

## Rise 334

### Chapter 334: First Encounter at the Xu Residence

Zhu Ping'an and his two companions, spirits high, made their way toward the residence of Xu Jie. Along the way, they passed by West Chang'an Street, where the gates of the Yan household were still as bustling as ever, with carriages crowding the road and guests coming and going in endless streams.

Zhu Ping'an briefly told Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen about the last time he had been invited to a banquet at the Yan residence after winning first place in the examinations. He spoke mostly of how he had been made things difficult for, and of how young Ouyang had "shone brilliantly." As for that awkward incident of accidentally witnessing Yan Lan, the second daughter of the Yan family, stepping out of her bath—he simply glossed over it in the vague style of the Spring and Autumn Annals.

"Heh, no wonder rumors have been flying through the capital lately—that this year's examinations were unjust, that the second place candidate far outshone the first. So it was tricks at that Yan family banquet all along! That second-place Ouyang is Yan Song's nephew. No wonder the Yan household went to such lengths to raise his name!" Zhang Siwei cast a glance at the crowded gates of the Yan residence and sneered.

"A nest of snakes and rats..." Wang Shizhen, too, spoke with disdain.

"Indeed. The deputy examiner this year, Yan Maoqing, is a core member of the Yan faction. No doubt his appointment as chief examiner for this round was tied to Yan Song. Their aim was to crown Ouyang as the champion. Clever schemes upon clever schemes, yet in the end, you, Zihou, appeared from nowhere and snatched away first place. Their plan fell apart. I fear they'll hold it against you. I hear Yan Shifan is no easy man—cruel, sly, and ruthless in pursuit of his ambitions. Zihou, are you sure you're unharmed?"

Zhang Siwei stroked his chin thoughtfully, then pieced the story together with startling clarity. He turned toward Zhu Ping'an, concern in his eyes.

Wang Shizhen was even more direct. He reached out, patting and prodding Zhu Ping'an up and down to make sure he hadn't been harmed by Yan Shifan and his ilk during that banquet.

"Hey—hey, enough! I'm perfectly fine." Zhu Ping'an quickly backed away from Wang Shizhen's wandering hands, goosebumps rising all over. He certainly had no taste for such antics.

"They wanted Ouyang to gain fame? Let them have it. A hollow reputation means nothing to me." Zhu Ping'an truly didn't care for titles or name.

"Alas, Zihou, you've been wronged. With your quick wit and abundant talent, yet in that dragon's den of the Yan household, circumstance forced you to let Ouyang steal the glory. Truly unfair." Wang Shizhen sighed, convinced Zhu Ping'an was only trying to comfort them, and felt indignation on his behalf.

You two are really overthinking this. I didn't take it to heart at all. Zhu Ping'an glanced at Wang Shizhen, who looked genuinely sympathetic, and was left at a loss for words.

The three passed the gates of Yan Song, the Grand Secretary, and reached the street corner. From there they turned right, crossed two streets, and arrived at Sophora Alley. The third house along was the residence of Xu Jie, Minister of Rites. Xu's home, though stately, was a far cry from the grandeur of Yan Song's mansion.

As Zhu Ping'an and his friends arrived at Xu Jie's gates, they met several students departing together. They exchanged polite bows with one another as they passed—those men, too, had just paid their respects to Xu Jie.

At the gate, Zhu Ping'an and his companions handed over their visiting cards and greetings. The porter went inside to announce them.

Soon enough, they were invited in. A stewardly figure led them through a small garden, along a covered corridor, and into the front hall. Stopping at the entrance, the steward gestured for them to enter on their own.

Inside the hall, they saw Xu Jie seated at the main seat. To Zhu Ping'an, he looked like a kindly uncle in his forties, fair-complexioned, of medium height, with a genial smile upon his lips.

The man at the head seat—without question, this was Xu Jie.

“Your disciple Zhu Ping'an (Zhang Siwei) (Wang Shizhen) pays respects to our honored teacher.”

The three entered the hall, knelt in the formal rite of students before their master, and presented their folded visiting cards once more. Zhu Ping'an, kneeling on the ground, silently cursed the oppressive feudal order, but kept his expression solemn and respectful.

“You are all pillars of the nation's future, no need for such ceremony. Quickly, rise.” Xu Jie stood and moved forward, extending a hand in a gesture of assistance.

“Thank you, Master.”

Zhu Ping’an rose first, followed by Zhang Siwei, then Wang Shizhen.

As he stood, Zhu Ping’an let his eyes sweep the hall. Besides Xu Jie, there were two other men present. One he recognized at once: Yang Jisheng, the most formidable man of the Ming dynasty, whom he had met when he first arrived in the capital. Dressed in a dark blue robe, he sat upright, brimming with righteous energy like a sharpened blade. Yet today, his expression was heavy with worry.

Yang Jisheng recognized Zhu Ping’an as soon as he stood, showing a flicker of surprise before inclining his head.

Zhu Ping’an returned the nod.

The other man was a stranger. If Yang Jisheng was like a drawn sword, then this man was a fortress—immeasurable and unfathomable.

Zhu Ping’an had thought Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen were the very image of handsome young men, fit to star in idol dramas in the modern world. But compared to this man, they seemed a shade less dazzling.

He was, without doubt, the most handsome man Zhu Ping'an had yet seen in the Ming dynasty. Even calling him a "beautiful man" felt inadequate. His jet-black hair was combed neatly into a topknot bound in a delicate white jade crown. His nose was high and straight, his lips thin, his sword-like brows arched above deep, piercing eyes. Every feature was flawless. A trim black beard added to his striking presence. His whole being radiated a commanding aura, the bearing of a leader destined for great things.

Yet he seemed almost obsessive about perfection. His hair was immaculate, not a strand out of place. His robes looked newly made, without a single crease—even though he was seated! If that wasn't a touch of obsession, what was?

What unsettled Zhu Ping'an most was the impression he felt at first glance: this man was profoundly calculating, unfathomably deep.

Strange as it was, the feeling came instantly, unbidden. One look, and his mind reflexively sent him that warning.

"You are all men of great promise. Do not stand—sit, and let us talk." Xu Jie, once the three had risen, gestured for them to be seated.

"Thank you, Master."

They hurried to thank him and sat in the lower seats of the hall. Zhu Ping'an found himself nearest that striking man. A faint fragrance drifted to his nose—it came from him.

Wait... not only handsome, not only meticulously groomed, but scented with perfume as well?

Had it not been for his overwhelming aura of heroism and commanding presence, Zhu Ping'an might have suspected, half in jest, that the man was better suited to a certain flamboyant song.