

Rise 323

Chapter 323: Confronted with Guilt on the Spot

One cannot truly see the face of the Yan residence, simply because one is already within its walls.

The Yan residence was vast, sprawling across the width of four full streets—far larger than an ordinary academy. Upon entering, the first sight to greet the eyes was an expansive garden. From this garden branched three distinct paths—east, central, and west—each leading toward different quarters of the estate. Within the garden lay a clearly man-made lake, large enough to be considered a true body of water, covering dozens of acres. Hundreds of rare and exotic flowers and plants thrived there, and though it was still only early spring, blossoms already burst forth in splendid abundance.

The black horse “Shamate” had long been led away to the stables by servants of the marquis’s household. They handed Zhu Ping’an a bamboo token, carved with the lifelike image of a horse and stamped with a number, by which he could reclaim his mount upon departure. Following another servant, Zhu Ping’an walked along the long western path of the estate toward the courtyard where the Yan family was hosting the banquet. Along the way, finely dressed maids in orderly lines carried trays of fruits, wine, and delicacies, their graceful figures passing by like a living painting.

The servant leading the way stole glances at their slender backs, gulping audibly with desire.

From not far ahead drifted the sounds of chatter and music, with the faint silhouettes of dancing girls flickering in the distance. The banquet was near.

Zhu Ping’an, full of curiosity, straightened his sleeves and slowly stepped into the feast.

The banquet hall was fragrant with incense rising from several braziers. Potted flowers and carefully arranged displays lent the gathering an air of refinement. Dancers in red skirts waved their colorful sleeves, their bare feet moving lightly in elegant steps, while singers and musicians played accompaniment to the side.

What drew Zhu Ping'an's eye most was the flowing-wine setup at the center of the banquet. There, amid a jade-carved rockery, gleaming white jade pipes ran between artificial peaks. Atop the rocks stood enormous wine jars inlaid with gold and jade, filled with sparkling liquor. Like crystal streams, the wine coursed gently through the jade conduits. Guests seated around the rockery could simply lower their cups, and the fine wine would flow directly in.

If a cup was not placed beneath it, the wine would vanish into a slot below—clearly designed to recycle it back into the system.

On the banquet tables lay bear paws and camel hooves, slivers of rare fish and meats. Creatures of mountain, river, grassland, and sky—anything that ran, swam, soared, or grew—had been turned into delicacies, laid out in endless streams before the guests.

By this time, the feast was already well underway, the atmosphere lively and boisterous. Everyone crowded around a short, stocky man, fawning over him with smiles and compliments. This man, around thirty-seven or thirty-eight years of age, was not tall, with a thick neck and stout frame. Most striking was that he had but one good eye—the other blinded. Yet the remaining eye gleamed with cunning intelligence, as though a single glance could pierce into the very depths of one's heart.

His energy was boundless, so much so that it radiated arrogance and domineering airs.

Short, stout, one-eyed, and overbearing—these qualities together led Zhu Ping'an to his conclusion: this was none other than Yan Shifan, the sole son of Elder Yan, and now the Right Vice Minister of Works.

Indeed, Heaven was fair. Though Heaven had made Yan Shifan squat, fat, and half-blind, it had bestowed him with an extraordinary intelligence. Historical records even described him as “cunning and shrewd, widely learned and sharp of memory; well-versed in institutions and current affairs; tireless in energy, capable of great burdens; and above all, adept at discerning the emperor’s every whim.”

Led in by a Yan servant, Zhu Ping’an entered the hall. His arrival was announced, and all eyes turned to the young man standing at the door.

A boy? Who was this? Never before had they seen him here. Those who frequently lingered at the Yan residence looked upon him with curious eyes.

“Who goes there?” came a sharp question. The speaker sat not far below Yan Shifan, setting aside his wine cup and fixing Zhu Ping’an with a cold gaze.

This man was Luo Longwen, courtesy name Hanzhang. He had risen from merchant origins, amassing wealth through the art of ink-making in his youth. He mastered the secret craft of producing superior ink from tung-oil soot, earning renown as a producer of the finest inks, worth thousands in gold and always in demand. With wealth came ambition, and Luo sought political capital. Thus, he attached himself to Yan Shifan’s household, and under his patronage, he now held the post of Hanlin Copyist.

In short, he was one of Yan Shifan’s most loyal lackeys.

“Zhu Ping’an of Xiahé Village,” Zhu Ping’an replied calmly, bowing with composure. “I am honored to have received Lord Yan’s invitation and have come to pay my respects.”

His voice was unhurried, his bearing neither humble nor arrogant, unshaken by Luo Longwen’s hostile tone.

“Zhu Ping’an? Heh... and who might Zhu Ping’an be?” Luo sneered, glancing at him with thinly veiled disdain.

Hearing this, many others joined in laughter, their eyes upon Zhu Ping’an filled with mockery.

Yet in truth, who here truly did not know who Zhu Ping’an was? After all, the Metropolitan Examination was one of the most important events in the realm, and many of these men had long haunted the Yan estate, Luo Longwen included. How could they be ignorant of the story of Ouyang, who had failed to claim the title of champion? Their laughter was no more than a declaration of allegiance.

Still, amid the derision, some gazes lingered upon Zhu Ping’an with curiosity and thought.

Through it all, Zhu Ping’an remained calm, standing firm under their scrutiny, neither bowing nor flinching.

Just then, the man at the center of their flattery—Yan Shifan, the stout, one-eyed lord—rose with a smile. His sharp gaze fixed upon Zhu Ping’an, and his fleshy face quivered as he pointed at the youth, introducing him to all

“Hanzhang, gentlemen, this is no ordinary youth. Though you do not yet know him today, in time his name will echo across the empire and be etched deeply into your memories. This year’s champion of the Metropolitan Examination is none other than this young man—Zhu Ping’an, styled Zi Hou, the famed prodigy of Xiahé Village in Anqing Prefecture. At thirteen he passed the provincial exam and earned the title of juren. Only Grand Secretary Yang Tinghe surpassed him, having passed at twelve. Yet Yang Tinghe failed his first metropolitan exam and did not succeed until six years later, at the age of nineteen.”

Here Yan Shifan paused, his one bright eye sweeping across the hall with a knowing smile. “And tell me, gentlemen—do you know how old this man is now?”

The guests all shook their heads in practiced unison, murmuring ignorance.

“He is but fourteen years of age! Fourteen, and already the champion! Even Grand Secretary Yang was not his equal.” Yan Shifan gestured proudly at Zhu Ping’an.

A wave of astonishment swept the hall. Many had not imagined Zhu Ping’an to be so young. Fourteen years old, and already the champion of the empire’s most prestigious examination! Even Yang Tinghe had been nineteen. The feat was nothing short of extraordinary.

“A fourteen-year-old champion... no wonder, no wonder...”

The voice came again, sharp and mocking—it was Luo Longwen.

“No wonder what?” someone asked.

“No wonder he disregards Brother Donglou. No wonder he dares slight the Yan household itself. Brother Donglou spoke so highly of him, sent him an invitation, welcomed him to this feast... and yet, the great champion, at only fourteen, sees fit to arrive so late. Tell me, Champion Zhu—do you even know the meaning of propriety? A man without trustworthiness is unfit to stand. You, a champion, cannot even keep time—do you not fear becoming a laughingstock before such esteemed company? Or is it that you never placed us in your eyes to begin with?”

Luo Longwen’s lips curved in a faint, sinister smile as he launched his accusation, his tone cutting and persuasive.

At once, the mood shifted. The eyes of many guests turned upon Zhu Ping’an with censure. To be late was to be untrustworthy, and what was a man worth if he had no integrity?