

Rise 339

Chapter 339: The Palace Examination Begins a Day in Advance (3)

Under the warm and seemingly enthusiastic greetings of Yan Shifan and the others, Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands one by one in salute to the distinguished guests already seated. Only then did he take his seat, pretending to be "overwhelmed with honor," though in truth he was bracing himself for what lay ahead.

Yet the moment he sat down, he noticed something peculiar. Among the assembled figures of power and influence, Ouyang Zishi was nowhere to be seen. Wasn't this banquet meant as a send-off for those about to face the Palace Examination? Ouyang, too, was scheduled to participate in tomorrow's exam. Why then was he absent from this so-called "send-off banquet"?

One thought connected to another, and in Zhu Ping'an's mind the pieces swiftly aligned. There was no doubt now—this banquet was a Hongmen Banquet, a feast in name but a snare in truth!

Yan Shifan, after all, was not just anyone. He was the Left Vice Minister of Works, a third-rank official of the realm. His father, Yan Song, stood even higher—Grand Secretary of the Cabinet, Senior Grand Tutor to the Crown Prince, holder of the title of Grand Preceptor, the highest minister of state, a man second only to the emperor himself. Even the other men gathered here—members of the Yan faction—were formidable figures upon the imperial court, not ones to be dismissed lightly.

Zhu Ping'an had suspected from the beginning, but now he was certain. This was a trap. And yet, despite knowing, he could not refuse to come.

Reason told him one thing, reality another. Refusal? Hah! Try refusing. Any single man here had a finger thicker than his thigh. What chance did he have to say no? He thought bitterly: If in modern times you were invited by the governor of your province, or the mayor of your city, or even your school principal or company director—what then? Suppose they not only invited you but sent people again and again, four or five times, insisting that if you would not come, they themselves would fetch you personally. Could you possibly refuse?

As if reading his very thoughts, Yan Shifan's hearty laugh rang out. "Ouyang, I'm afraid, caught a chill today. He is resting at home, too unwell to attend this feast. Otherwise, he too might have benefited from Brother Zi Hou's guidance."

Zhu Ping'an put on an expression of genuine concern, nodding earnestly. "Ah, what misfortune! Still, Brother Ouyang is a man of good fortune—surely he will be restored by tomorrow." Inwardly, though, he sneered. Hmph. Spare me the excuses. Who do you think you're fooling? But he kept his silence. To expose their lies now would serve no purpose.

Yan Shifan raised his cup with a smile. "Zi Hou, let me drink with you on Ouyang's behalf, to express our gratitude."

Zhu Ping'an nearly choked. What the hell—are they planning to drink me under the table? Tomorrow is the Palace Examination, and tonight they want to drown me in wine? What exam could I possibly take after that?! His mind cursed like a stampede of wild horses while he eyed the gleaming cups in the hands of the men around him.

Oppression by power—shameless!

In that moment, a fire lit within Zhu Ping'an's chest, a yearning for power far greater than ever before. Today's predicament was nothing but weakness before the strong. Yet he was no ordinary youth. Countless history books had passed before his eyes, and he knew what the future of the Ming would bring. Yan Song might remain in power for nearly another decade, but time would shift. Though today he must endure,

though ideals and ambitions must be hidden, he would wait. He would not be cannon fodder! If Xu Jie could endure, why could he not?

A true gentleman hides his edge, waiting for the proper moment to act.

Zhu Ping'an rose smoothly, cup in hand. "How could I dare let Master Yan toast me? It should be I who toasts you."

With elegant composure, he raised his cup slightly lower than Yan Shifan's, concealing a small movement with the wide sleeve of his robe. His hairpin slipped silently into the wine. One discreet glance—the silver tip had not blackened, nor had it changed color. No poison. His heart eased a fraction.

"Still," Yan Shifan chuckled, "Zi Hou must not overindulge. Tomorrow is the great exam, after all. Just a light sip will do."

To Zhu Ping'an's surprise, Yan Shifan did not press him to drink further. Instead, turning to the others, he declared, "You all must not force Zi Hou either. This is a banquet to strengthen his resolve for tomorrow, not to hinder him. Tonight, one cup will suffice."

The others chorused their agreement. "Rest assured, Master Yan. Though Zi Hou is young, his learning is extraordinary. He is even a strong contender for the top scholar's title! How could we, at such a critical moment, be so foolish as to drag him down?"

This was unexpected. Zhu Ping'an's brows lifted slightly as he returned to his seat, faintly surprised by their restraint.

Yan Shifan then turned the feast in another direction. "Since tonight is for Zi Hou's sake, all of you—men who have themselves passed through the Palace Examination—should not keep your wisdom to yourselves. Share with Zi Hou what you know. Any guidance or experience will surely aid him tomorrow."

And with that, Zhu Ping'an understood.

This was not the Hongmen Banquet after all. He glanced at the window, silently exasperated. Not a Hongmen Banquet perhaps, but hardly a pleasant one either!

One man after another rose to share his so-called "experience." A middle-aged official of forty, introduced as Shang Dazhi, an officer in the Ministry of Personnel, spoke at length on the emperor's preferences. He recited advice from years past: how Emperor Jiajing once decreed that exam essays must be plain and elegant, not gaudy or bizarre. Shang fixed Zhu Ping'an with a meaningful look. "Remember, Zi Hou—His Majesty cherishes sincerity and purity of style. Flowery tricks are but fleeting blossoms, unfit for lasting success."

Zhu Ping'an listened politely, though inwardly he scoffed. Sincerity? Elegance? Then what of those "immortal petitions," those flowery Daoist hymns the emperor so adores? Hasn't His Majesty's taste changed a thousand times over twenty years? This advice is as fickle as the emperor's moods. Still, he nodded and thanked Shang Dazhi with the utmost courtesy.

But the torment had only begun. One man finished, another began. They spoke endlessly, pulling Zhu Ping'an into their questions and answers, forcing him to feign deep gratitude and eager inquiry. His face wore the mask of a respectful student, while his eyes drifted often to the window.

The bright midday sun dimmed to slanting rays, then to dusky yellow twilight. Darkness fell, the moon climbed above the willows, and still the chatter droned on. The watchman's clapper marked the second watch—deep into the night.

Only then did Yan Shifan raise his hand. "Enough, enough! See how you've gone on. Zi Hou must rise early for tomorrow's exam. No more tonight. Come, Zi Hou, take my sedan chair home—none will dare stop you despite the night curfew."

Zhu Ping'an forced a smile, but inwardly he wanted to howl. Damn it all! A so-called 'send-off feast,' dragging on from noon until nearly midnight, all while a flock of ducks quacked endlessly about their 'experience.' Every word a trap, every phrase a test! My body's tired, my ears are numb, my spirit drained—and now, past midnight, I must stumble home. Truly—utterly exhausting!