

## Rise 292

### Chapter 292: You Took the Imperial Exam Too?

Zhu Ping'an naturally didn't take the brat's words to heart. Besides, if what the brat said was true—that Li Shu was marrying someone from her aunt's family—he would probably be thrilled. However, he still had to wait for Li Shu to propose breaking off the engagement herself.

Still, the brat's behavior did need some discipline. After all, a young tree that isn't pruned won't grow straight, and a person who isn't corrected will grow unruly.

Of course, there was no need to rush.

Originally, Fatty Zhou was supposed to dine at the table with the old madam of the marquis's residence. But since Zhu Ping'an, an outsider, was present, the old madam asked Fatty Zhou to eat at Zhu Ping'an's table instead. After all, "By seven years of age, men and women do not sit together or eat from the same dishes"—such decorum had to be observed in front of outsiders.

"This younger sister is...?" Fatty Zhou asked only when he came over to Zhu Ping'an's table and noticed Li Shu.

"She's from your third uncle's household. Zijuan, go and bring a portion of these dishes to the other table. My Monkey loves these." The old madam of the marquis's residence casually introduced her, then instructed her head maid, Zijuan, to send over some of the dishes that Fatty Zhou liked to his table.

From the look of it, it seemed that Li Shu wasn't particularly valued in the marquis's household.

"Oh, so it's Sister Shu. Hmm, it's been a few years, and you've really grown more striking." Fatty Zhou stroked his chin, his small eyes scanning Li Shu up and down.

"Greetings, Brother Yan Zhou," Li Shu said with a smile on her face, though she felt not the slightest fondness for this cousin.

Fatty Zhou's full name was Li Yanzhou. He was the legitimate son of Master Li Tingzhu, the eldest son of the marquis's household. He was eighteen this year and already engaged—his fiancée was the third young lady of the Marquis of Dingyuan's household, the legitimate daughter of the second branch.

Soon, under Zijuan's direction, the young maids had re-divided and arranged the dishes. Afterward, she reported back to the old madam.

"Very well. My Monkey must have been famished from the exam. Let's begin the meal," the old madam said with a wave of her hand.

He really was her beloved grandson—upon Fatty Zhou's arrival, the table gained eight more dishes, including delicacies like shark fin and bird's nest.

Besides the abundance of food, the marquis's residence was very formal. During meals, every person was attended by servants, maids with fly-whisks, wash basins, and handkerchiefs, all ready to step forward attentively when needed.

Of course, Zhu Ping'an didn't receive such service.

There was a lot of food. Zhu Ping'an didn't hold back—during the days of the imperial exam, he had been stuck in a foul-smelling cell, barely able to eat. So now, in front of this sumptuous feast, he wasn't going to be polite.

The sixth young lady of the marquis's household glanced at Zhu Ping'an during the meal and looked at him with disdain. As expected, he was a bumpkin, eating like he had never seen food before. Even if his table manners weren't awful, he ate too much—definitely a country bumpkin!

"How many days have you gone without food?" asked Fatty Zhou, sitting across from Zhu Ping'an, a sneer on his chubby face.

"Nine days and seven nights. I barely ate at all," Zhu Ping'an replied after swallowing a bite of crystal pork knuckle and putting down his chopsticks.

"Nine days and seven nights? What were you doing? Why so long?" Fatty Zhou squinted his small eyes, asking with a touch of disdain.

This bumpkin also claimed nine days and seven nights? Just like himself during the imperial exams? But he had been sitting the imperial examination! What was this bumpkin doing? Even if the time was the same, it felt much lower in status.

Fatty Zhou squinted at Zhu Ping'an with utter disdain and even felt embarrassed to share the same number of days.

"In front of the Gongyuan gates, the grace of Brother Li's kiss still lingers in my mind," Zhu Ping'an replied with a faint smile after sipping his tea.

Gongyuan gates? Kissed?

"You took the imperial exam too?" Fatty Zhou asked in surprise. His voice was loud from shock.

"You took the imperial exam too?"

The voice was so loud and abrupt that it immediately drew everyone's attention. Everyone at the old madam's table heard it clearly. They had all assumed Zhu Ping'an was just a poor scholar from the countryside—no one expected that he was actually a juren who had passed the provincial exam and was now taking the metropolitan exam. He didn't look that old either!

Judging by his circumstances, it couldn't have been through connections or a donation like Fatty Zhou—he must have passed the exams on his own. Unexpectedly, this bumpkin was actually a juren!

In fact, when the Li family's wealthy patriarch had sent someone to inform them of Li Shu's engagement, they had clearly stated the groom-to-be was from a rural household and had recently passed the county-level exam (xiuca), and then the provincial exam (juren). But the marquis's wife had wanted to marry Li Shu to her nephew. Upon hearing that Li Shu was already engaged, she had been furious and ignored the fact that the groom had passed the provincial exam—she only remembered he was a rural bumpkin who had just become a xiuca.

Li Shu, hearing Fatty Zhou's loud question, gave a slight smirk. Though she'd had no appetite earlier, she suddenly found the bird's nest porridge in front of her quite tempting. She gently picked up the spoon with delicate fingers, took a small sip—only half a spoonful—and did not make a sound. Then she dabbed her lips with a handkerchief and smiled faintly, clearly satisfied with the porridge.

"Yes, I was standing just behind Brother Li in the line," Zhu Ping'an nodded.

"How did you do on the exam?" Fatty Zhou, now knowing Zhu Ping'an had taken the imperial exam, looked at him with a bit more respect. At least the disdain in his squinted eyes had faded slightly.

"I was assigned to a foul cell..." Zhu Ping'an replied, not directly answering the question.

“Hahaha! Then you’re doomed! No one has ever passed from one of those in hundreds of years. That smell would choke you—how can you even write? Hahaha...” Fatty Zhou burst into mocking laughter, pointing at Zhu Ping’an. His eyes were practically lost in his smile, and the disdain returned in full force.

So he was assigned to a foul cell—then there was no hope for him in this round of exams. No one had ever passed from there!

The ladies at the old madam’s table looked at Zhu Ping’an with even more contempt. What a miserable bumpkin! With luck like that, don’t even dream about future exams. So what if he’s a juren? No money, no backing—just wait in line for an official post in your next life. A mere juren meant nothing in the capital, where even random bricks could hit ten officials. What was he worth?

As for Fatty Zhou’s ridicule, Zhu Ping’an merely smiled and continued eating.

He could still eat? What a thick-skinned bumpkin!

Miss Li of the marquis’s household curled her lip and rolled her eyes at Zhu Ping’an, who was eating as if nothing had happened.