

Rise 335

Chapter 335: It Turns Out to Be Him

At the front hall of the Xu residence, the guests and hosts were seated according to rank. Naturally, Xu Jie sat at the main seat. To his left, on a carved pearwood chair, sat Yang Jisheng. On his right, in another carved pearwood chair, was the handsome man with scented balm in his hair. Beside him sat Zhu Ping'an, while Wang Shizhen and Zhang Siwei took their places behind Yang Jisheng on the left.

"There's no need for formality here. I was once your age, and in those days I too went to pay respects to Master Xia," Xu Jie said warmly. There was not the slightest trace of arrogance in his manner. Sitting in the main seat, he chatted with Zhu Ping'an and the others as though closing the distance between them with ease.

Xu Jie held the initiative in the conversation. He asked about their native places, whether they were settling well in the capital, if they had encountered any difficulties in life or study. Then he exhorted them to guard against arrogance and impetuosity, and to prepare diligently for the palace examination—every inch the kindly elder of the household.

In the eyes of Wang Shizhen and Zhang Siwei, Xu Jie was humbling himself to meet men of lesser rank. This won their deep gratitude, and their respect for him rose to new heights.

Zhu Ping'an wore the same look of heartfelt gratitude as Wang Shizhen and Zhang Siwei, an expression that seemed ready to pledge life and limb for Xu Jie. Yet inwardly he was calm. He had once read Mr. Dangnian Mingyue's great work *The Ming Dynasty, Those Things*, and had learned something about Xu Jie, the former Guozijian Principal. To lower his posture and show humility toward new scholars was, to Xu Jie, no more than what Principal Chiang of Huangpu Military Academy had done in his time. The goal was not merely to encourage study—who knew if among these fresh scholars a few might rise to the rank of first- or second-class officials? Drawing them into his circle was one very important purpose.

Of course, Mr. Mingyue was no worm in Xu Jie's belly. His words were only reference points for Zhu Ping'an.

Hearing was false; seeing was believing.

What sort of man was Xu Jie? What sort of man was Yan Song? What sort of man was Emperor Jiajing? What sort of Ming Dynasty was this era's Ming Dynasty? For all these questions, Zhu Ping'an would rely on his own eyes, his own thoughts, to slowly observe this world of Daming.

Zhu Ping'an's natural plainness of face and unremarkable appearance served as a kind of disguise. In the eyes of Xu Jie and the others, he and Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen were no different from previous groups of new scholars who had come to pay respects—all full of gratitude for Xu Jie's humility.

"At the post station that day, we parted ways. Who would have thought we'd meet again here at Teacher's hall? And who would have thought that the young friend I met at the post station would today be the laureate of the metropolitan examination?" Yang Jisheng, after Xu Jie had finished his warm words with the others, smiled faintly as he addressed Zhu Ping'an. His voice was still as deep and hoarse as it had been that day.

"Brother Yang jests." Zhu Ping'an smiled a little sheepishly.

Yang Jisheng's words drew the attention of everyone present—including the handsome man seated to Xu Jie's lower right. When Zhu Ping'an and his companions had first entered, they had not caught his eye. He had already seen too many new scholars come through Xu Jie's doors, all much the same. Yet when Yang Jisheng mentioned the words metropolitan laureate, his eyes flashed with a sharp, intimidating light.

“Oh? You two know each other?” The handsome man turned toward Yang Jisheng, asking with feigned casualness.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen were curious too; Zhu Ping’an had never spoken to them of Yang Jisheng.

“Ah, some days ago, when I first arrived in the capital, I met Brother Zhu at the post station,” Yang Jisheng replied lightly.

“I owe Brother Yang much thanks for that day. Otherwise, I fear I would have had to sleep out in the wild.” Zhu Ping’an rose from his chair and clasped his hands in gratitude once again. It was true—at the post station, where people bowed to the powerful and trampled the weak, had it not been for Yang Jisheng, he likely would have ended up in the wilderness. At that time, finding another inn was not easy.

“A trifling effort, Brother Zhu. Think nothing of it.” Yang Jisheng had long since put the matter from his mind.

“Oh, that was my oversight.” Xu Jie chuckled at himself, then gestured toward Yang Jisheng as he made introductions to Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen. “This is Yang Jisheng, Assistant Director of the Ministry of War’s Chariot Division, courtesy name Zhongfang.”

“Zhang Siwei (Wang Shizhen) pays respects to Master Yang.” The two of them rose and bowed with clasped hands.

“We have long admired Master Yang’s name. When you memorialized against Chou Luan’s horse market proposal, we took you as our model,” Zhang Siwei added, full of admiration.

“As does Shizhen.” Wang Shizhen’s reverence was even deeper.

“I am unworthy of such praise. I merely did my duty as a subject.” Yang Jisheng shook his head slightly, then said, “There’s no need to keep calling me Master Yang. I am a few years older—just call me Brother Yang, as Brother Zhu does.”

“Many thanks, Brother Yang.”

Their admiration for Yang Jisheng was genuine. On the day he had memorialized against Chou Luan and was demoted to magistrate of Didao, both had already held him in the highest esteem. Now that he invited them to call him “Brother,” of course they would not refuse.

When Xu Jie had finished introducing Yang Jisheng, he pointed to the handsome man at his lower right. “And this is Zhang Juzheng, Compiler of the Hanlin Academy, courtesy name Shuda. He entered as a jinshi the same year as Zhongfang, one class ahead of you.”

Zhang Juzheng?!

The name struck Zhu Ping'an like a bolt of lightning. Good heavens—this handsome fellow with perfumed balm in his hair, the one he had nearly dismissed with a jest about curry and soap—was actually Zhang Juzheng!!!

If such a towering figure were ever to learn how narrowly Zhu Ping'an had misjudged him, his life in Daming would surely be a troubled one.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, unlike Zhu Ping'an, had no such historical knowledge. Hearing Xu Jie introduce Zhang Juzheng, they felt no particular awe—much as a student hearing a professor introduce an older alumnus. Oh, a senior, is it? That was all.

For them, Yang Jisheng, who had dared to rebuke General Chou Luan at the height of his power, was the true stormy figure.

As for Zhang Juzheng, his fame was still obscure. He was not yet a figure of wind and cloud. To them, the only appealing part was his current position as Hanlin compiler. After all, the Hanlin Academy was the cradle of talent, and the saying went: no jinshi, no Hanlin; no Hanlin, no Grand Secretariat. Yet even so, the Hanlin Academy housed many men, and not all would rise to prominence.

Thus, while they showed respect, there was no awe.

“We greet Master Zhang.”

They both rose and bowed after Xu Jie's introduction.

"We greet Master Zhang."

Zhu Ping'an, however, was half a beat late. Only after Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen had made their bows did he come back to his senses and rise to salute Zhang Juzheng.

To Zhang Juzheng, the difference between their manner toward Yang Jisheng and toward himself was obvious. A man of sharp wit, he could easily guess the reason behind it.

But such shallow men were hardly worth a thought.

Zhang Juzheng, a man of unfathomable depth, concealed every flicker of thought. His face showed nothing but a mild smile as he rose slightly and said with an easy laugh, "No need for formality. Just call me Shuda."