

Rise 337

Chapter 337: The Palace Examination Begins a Day in Advance (1)

“Two-Sleeved Breeze’ Yan Maoqing...”

“Looks like our gift was a little too heavy, hahahaha...”

The moment Zhu Ping’an and his two companions stepped out of Yan Maoqing’s residence, they exchanged glances. That single look was enough to break their composure—laughter burst out of them, loud and unrestrained, echoing down the quiet street.

Yan Maoqing... what sort of man was he? To Zhu Ping’an, he was not unlike certain officials from the modern world—those who could roar out slogans with righteous indignation at the podium by day, only to shamelessly indulge themselves at night, their expenses covered by public funds. Just yesterday, Yan had spoken in lofty tones about the importance of incorruptibility, yet as evening fell he went “personally” to deliver comfort to unfortunate courtesans. Such a man was, quite literally, a living irony.

After leaving the Yan residence and having their laugh at his expense, the three companions—Zhu Ping’an, Zhang Siwei, and Wang Shizhen—went their separate ways, each to pay respects to his own fangshi (examiner-mentor). Since their examiners were different, they could not go together.

Zhu Ping’an’s examiner was Zhou Chengtian, the very same who had highly recommended his exam essay during the grading. When Zhu Ping’an went to pay his respects, he immediately sensed Zhou’s strong appreciation. That admiration only grew as they conversed on various questions from the Four Books and

Five Classics. Zhou was deeply taken by Zhu Ping'an's articulate words, his clarity of thought, and the depth of his learning.

"Zi Hou," Zhou asked with sudden warmth, "have you yet taken a wife? I have a daughter—thirteen years of age, talented, gentle, wise beyond her years. She would be a perfect match."

It was clear: admiration had blossomed into something else. In Zhou's eyes, Zhu Ping'an was a raw jade, destined to be polished into a vessel for the state. What better way to secure such a future than to bind him to the family through marriage?

Zhu Ping'an rose and bowed deeply, his expression both apologetic and resolute. "I thank you, Master Zhou, for your great kindness. Yet I dare not impose upon your esteemed daughter. Before I came to the capital, my family had already arranged a marriage for me."

A hint of relief flickered across Zhu Ping'an's heart as he spoke. That old engagement—one he had often viewed with indifference—suddenly seemed like a most reliable shield.

"It matters not," Zhou Chengtian replied, smiling with understanding. "A man's promise is worth a thousand in gold. A gentleman does not cast aside the wife of his youth. That you hold firm to this principle only makes me respect you more."

And just like that, Zhou let the matter go. His offer had been but a passing thought; hearing Zhu Ping'an's steadfast reply, his admiration grew even stronger.

When Zhu Ping'an finally left Zhou's residence, the evening sky was already painted with streaks of crimson. The thought of the Marquis of Linhuai's household dining without him crossed his mind, and so he chose

instead to eat at a modest restaurant along the street. Better to fill his belly there than return hungry or burden the Marquis's kitchens unnecessarily.

Meanwhile, within the Marquis's household, shadows of unease stretched long. Ever since the birthday banquet, the old matriarch had not smiled once. Her appetite waned day by day, and on this very day she had refused to eat altogether. The Marchioness, too, was plagued by foul tempers, lashing out frequently at the concubines of the main branch. The poor women had endured more than one storm of misplaced anger. Whispers among the maids circulated freely: some said the most profitable shops had recently collapsed, seized by others, forcing even the furniture of the residence to be carted away as repayment. Others, with *schadenfreude*, claimed it was karma—those shops had originally been taken by the Marquis from his third brother, and now they had been snatched away in turn.

Yet, amidst the gloom, one chamber alone was filled with quiet joy—Li Shu's boudoir. Her little maid, Hua'er, nicknamed Baozi nearly dislocated her jaw with laughter as she watched her mistress lock away a stack of house deeds and land contracts inside a jewelry box.

"What are you grinning like a fool for? This is only the beginning. Tomorrow, once the 'King Quail' lands, the net can finally be cast." Li Shu rolled her eyes and tapped the girl's forehead lightly with a slender finger, her lips curving into a mischievous smile.

As for Zhu Ping'an, he remained blissfully unaware of the storm within the Marquis's household. After his simple meal, he paid his bill and strolled back at an easy pace, enjoying the evening air.

That night, he slept peacefully, sweet dreams wrapping him like warm silk.

Morning came. Zhu Ping'an rose as usual, washed, practiced his calligraphy, and read aloud to steady his mind. After breakfast, he continued his studies. Only by noon did he notice that the mischievous "bear child" had not appeared for several days. In fact, the child did not come at all in the following days. Later, Zhu Ping'an learned the reason: the Marquis had been away on official duties, and with no one to restrain him, the boy had gladly abandoned lessons.

So Zhu Ping'an remained undisturbed, devoting himself to copying texts, practicing his brush, and reviewing imperial examination papers from past reigns. Time slipped by quietly with the turn of each page and the drip of ink from his brush.

The day of the palace examination drew ever closer. By tradition, the exam was held on the first day of the third month. But during the Chenghua reign, it had been delayed to the fifteenth, in mourning for the late Crown Prince, and that date had continued to the present day.

Now, it was already the fourteenth.

That afternoon, as Zhu Ping'an was bent over his desk in the Marquis's residence, a servant arrived, leading a stewardly-looking man into his small courtyard. The man respectfully handed him a familiar invitation.

It bore the distinctive style of the Yan household. The wording inside was almost identical to the last—Yan Shifan once again inviting him to a banquet. But this time, the venue had changed: no longer the Yan estate, but the "Zhuangyuan Tower," a place famed for producing several top scholars.

“My master says, since tomorrow is the palace examination, he wishes to host you at Zhuangyuan Tower to send you off with auspicious fortune. Several Zhuangyuan have emerged from there, and he hopes by dining there, you too may secure the title tomorrow.” The steward bowed low, his voice polished with deference. Compared to the last messenger’s coldness, this was like heaven and earth.

Why me? Zhu Ping’an wondered grimly. If he wants to send off Ouyang Zishi, that makes sense. But me? And on the eve of the palace exam, so suddenly? This feels more like a Hongmen Banquet than a blessing.

“My master has already prepared the feast at Zhuangyuan Tower,” the steward pressed, bowing deeper when Zhu Ping’an remained noncommittal.

Zhu Ping’an set the invitation down lightly. “Thank your master for me. Tell him another day I shall come in person to apologize.”

A gentleman does not stand beneath a crumbling wall. Whatever Yan Shifan was plotting, Zhu Ping’an had no belief it was in his best interest.

The steward departed, but before long another man arrived with the very same invitation. This one bowed even lower, speaking with greater urgency.

“Master Zhu, the sedan chair is already waiting outside. My master insists this banquet is purely for good fortune—nothing more. If you decline, he says he will have no choice but to come here personally to send you off before the exam.”

If I refuse, he'll come himself?

Zhu Ping'an sighed inwardly. Damn it, he's boxed me in. With the palace examination tomorrow, under the eyes of the Son of Heaven, surely Yan Shifan wouldn't dare play any tricks at a public banquet. Still, there's no way his intentions are pure.

After a moment's thought, Zhu Ping'an carefully gathered his exam materials, locked them safely away, and slipped a white jade hairpin into his sleeve—just in case. He left instructions with the servants of the Marquis's household to let them know he would be attending Yan Shifan's banquet, so they need not wait for him at dinner.

With preparations made, Zhu Ping'an finally followed the steward out through the gates.