xu Jie was a clever man. He kept his head lowered and listened to the emperor—dressed in Taoist robes and ruler of the empire—berate him, all the while his mind was racing.

The very first moment, Xu Jie immediately concluded that it was the doing of that old thief Yan Song. There was no need to think twice. Besides him, there was no one else who could have done it.

Then Xu Jie realized a hard truth: his strong thigh wasn't even a match for Yan Song's little finger.

No matter. After all, his idol was Goujian.

So, from now on, he would become Goujian. The only question was whether Yan Song was ready to be Fuchai.

Besides, things weren't all bad. Although he had fallen out of favor with the emperor, the imperial edict appointing him to oversee the examination had not been withdrawn. Surely the emperor would not go back on his word—after all, imperial words were not meant as jokes. This was good; he still had a chance to turn things around.

Neglected by the emperor and shunned by his colleagues, Xu Jie swore to do his utmost in supervising this metropolitan examination.

Time flies like a wave washing away the shore; a moment gone is a moment lost.

Life between heaven and earth is like a white colt flashing past a crack—it's gone in a blink.

In the blink of an eye, the day of the nationwide metropolitan examination had arrived.

The format of the metropolitan exam was quite similar to that of the provincial exam, also divided into three sessions, each lasting three days. The first session started on the ninth day of the month, the second on the twelfth, and the third on the fifteenth. Examinees entered the venue a day before and left the day after each session. The test subjects were nothing more than Eight-legged Essays and policy questions.

The examination site was the Shuntian Examination Hall in the southeast of the capital.

Zhu Ping'an had already received his exam pass two days earlier. This was issued by the Ministry of Rites based on the registration information. It contained personal details, much like a modern exam admission ticket.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen's families had arrived several days earlier and had been taking great care of them with delicious food and drink, so they could concentrate fully on the exam. Naturally, their families also accompanied them to the examination hall, leaving them with no time to look after Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an had washed up by the second hour of the day (1-3 a.m.), and alone, carrying his specially prepared exam bag, he set off for the examination.

Just as Zhu Ping'an left his inn with his exam gear, three large boats arrived at Liaocheng, within the borders of Shandong.

A stunningly beautiful young lady, accompanied by a chubby-faced maid, guards, and an older nanny, went to the banks of the river to visit the tomb of Cao Zhi. There, she burned incense and knelt in worship. While murmuring something about a toad, the beautiful lady donated a large sum of money and asked the presiding monk for a talisman that would grant her inspiration.

As this stunning young lady made a silent wish toward the capital and carefully stored the "well of inspiration" talisman on her person, Zhu Ping'an had already arrived at the gates of the Shuntian Examination Hall with his bag.

At that moment, the area in front of the Shuntian Examination Hall was a sea of people. Although the authorities had already arranged sufficient manpower, the situation was still somewhat chaotic.

The Shuntian Examination Hall was located within the Chongwen Gate, to the southeast. At this time, it had gathered examinees from across the country who had come to take part in the metropolitan exam. According to the Ministry of Rites, for this special examination, there were a total of 5,121 candidates from the southern and northern direct-controlled areas and thirteen provinces of the Ming Empire.

All 5,121 of these candidates were juren (provincial graduates), and most had three to five attendants to take care of their daily needs and allow them to focus on the exam. That meant there were about 20,000 people gathered here. Although soldiers and yamen officers had set up barricades allowing only the juren candidates to enter, there were still more than 10,000 people outside waiting to see them off.

Zhu Ping'an had stayed some distance away from the examination hall, so by the time he arrived, this was the overwhelming crowd he saw.

After struggling for a while, Zhu Ping'an finally squeezed his way to the front of the barricade. The official at the outer gate verified his identity and allowed him inside to queue for the exam.

Candidates were divided into fifteen large groups based on their administrative regions: the southern and northern direct-controlled areas and the thirteen provinces. Zhu Ping'an asked a yamen officer for directions and then headed to the line for candidates from the Southern Direct-Controlled Area.

Due to the large number of examinees and the unfamiliar faces, Zhu Ping'an didn't spot anyone he knew right away.

All the juren present had already gone through county, prefectural, academy, and provincial exams, so they were very familiar with procedures like lining up. Everyone queued calmly and orderly, waiting for the exam.

However, there were always exceptions.

While waiting in line, Zhu Ping'an noticed a peculiar character.

In a line from a neighboring province, there was a rather fat man who reminded Zhu Ping'an of the last chubby nobleman he had seen riding through the crowd when he first entered the capital.

This peculiar fat man was truly a rare flower. Ever since queuing began, he had been kissing every item he carried—all of them, one by one—loudly and exaggeratedly.

For example, at that very moment, this fat man was hugging his inkstone and smooching it furiously, "smack smack smack," before putting it into his exam box. Then he pulled out a carved brush and started another round of intense smooching...

Although it was currently the Southern Direct-Controlled Area's turn to enter the exam site, the fat man's antics had captured the attention of nearly everyone nearby. All the examinees looked at him as if he were a complete idiot.

"Uh... is this guy brain-dead? Why is he kissing everything he touches?"

"He's probably so nervous about the exam that he's lost his mind. What a pity. It's no small feat to get this far. What a waste."

"He's probably one of those noble-borns with special privileges—recommended to the National Academy under the grace system and granted an exception to take the exam. But how did they end up recommending someone like this? What a waste of a spot."

For a while, everyone around discussed the fat man's strange and perverted behavior, pointing and whispering. They were baffled and even scornful, feeling it was shameful to share the exam with someone like him.

But the fat man was utterly oblivious to their judgment. He continued smooching his belongings without a care in the world.

Finally, a refined-looking juren standing behind him couldn't hold back anymore. Blushing with curiosity, confusion, and frustration, he asked the smooching fat man:

“Brother, may I ask—what on earth are you doing?”

He simply couldn’t understand it and couldn’t endure the fat man’s perverse behavior any longer.

Upon hearing the question, the fat man stopped his smooching, put down a bag of snacks, wiped his greasy hands on his clothes, and replied mysteriously:

“This is called ‘wen guo’.”

‘Wen guo’?! ‘Wen guo’?!

Kissing it for good luck?!

Oh come on, big guy, I’ve read a lot of books—don’t try to fool me!