

Rise 313

Chapter 313: Your Demon is a Foot Taller, My Virtue is Ten Feet Higher

Amid fierce debate over the ranking of the final ten exam papers, the examiners engaged in a grueling battle, spitting arguments, exchanging sharp words. At last, the rankings of seven out of the ten papers were finalized.

Only the top three papers remained undecided.

Each of these three had multiple examiners supporting them. Of the eight assistant examiners, three favored the paper chosen by the Deputy Chief Examiner, Yan Maoqing. Another three, along with Chief Examiner Xu Jie, agreed unanimously on the paper strongly recommended by that zealous examiner — it was exceptionally well written in the eight-legged style, and even the parallel prose was distinctive. Though the comment “A scholar of such talent deserves to be heard” may have been a bit much, the paper was without doubt the best candidate for the top scorer. The remaining two examiners supported a third paper, which also had solid eight-legged essays and magnificent parallel prose — truly a masterpiece.

In this final ranking debate, Yan Maoqing remained notably quiet. The three examiners behind him, all members of the Yan faction, were red-faced and vehemently defending their stance.

Xu Jie was a mild-mannered man who didn't speak much, but his position carried weight.

The other two examiners also argued their points, but with fewer people on their side and a sense of caution.

Eventually, the third-place position was assigned — it went to the paper favored by the two remaining examiners.

Now only the papers supported by Xu Jie and Yan Maoqing's respective camps remained, vying for first and second place. The debate showed no signs of resolution.

At this critical juncture, Yan Maoqing remained unusually silent, letting the three examiners behind him argue heatedly with Xu Jie's faction, without saying a word himself.

"What does Lord Yan think?" Xu Jie turned to Yan Maoqing, a faint smile on his lips as he asked.

Finally, after Xu Jie's question, Yan Maoqing stirred.

Under the gaze of all the examiners, Yan Maoqing adjusted his hat, making sure it was perfectly aligned. He then straightened his clothes meticulously, smoothing every crease, and composed his expression with great formality...

What is Lord Yan doing? The examiners in the hall looked at him, puzzled by his solemn behavior.

After this ceremonial straightening of attire, Yan Maoqing walked over to the long table where the final two papers lay, and picked one up.

It was the one Xu Jie had endorsed.

The three examiners behind Yan Maoqing gasped. What was Lord Yan doing? Why was he picking up the paper Xu Jie supported? Had he forgotten Lord Yan's instructions?!

To everyone's astonishment, Yan Maoqing placed Xu Jie's favored paper squarely at the center of the long table, and then made an even more startling move.

He placed his left hand over his right, tucked both into his sleeves, raised them to his forehead, and bowed at a 90-degree angle — a formal gesture of great respect. Then he rose, brought his hands back to eyebrow level, and finally let them fall.

What the heck? Lord Yan just performed a deep bow to the exam paper?!

The examiners in the hall were wide-eyed with disbelief. Yan Maoqing had just performed a formal bow to the paper endorsed by Xu Jie! Wasn't this flattery a bit much? Xu Jie only outranked him by two official grades!

The three examiners behind Yan Maoqing were utterly shocked, their hearts about to leap out. Hey, hey, hey! Lord Yan, did you make a mistake?! You told us the signal was "Yu Xiuzai"! If we picked that paper as the top scorer, it would be a huge credit in front of Grand Secretary Yan! Aren't we all part of his faction? Why are you siding with Xu Jie now?! That was going to be my accomplishment!!!

“This paper...”

As the others stood stunned, Yan Maoqing completed his grand salute and finally spoke. His voice was low and hoarse, but solemn and reverent.

Well, what about the paper? Say it already! The examiners were anxious.

“This paper is excellent...”

The words rang out from Yan Maoqing, each of the six characters falling from his lips slowly. To the three examiners behind him, it felt like sitting in a blizzard in December, chilled to the bone.

Lord Yan! How could you say that paper is excellent?! Have you forgotten about Grand Secretary Yan?!

Even the other examiners were shocked. No one could understand why Yan Maoqing had suddenly changed his stance.

“This paper is excellent, but within it...” Yan Maoqing pointed solemnly at a part of the paper, “These two characters are my father’s name. These three here are my mother’s. And here — the characters ‘Yan Zhun’ — that is the name of Grand Secretary Yan’s father...”

“My father, my mother, and the name of Grand Secretary Yan’s father are all present in this paper. Thus, I had no choice but to offer such a deep salute.”

With grave seriousness, Yan Maoqing placed the paper back on the table and stood there silently for a long time.

After his explanation, the examiners began murmuring among themselves. This could be a problem. In Ming Dynasty protocol, name taboos were taken seriously. There were four types: taboos for emperors, superiors, sages, and elders — including parents and grandparents.

For example, the Tang poet Du Fu’s father was named Du Xian. To avoid the taboo, Du Fu never used the character “Xian” in his poems. His mother was named Haitang, so there were no poems using “Haitang” either.

Likewise, Su Shi’s grandfather was named Xu, so Su Xun avoided the character “Xu,” replacing it with “Yin,” and Su Shi used “Xu” as “Xu” (a homophone with different character).

Now, this exam paper had the names of both Yan Maoqing’s parents and Grand Secretary Yan’s father!

Yan Maoqing had performed such a grand gesture just because it contained his parents' names!

Good thing the Emperor's name wasn't mentioned — otherwise, the examinee would have been guilty of grave disrespect and might have landed in prison instead of making the list!

Still, this paper did contain the name of the current Grand Secretary's father.

So... can it still be chosen as the top scorer?

Imagine Grand Secretary Yan seeing his father's name in the top paper — would that be acceptable?

Even the two previously neutral examiners switched sides, now supporting the paper Yan Maoqing had endorsed.

The examiners behind Xu Jie hesitated. The paper was outstanding, worthy of top honors, but it violated a taboo by including Grand Secretary Yan's father's name. That was a serious matter. They too ended up switching to support Yan Maoqing's pick.

Brilliant move — cutting the fuel from under the pot! Lord Yan, your genius is unmatched! The three examiners behind Yan were ecstatic, deeply impressed.

“Lord Yan, that seems a bit far-fetched,” said one examiner who had strongly supported the now-tabooed paper. “We are choosing talents for the empire. Apart from the Emperor and the sages, no name taboo should apply! This paper is far superior — it deserves the top spot!”

“What does Lord Xu think?”

Yan Maoqing looked at Xu Jie and threw the same question back at him, word for word.

All eyes turned to Xu Jie.

He remained calm as ever, as if this bombshell hadn't stirred him in the slightest.

“In that case, let this paper be ranked first.” Xu Jie said calmly, picking up the paper Yan Maoqing had supported — the one with the phrase Yu Xiuzai still visible.

The examiner who had previously promoted the other paper looked resentful, wanting to protest. But another examiner behind him tugged his sleeve, and he finally let out a long sigh.

“Lord Xu has keen judgment. I concur,” he said.

Hearing this, a victorious smile bloomed on Yan Maoqing’s face. The top spot for the grand-nephew of Grand Secretary Yan was secured! Yan Maoqing could already imagine Grand Secretary Yan’s approving smile, already see the salt monopolies of Liangzhe, Lianghuai, Changlu, and Hedong waving at him...

“Then let’s fill in the rankings...” Yan Maoqing said with a smile.

“Yes, yes, let’s get it done. After days of grading, my old back can’t take it anymore,” the examiners behind him echoed.

Everything seemed firmly under control. Yan Maoqing’s mood could not be better.

Just as they were preparing to finalize the rankings, thinking all was settled, Chief Examiner Xu Jie let out a chuckle and spoke again.

“No rush, no rush... Before the examination, His Majesty summoned me at the Western Garden. He instructed that once grading is complete, but before the list is published, the top ten exam papers are to be submitted to the Western Garden for imperial review.”

Xu Jie chuckled as he looked at Yan Maoqing. So what if your schemes are clever? My strategy is one level higher.

Yan Maoqing's face turned pale. The other examiners were equally stunned, murmuring among themselves. This was only the provincial exam, not the palace exam. Why would the Emperor want to personally review the top ten papers? That had never happened before.

"Is there a problem?" Xu Jie said meaningfully. "After all, His Majesty is the one who composed the essay prompt for this examination..."

Ah yes, the parallel prose for the second round of this exam was indeed written by the Emperor.

Which examiner would dare question the Emperor's will? All of them nodded quickly.