

Rise 320

Chapter 320: I Want to Be Alone

“Good news from the Metropolitan Exam! Congratulations to Zhu Ping’an of Anqing Prefecture for ranking first and becoming the Huiyuan in this year’s gracious Metropolitan Examination!”

When the third son of the Duke of Wei’s household, Xu Laosan, was reading the congratulatory announcement, curious onlookers craned their necks to peek at the red paper. Although some had guessed that the Huiyuan of this year’s Metropolitan Exam might not be Fatty Zhou but someone else, the moment they saw the black characters on the red paper, they couldn’t help but exclaim in surprise and read it out loud.

Zhu Ping’an!

If Fatty Zhou’s earlier constipated, grief-stricken remark, “Fifth Brother-in-law, your victory notice,” was like a sudden drumbeat that merely planted seeds of doubt—

Then this moment, reading aloud the line “Good news from the Metropolitan Exam! Congratulations to Zhu Ping’an of Anqing Prefecture for ranking first and becoming Huiyuan in this year’s gracious Metropolitan Examination” was like a thunderclap exploding in everyone’s hearts. The fact that this year’s Huiyuan was Zhu Ping’an became an ironclad truth.

The Huiyuan of the gracious Metropolitan Examination—Zhu Ping’an!

The news was so sudden that people simply couldn't accept it.

If the Huiyuan had been Fatty Zhou, people could still take it in, but for it to be Zhu Ping'an—this was beyond their ability to process in that instant.

And who exactly was Zhu Ping'an?

He was the fifth son-in-law of the Marquis of Linhuai's household who was about to be divorced.

He was a country bumpkin.

A man living off a woman.

A mediocre, incompetent fellow.

In the Marquis's household, there were no fewer than fifty disgraceful tales about him. Even if just one of those versions had been true about oneself, one would be so ashamed as to hang oneself from the southeast branch!

And yet, in reality, this year's Huiyuan was precisely that man.

It was like the line, “While dying of illness, I suddenly sat up—who is more beautiful, I or Lord Xu?” People’s feelings right now were akin to the stunned disbelief upon hearing that line. They were left dumbfounded, unable to recover for a long while.

All eyes, wide in astonishment, turned again toward the youth they had just been scorning.

The boy’s looks were very ordinary—“mediocre” would not be an exaggeration. He even looked a bit simple and honest.

Too ordinary! Throw him into a crowd and he’d vanish like a drop of water in the ocean, completely unremarkable. He had none of the refined air expected of a Huiyuan, let alone the charm and elegance befitting one. Many in the audience looked more like a Huiyuan than he did—Xu Laosan of the Duke of Wei’s household, for example, could outshine him by a wide margin.

Compared to the general astonishment, the reactions of those directly affected by this year’s Huiyuan were even more dramatic.

For example, the true protagonist of today’s banquet—the old Madam of the Marquis of Linhuai’s household, celebrating her sixtieth birthday. Just moments ago, she had been full of vigor, trembling with excitement as she shouted “A grand reward!” and commanded the steward to set off firecrackers, looking ten years younger. But now her vision went black, and she nearly fainted on the spot. If not for her personal maid, Zijuān, quickly supporting her and pinching the tiger’s mouth point on her hand, she would have collapsed entirely. Even so, she sat back into her seat as if all her spirit had been drained, her face clouded over.

Or take Marquis Li Tingzhu of Linhuai, seated at another table. The moment the words on the congratulatory notice were read aloud, the wine cup he had been holding with trembling hands, still warm from excitement, suddenly felt scalding hot. With a snap, the Marquis dropped it, shattering it into pieces on the floor.

Of course, not everyone was struck dumb—some were overjoyed.

“He... he did it! Young Master has done it, Miss! Miss, Young Master got... first place—he’s Huiyuan!”

The bun-faced little maid Hua’er, upon hearing the news, leapt up and down, hugging Li Shu’s arm. Her round cheeks flushed bright red, her excitement beyond words. It seemed as though every cell in her body was dancing with joy as she bounced happily at her mistress’s side.

Li Shu allowed her little maid to cling to her arm and frolic. Her clear, watery eyes gazed tenderly at the youth holding a teacup, her lips curving slightly upward.

See that? That is my husband, Li Shu’s husband!

It was as if a sweet, cool breeze swept through Li Shu’s heart.

Hua'er's jubilant cries snapped the other young ladies of the Marquis's household back to reality.

Those who had earlier stepped out of the house with flushed, excited faces now looked as though they had suffered a heavy blow. Though they still wore smiles, the smiles were forced.

Especially the Sixth Miss of the Marquis's household, who earlier, when Xu Penghui of the Duke of Wei's household had arrived, was full of girlish excitement and pride, looking down on Li Shu. Now, her face was frighteningly pale, her handkerchief twisted tightly in her grip.

At last, she understood why, when Xu Penghui had ranked only thirty-eighth earlier, her Fifth Sister had remained calm and unruffled while sipping tea.

At last, she understood that her earlier thoughts—imagining that her Fifth Sister must have been seething with jealousy, and waiting to see her envy—were laughable! Her own fiancé had only managed thirty-eighth place, while her Fifth Sister's betrothed was first place, the Huiyuan!

The Sixth Miss of the Marquis's household, her pretty face drained of color, turned her gaze toward the "country bumpkin" Fifth Brother-in-law who was now the focus of all eyes.

This "country bumpkin" looked plain, as ordinary as a drop of water in the sea, seemingly simple and honest. But in that honest face were a pair of dark, bright eyes, always lively, as if they could see through everything.

At this moment, the “country bumpkin” Fifth Brother-in-law wore a faint smile. Facing the crowd, he cupped his hands politely, neither humble nor arrogant, his composure no different from when he had first entered the Marquis’s household and endured her mockery. She could still recall his words from that day: Someone like you—good-looking, sweet-voiced, pure yet intelligent, like a drifting willow catkin with a curious spirit—honestly, a country bumpkin like me could take on ten of you.

And the most shocking realization for the Sixth Miss—this “country bumpkin” Fifth Brother-in-law was only fourteen or fifteen years old. Oh yes, he was the same age as her and her Fifth Sister—just fourteen! To be Huiyuan at fourteen... the thought alone was enough to make one’s heart race.

The Sixth Miss shifted her gaze from him to her Fifth Sister Li Shu, whose lips were curved in a smile.

At last, the Sixth Miss understood why her dazzlingly beautiful Fifth Sister had agreed to marry such a “country bumpkin.” At last, she understood why her Fifth Sister had been utterly dismissive when others in the household slandered him.

Yes—dismissive. Her Fifth Sister was above it all.

There were many at the banquet who now looked at things the way the Sixth Miss did. But there were exceptions. For instance, Young Master Zheng—who had spent all morning fixing his hair, blocked Zhu Ping’an’s courtyard for half the day, and earnestly advised him to stay quiet in a corner so as not to embarrass the Marquis’s household or Li Shu—did not see things this way.

After hearing the line “Good news from the Metropolitan Exam! Congratulations to Zhu Ping’an of Anqing Prefecture for ranking first and becoming Huiyuan,” Young Master Zheng reacted as if struck by lightning. Pushing through the crowd, muttering “It must be a mistake, must be a mistake,” he snatched the announcement from Xu Laosan’s hands.

It must be wrong. That country bumpkin’s poetry isn’t even as good as mine! I even tutored him in the eight-legged essay! Young Master Zheng simply could not believe that the man inferior to him in every way—poetry, essays, everything—had actually become Huiyuan.

He stubbornly read the announcement over and over again, but the three characters “Zhu Ping’an” were clear beyond doubt, like a fierce slap across his face.

Don’t say anything. I want to be alone.