

Rise 319

Chapter 319: Your Victory Notice

“Congratulations to your honorable household! Your young master has achieved first place, the top scholar, in the metropolitan examination of this imperial year.”

The sunlight was warm, the days peaceful. The messenger delivering the joyous news repeated the announcement once more, enunciating each word clearly, his voice loud and resonant. The proclamation spread through every corner of the Marquis of Linhuai’s birthday banquet, reaching the ears of every guest present.

The news was like a sudden clap of thunder, exploding above the banquet hall.

At the table where Fatty Zhou sat, the group of idle young heirs were so stunned that their heads spun; they could barely form words, their voices trembling.

How could they not be astonished?!

Fatty Zhou had always been their favorite target of mockery—useless in both literary and martial pursuits, with even his skills in sports and combat inferior to theirs. Yet in the blink of an eye, this same Fatty Zhou had not only passed the metropolitan examination, but had also placed first as the top scholar. This was something unprecedented in the entire aristocratic circle of the Ming Dynasty.

Since the Tumu Fortress Incident, the influence of the nobility had sharply declined, and the power of civil officials had rapidly expanded. Noble families had started to shift toward producing officials through the civil service route, but in all these years, never had anyone from a noble household won the title of top scholar!

Now, the one to break this deadlock was none other than him—Li Yanzhou, the pride of the nobility!

Li Yanzhou—Fatty Zhou—becoming the top scholar was a far greater achievement than that of Xu Laosan from the Duke of Wei's household. Thirty-eighth place and first place were worlds apart; that was the leap from quantitative change to qualitative change.

The young heirs at Fatty Zhou's table now looked at him almost with reverence.

"Fatty Zhou—no, Brother Li—you really have been hiding your talents."

"Brother Li, you're incredible. Silent for so long, and then a single cry that shakes the world! Xu Laosan only placed thirty-eighth, but you, Brother Li, are the top scholar—first place!"

"Brother Li, from now on you must look after us more. Let's not talk about anything else—whenever we go to the pleasure houses and see the best courtesans, the bill goes on us."

The same young heirs who had ridiculed him moments before now changed their tone entirely, crowding around to offer congratulations. In their eyes, Fatty Zhou's status rose rapidly, like a rocket. Just moments ago, they had been gathered around Xu Laosan offering praise; now, they abandoned him and turned all their attention to Fatty Zhou.

Thirty years on the east bank, thirty years on the west bank.

Xu Penghui, who had placed thirty-eighth, had originally come to the Marquis of Linhuai's residence to provoke Fatty Zhou, "sharing" his good news in the process. Everything had been going so well—he'd gotten Fatty Zhou riled up as intended. But in the blink of an eye, the entire plot had flipped upside down.

He had just taunted Fatty Zhou about whether his good news had arrived.

Well, now it had—except it wasn't just good news; it was the ultimate good news. The first-place top scholar!

In a single moment, Fatty Zhou had gone from an exam failure to the top scholar.

Xu Penghui's expression froze. Looking back now, all his earlier mockery made him seem like nothing more than a clown performing before the true protagonist.

The news had come too suddenly for Fatty Zhou to process. This joy was overwhelming—like asking for a single green leaf and being given an entire forest. Stunned, he remained motionless until one of the young heirs gave his plump cheek a shake, pulling him back to his senses.

Shocked, thrilled—Fatty Zhou could barely contain his joy. Is this real? I actually became the top scholar?!

“Ahem, Brother Xu, your elder brother’s good news has arrived.” Fatty Zhou coughed lightly, suppressing his elation, arranging his plump face into an air of composure, and speaking with deliberate calm as he looked at Xu Laosan.

Heh, Xu Laosan—you were feeling smug just now, weren’t you? Mocking me about whether my good news had arrived?

Satisfied now?

At this moment, Fatty Zhou was positively glowing inside. Narrowing his small eyes, he looked at Xu Laosan, feeling delight in every cell of his body, as if he had ascended to the clouds.

“Ahem, congratulations, Brother Li.”

Xu Penghui’s words of congratulations came with a strained smile.

“The same to you, Brother Xu—thirty-eighth place is still quite good,” Fatty Zhou replied, his smile widening as he deliberately emphasized the words “thirty-eighth.”

After savoring Xu Laosan's discomfort, Fatty Zhou turned his gaze to the other young heirs at the table. Raising his chubby hand, he blew imaginary dust off his nails and said casually, "I think I heard someone say just now that if I became the top scholar, a certain person here would... eat excrement on the spot?"

"Brother Li, just pretend your elder brother had too much to drink earlier. I'll punish myself with three cups. By the way, you said before you liked my black-maned horse—why don't I give it to you?"

The young heir who had made the crude bet smiled ingratiatingly, stepping forward to put an arm around Fatty Zhou's neck.

"That wouldn't be right—gentlemen do not take what others cherish," Fatty Zhou replied modestly, though his plump face was alight with joy.

"Not at all—such a fine horse should belong to a hero," the other insisted.

"Well... I can't argue with you. As you wish, then," Fatty Zhou sighed with exaggerated reluctance.

From there, the other young heirs came forward one by one to express their goodwill, each "persuading" Fatty Zhou into accepting their gestures.

The entire banquet was abuzz with the news.

The old marchioness of the household was so overjoyed that even her deep wrinkles seemed to smooth out; her smile could not be hidden.

The Marquis of Linhuai, Li Tingzhu, maintained outward composure, but the wine cup in his hand trembled, spilling more than half its contents.

The young ladies of the household, who had been keeping to their rooms to avoid impropriety, now rushed out with flushed, excited faces.

Li Shu also emerged, her smile carrying a hint of slyness, like that of a little fox.

“Reward!” The old marchioness’ voice trembled as she spoke, then quickly added, “A generous reward.”

At her word, the stewards stepped forward, giving each messenger a silver ingot the size of a palm—ten taels each. The messengers, clutching their silver, were overjoyed. The gossip they’d heard earlier about this household’s generosity had proven entirely true.

Then came the sound of firecrackers—louder and longer than those from the Duke of Wei's residence earlier.

When the noise subsided, the messengers presented the rolled-up red victory notice with both hands.

It was only fitting for the honoree to receive it himself. Everyone yielded the moment to the man of the hour: the new top scholar, Fatty Zhou.

Suppressing his excitement, he reached out his plump hand to take the scroll. Under the envious stares of the crowd, he slowly unrolled it and read the words.

Then, his smile abruptly withered. His squinting eyes flew open wide, his face stiffening as if struck by constipation.

His hands shook.

To the crowd, this seemed like perfectly normal excitement—after all, this was the top scholar's notice! Who wouldn't be overcome with emotion at seeing their name tied forever to such an honor?

Still... wasn't he a little too emotional? And for a bit too long?

Finally, Fatty Zhou took a deep breath.

“Ahem... brother-in-law—fifth brother-in-law,” he called, lifting his head to look toward a corner of the banquet hall. His face still bore that wilted smile, but his voice sounded like that of someone mourning.

Hearing this, Zhu Ping’an set down his teacup and rose to his feet. It seemed that cup of tea would remain unfinished. When the messengers had arrived earlier, Zhu Ping’an had suspected that the good news might actually be for him—but the guests’ excitement had hemmed in both Fatty Zhou and the messenger, drowning everything in noise and firecrackers.

Unable to get close or make himself heard, Zhu Ping’an had resigned himself to returning to his table for a sip of tea—until Fatty Zhou called for him.

Fifth brother-in-law?

Why? Fatty Zhou had been looking at him with disdain earlier.

Rumors about the Marquis’ fifth son-in-law had painted him as a country bumpkin—plain to the point of ugliness, useless, and living off his wife’s family.

Following Fatty Zhou's gaze, the guests spotted a plain-looking young man sitting alone at a corner table, still calmly sipping tea.

Indeed, utterly ordinary—maybe even a bit simple-minded.

Look at him—can't even put down his tea. Such a nobody.

But then Fatty Zhou raised the red scroll in his hand and, with that same pained expression, repeated:

"Ahem... brother-in-law—your victory notice."

Wait... what?!

Your victory notice?!

Did that mean this plain-looking youth... was the top scholar?!

Xu Laosan, who had been fuming all this time, snatched the scroll from Fatty Zhou's hands and read:

“Victory notice for the metropolitan examination—congratulations to Zhu Ping’an of Anqing Prefecture for achieving first place, the top scholar, in the imperial year’s examination.”