

Rise 341

Chapter 341: As Your Brother, This Is All I Can Do for You

On the Fifteenth Day of the Third Month, the Palace Examination Commenced as Scheduled

At this moment, it was just past the fifth watch of the night. Outside, the sky was still shrouded in darkness, and the pale moon lingered at the horizon, reluctant to depart. Under the soft, silvery glow, Zhu Ping'an hurried along the path toward the venue of the palace examination—the Western Garden.

In theory, the grand palace examination was supposed to take place in the Jingshen Hall of the Forbidden City. From the reign of emperors before Jiajing, all major ceremonies—whether enthronements of emperors, appointments of crown princes or empresses, or even the final stage of the imperial civil service examination—were held there. It was a hall steeped in tradition and solemnity.

But the reign of the Jiajing Emperor was an exception. In the twenty-first year of his reign, during the Renyin Palace Incident, palace maids attempted regicide. The terrifying memory of that night left a deep, lingering psychological scar on the emperor. From that day onward, he harbored a deep-seated aversion to the Forbidden City and refused to reside there. Instead, he moved to the Western Garden, devoting himself to Daoist cultivation and alchemical experiments, seldom attending court. Officials who needed an audience had to visit him there. From that time, the Western Garden became the political heart of the Ming Dynasty, and thus, the palace examinations were relocated accordingly.

When Zhu Ping'an arrived at the Western Garden, the area outside the palace gates was already teeming with people. Candidates in their neatly pressed examination robes waited eagerly, their hearts pounding with anticipation at the thought of stepping into the political center of the empire.

For them, this was a small step in life, yet simultaneously a monumental leap.

The palace examination ranked candidates but did not eliminate them. No matter how they performed, these individuals were guaranteed success; at worst, they would enter the civil service at the same rank as other successful candidates. Even if they did not become members of the Hanlin Academy, they would at least secure positions within one of the Six Ministries or be sent to govern a county. In any case, taking this step meant reaching a pinnacle in life that ordinary people could only admire. The winds of political fortune in the Ming Dynasty would inevitably brush past them. How could one not feel exhilarated?

“Zi Hou, over here!” Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen called to Zhu Ping’an from among the crowd.

“Zi Wei, Wensheng,” Zhu Ping’an greeted with a smile, hastening forward to bow respectfully to them before merging into the throng of candidates waiting for the palace examination.

“Eh? Zi Hou, what’s wrong with you? You look so haggard... those dark circles under your eyes are glaring! Could it be you stayed awake all night out of excitement?” Zhang Siwei asked, stunned at the sight of Zhu Ping’an’s panda-like eyes.

“Zi Hou, calm and composed... should not be like this, right?” Wang Shizhen scrutinized him, a questioning frown crossing his brow.

Under their inquisitive gaze, other candidates—who had paid little attention to Zhu Ping’an until now—also turned to look. To them, he appeared in such a state:

Haggard, listless, pallid, utterly exhausted. His eyes were swollen and dark, lacking any spark.

If they were full, robust grains of rice, Zhu Ping'an looked like a shriveled, dusty seed, mottled with dirt and dark stains.

Naturally, the crowd couldn't help but feel some contempt. They did not know him, nor did they know that Zhu Ping'an was the champion of the provincial examination. Judging solely by his appearance, they assumed he was delicate, incapable of enduring great responsibilities. After all, it was only the palace examination—a formality in their eyes—and yet he looked like he had lost sleep over it. How could he handle serious matters in the future?

Yet, amid the crowd, two people did not appear shocked, nor did they share the crowd's disdain. They simply smiled knowingly.

They stood together—one was Ouyang Zishi, flanked by dozens of admiring candidates. He had arrived in the sedan chair of Grand Secretary Yan Song, a spectacle that drew much attention. Beside him stood Xu Penghui, known as Xu Lao San of the Duke of Wei's household, one of the young men attending the examination in Ouyang's entourage.

Both men were vibrant, alert, and majestic in demeanor. Their vigor and confidence stood in sharp contrast to Zhu Ping'an's weary state. Casting a glance at him, they smiled faintly, fully aware of the reason behind his appearance.

In the arena of the imperial examination, only success or failure mattered—process and fairness were irrelevant.

“Congratulations in advance, Brother Ouyang,” Xu Lao San said with a bright gaze and a courteous smile, bowing slightly.

“Xu, you flatter me. The palace examination hasn’t even begun,” Ouyang Zishi replied lightly, a calm, confident expression on his face.

In their minds, the outcome of this examination was already clear: the top scholar would undoubtedly be Ouyang Zishi. The final rankings would only be a slight adjustment from the provincial examination results. Zhu Ping’an had come first in the provincial exam, Ouyang second—but today, Ouyang was well-rested, supported by Grand Secretary Yan Song, and inherently gifted. Moreover, his noble appearance and radiant spirit added to his aura.

Now, look at Zhu Ping’an: worn down from a sleepless night, pale and drained, his plain features further diminished by fatigue. Even achieving half his usual performance today would be an accomplishment.

What reason did Zhu Ping’an have to compete with me?

In such a comparison, there was no doubt: the top scholar would be Ouyang Zishi.

Earlier, when Yan Shifan had bid farewell to Ouyang Zishi, he had said, “This term’s top scholar will be none other than you or Zhu Ping’an. I can only guide you this far—the rest is up to you.”

Ouyang Zishi had once felt a trace of concern. But now, seeing Zhu Ping'an's state, he felt complete certainty.

This term's top scholar—none could rival me. Only I, Ouyang Zishi.

Standing outside the palace gates of the Western Garden, Ouyang Zishi's gaze met the towering walls. Moonlight fell upon him, draping him in a silver glow. To the eyes of the assembled candidates, he appeared towering and majestic.

At this moment, the crowd's murmurs and curiosity were not the time for explanations. When Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen inquired, Zhu Ping'an only shook his head slightly and forced a wry smile. "It's a long story. I'll tell you after the palace examination."

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen guessed a little and nodded. They then went over some important reminders for the examination. To them, Zhu Ping'an was still young, focused mainly on scholarship, and somewhat lacking in worldly common sense.

Outside the palace gates, the candidates grouped in threes or fives, exchanging greetings and laughter. They were fellow graduates of the provincial exam, bonded by friendship and mutual future interests in the political tides of the Ming Dynasty. One hero needs the support of his companions; everyone understood this truth.

As camaraderie warmed among them, Zhang Siwei, with his affable personality, engaged eagerly in conversation with many, while Zhu Ping'an and Wang Shizhen were comparatively reserved.

Just as these budding friendships began to solidify, the palace gates of the Western Garden creaked open.

The examination was about to begin.

The grand palace examination of the imperial court had officially commenced.

Chapter 342: The Palace Examination (One)

The palace gates swung wide with solemn majesty. From within, a line of little eunuchs in yellow robes filed out like a stream of orderly fish, their voices sharp and carrying as they proclaimed the imperial decree: the gathered tribute scholars were now permitted to enter the Western Garden.

Zhu Ping'an, along with the other examinees, followed under the eunuchs' guidance. They formed into two neat lines, hearts pounding with anticipation. Excitement and anxiety churned together in their chests as they stepped across the threshold, so tense that none dared even breathe too loudly.

The Western Garden unfolded before their eyes like a realm of immortals. Zhu Ping'an felt a strange dizziness—as though he had been transported, not to a palace courtyard, but into the ethereal paradise of Penglai itself.

The first sight that greeted them was the Golden Sea. Even in his own era, Zhu Ping'an had long heard its name whispered with awe. This great body of water was composed of three parts: the Northern Sea, the

Central Sea, and the Southern Sea. Yes—“Central and Southern Seas,” a title he had once only read about, now lay living and breathing before his eyes.

At this moment, the Golden Sea shimmered in endless rippling waves. Mist rose gently from its surface, curling in veils of silver to cloak the islands scattered upon the waters and the rugged peaks that stood proudly beyond the shores. The occasional cry of cranes echoed over the water, while along the banks strange flowers and rare herbs bloomed in profusion. In the distance, palaces revealed themselves in fragments through drifting mist—half-hidden, half-seen, as though glimpsed in a dream. Truly, it was a scene out of a celestial fairyland.

Led by the eunuchs, Zhu Ping’an and the others crossed the Golden-Ao Jade Arch Bridge, which spanned the waters between the Central and Northern Seas. Step by step, they entered deeper into the heart of the Western Garden.

Everywhere they passed, imperial guards stood watch in full armor, weapons gleaming. From the style of their armor, one could distinguish the various divisions—the Jinwu Guard, the Yulin Guard, the Imperial Army Guard, and the Tiger Valor Guard. They were stationed at critical paths throughout the garden, ensuring that no disturbance could reach the imperial precinct.

To the scholars’ surprise, the eunuchs did not take them straight to the examination hall. Instead, they were led to a somewhat lower but still imposing palace hall. Above its entrance hung a plaque inscribed with four large characters: “Hall of Zhenkunda.”

At first, Zhu Ping’an and his companions exchanged puzzled glances. Why had they been brought here? But soon the truth became clear.

Bathing and changing.

The hall, though modest in height, was vast within. Steam drifted gently in the air; great wooden tubs of hot water had been prepared behind curtains, each space screened for privacy. One after another, the scholars filed inside to bathe and change into clean garments.

This ritual carried two purposes. Firstly, it was a gesture of reverence to the emperor—especially as the Jiajing Emperor was at that time fervently devoted to Daoist alchemy and the pursuit of immortality. Ordinary mortals must not pollute the sacred atmosphere. Secondly, it served as a method of inspection. By bathing unclothed, the scholars were stripped of any chance to conceal prohibited items, while their garments and belongings were searched outside. Any contraband would be confiscated and only returned after the palace examination concluded.

When Zhu Ping'an emerged, refreshed yet apprehensive, he found that his brush, ink, and inkstone had been withheld. However, the ginseng that Li Shu had thoughtfully arranged to send to him—delivered by her maid Baozi—was permitted. Classified as food rather than a tool, it was allowed to accompany him into the exam.

Once they had completed their bathing, the eunuchs once more led them southward. Near the southern gate of the garden stood a row of straight lodgings, before which waited more than a dozen officials in formal robes. Judging by their attire, they were members of the Ministry of Rites and the Court of State Ceremonials.

The eunuchs presented the scholars to these officials with a brief word, then withdrew, sweeping their dust-whisks as they departed.

From this point, the matter lay with the Ministry of Rites. Names were called, discipline emphasized, exhortations delivered. Nearly half an hour passed before the scholars were marshaled once more and led toward their destination: the Hall of Taixu, the site of this imperial palace examination.

The hall stood in the northern section of the Western Garden, not far from the Northern Sea. By the time they arrived, the sun had already risen, its golden rays spilling over the tiled rooftops. The officials arranged the scholars in the open space before the hall, where they stood in stiff ranks, waiting in reverent silence for the emperor's decree.

“Summon the tribute scholars of the Jiajing Xinhai Grace Examination to audience!”

The cry resounded from within the hall, echoing with ritual gravity.

In ordered formation, Zhu Ping'an and the others followed the Ministry officials through the doors, their footsteps synchronized, hearts trembling.

Inside, the Hall of Taixu was already lined with officials. Robes of scarlet, blue, and green filled the chamber, each embroidered with birds and beasts, each pair of eyes sharp, appraising. They regarded the four hundred scholars as one might scrutinize a younger generation, measuring their worth.

“All ministers bow before the Son of Heaven! Long live the Emperor—ten thousand years, ten thousand times ten thousand years!”

Together, Zhu Ping'an and the rest prostrated themselves before the emperor seated high upon the dragon throne. Five bows, three full prostrations—the ritual prescribed for this most sacred of occasions. Their foreheads pressed against the floor, their bodies bent in reverence.

“Rise.”

The voice rolled across the chamber, stern and heavy with authority.

It was the Jiajing Emperor himself. Many scholars, trembling with excitement, found their bodies quaking uncontrollably at the sound. Some even required a nudge from their neighbors before they scrambled awkwardly to their feet.

Zhu Ping'an seized this moment to steal a glance upward. The emperor sat upon the dragon throne, his frame somewhat thin, yet the aura he radiated was overwhelming. His dragon robe shimmered, and the sheer weight of his presence was such that one dared not meet his gaze. He was like a coiled dragon itself, majestic and terrible.

“This is a grace examination, decreed by Heaven's auspices. May you not disappoint Our expectations.”

The emperor's words were few, yet each syllable carried divine weight. It was a command, a reminder that this examination was not merely an academic test, but a matter of Heaven's will and the people's fate.

When he finished, he gave a slight nod to Huang Jin, the attendant standing at his side. Huang Jin immediately stepped forward, lifting an apricot-yellow silk scroll from the imperial desk and, with utmost reverence, carried it down to the waiting officials. The recipient—a middle-aged minister, head of the Court of State Ceremonials—knelt as he accepted the scroll.

This man was the Examination Promulgator, entrusted to present the very questions of the examination. He carried the scroll to the east side of the imperial desk, where, under the watchful eyes of the Grand Secretariat, it was opened.

At that moment, drums thundered, and whips cracked in ceremonial proclamation.

Once more, Zhu Ping'an and the rest bowed deeply, offering the full three-prostration, nine-bow rite.

The emperor, his duty fulfilled, departed the hall. He had more pressing matters—a furnace of alchemical elixirs awaited his hand. Why linger here when ministers were paid well to handle such tasks?

As he withdrew, a number of high ministers also excused themselves. A dozen remained, including Yan Song, though Xu Jie and the other examiners of the previous sessions had pointedly stayed away, no doubt to avoid suspicion.

When order was restored, the officials seated the scholars according to their ranking from the metropolitan exam. Those with odd numbers were placed along the eastern side of the hall, those with even numbers on the western side. Desks and chairs had already been neatly arranged in anticipation.

Thus, Zhu Ping'an and Ouyang Zishi found themselves seated directly opposite one another at the very front, the first positions on each side, glaring across the hall like rival generals on opposing fields.

But Zhu Ping'an was in poor condition. The repeated bows and prostrations had left him pale and faint, his body swaying with exhaustion. His thin face looked drawn and weary, as though a single breath might topple him. Ouyang Zishi, who had been watching him intently, allowed the faintest curl of a smile to lift his lips. You—like this—how could you possibly compete with me?

“On this day of the palace examination,” an official of the Ministry of Rites declared, “you shall be provided with one breakfast, one midday meal, and tea served twice. The rules of the palace examination are strict—see that you abide by them. Do not fail His Majesty’s expectations!”

With these final words, the exam papers were distributed.

Zhu Ping'an accepted his with trembling hands. He rubbed his temple, hoping to drive away the dizziness brought on by fatigue, then slowly unfolded the snow-white sheet of fine xuan paper. The faint fragrance of sandalwood drifted upward, delicate and dignified.

At last, the questions themselves revealed their solemn form before his eyes.

Chapter 343: The Palace Examination (Two)

The paper was as white as freshly fallen snow, layered seven times in fine mounting, and as it slowly unfurled, a faint fragrance of ink mingled with the delicate scent of sandalwood, seeping into one's heart and mind. Upon it, the flawless characters—so precise and elegant they seemed almost printed rather than written—came into Zhu Ping'an's view:

“We, having inherited the throne in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven, now govern the Eight Wildernesses and rule over all realms beneath the sky. We shepherd the lives of countless subjects, and under Heaven's will, we must provide for them fertile land to cultivate, means to sustain their livelihood, and ensure that none are without sustenance. Only thus may we fulfill our sacred duty as shepherd of the people, and stand blameless before Heaven and Earth.

To bring peace to the people, they must have land to till and mulberry fields for silkworms. With land for farming, they will have food to eat; with silkworms and weaving, they will have clothes to wear. Thus, they shall be spared from hunger and cold. Moreover, the realm itself must be kept safe: without bandits, without raiders, without the scourge of war. Only then may the people live in peace, secure from the suffering of displacement and exile.

But if the people have no fields, what shall they eat? Without silkworms and mulberry, what shall they wear? Without secure borders, how shall they live? These three matters weigh heavily on Our mind. Yet today, there is less and less arable land even as mouths to feed multiply. Mulberry groves dwindle, yet the number of those needing clothing increases. Disorder grows while secure borders shrink. Floods plague the land unceasingly, droughts appear with alarming frequency, bandits rise again and again. To the north, the barbarians disturb our borders. To the southeast, the Japanese pirates harass the coasts without rest—from Shandong down to Fujian, even reaching Jiaozhi—their raids never-ending, their menace growing ever fiercer.

We lament the hardships of the people and grieve for the fate of the realm. We, who are not a sovereign of unmatched brilliance—above, unable to commune with Heaven’s mysteries; below, unable to bring peace and stability to the nation—lie awake at night, burdened with care. At this moment, only through adaptation, only through seeking wise counsel and clever stratagems, may the country be secured and the people brought peace. If the people have fields, food, and clothing, then the realm will be tranquil, the seas calm, and naturally the people will follow the Way and return to harmony.

We are not ignorant nor blind. You scholars—gifted, versed in principle, knowledgeable of the times, and well-read—have long been what We sought. For this examination, We have awaited you. Speak plainly of what you see and know, record it in your scrolls, and We shall read them with Our own eyes. Fear not. Hide nothing.”

This was the entirety of the examination topic—barely more than four hundred words.

Zhu Ping’an rubbed at his forehead lightly. The banquet at the Zhuangyuan Tower the night before, held to see him off, combined with a sleepless night, had drained him of all strength. When he first stepped into the Western Garden, his spirits had lifted somewhat. But by the time he had bowed before the Jiajing Emperor, all that fragile energy had been spent. Now, his temples throbbed in dull rhythm, his head dizzy with waves of fatigue.

For a brief moment, Zhu Ping’an closed his eyes, forcing himself to rest his spirit, before reopening them to read through the topic once again.

The Emperor’s Question, translated into plain words:

“I, Jiajing, inherited the throne under Heaven’s will and became ruler of the great Ming, the master of the people of the Eight Deserts and myriad realms. To protect the realm, I must ensure that the people have farmland to till and occupations to sustain their families. Only then can I fulfill Heaven’s mandate, only then can I live with a clear conscience.

To settle the people, they must have land to farm, mulberry groves to raise silkworms. They must have food to eat and clothes to wear, so that hunger and cold will no longer haunt them. Beyond this, the empire itself must be peaceful—no bandits, no thieves, no wars. Only thus may the people live in peace, free of displacement.

But if the people have no fields, what shall they eat? No silkworms, what shall they wear? No secure borders, how shall they live? These three matters trouble me deeply. Yet now, fields are fewer, mouths are more; silkworms fewer, bodies more; security less, disorder more! Floods strike, droughts strike, bandits rise, rebels within our soil plot, northern barbarians raid, and along the southeastern coasts, Japanese pirates plague us without rest—from Shandong down to Jiaozhi—their depredations unceasing, their menace growing fiercer by the day.

My heart is heavy. I, Jiajing, am no sovereign of eternal brilliance. I cannot unravel Heaven's secrets above, nor steady the nation below. Many nights I lie sleepless, worrying for the state. Now, I must adapt. I must find wise counsel. If the people can eat, can clothe themselves, can live in safety, then peace shall reign across the realm, and where peace rules, who would rebel?

You, scholars, are not without wisdom. You know principle, you understand the times, you have read widely—surely it is to help me, Jiajing, that you have studied so much. I have long awaited this day. Therefore, speak directly of what you know and think. Write it upon your scrolls. I shall read them with my own eyes. Fear nothing. Hide nothing.”

A monarch eager for counsel, a sovereign striving to restore the nation—at least in appearance, this was the impression left upon Zhu Ping'an as he finished reading.

The exam topic was short, a little over four hundred words. Soon the grand hall was filled with murmurs—whispers of excitement, gasps of astonishment. Few faces showed doubt; most were flushed with eagerness.

This was a “policy essay”—a request for strategies to govern the realm! How to secure the nation, how to bring peace to the people, how to rid the land of Japanese pirates and northern raiders, how to master flood and drought—all these were open ground for their ideas and proposals.

For scholars, this was the very stage of their dreams!

To brandish their learning with youthful pride, to unleash their words like banners in the wind—was this not what they excelled at?

To offer the fruits of their study to the Emperor himself—was this not their lifelong ambition?

How could they not be excited?

An imperial examination, and the Emperor himself seeking counsel, showing diligence in governance! This was the act of a ruler destined for greatness, a monarch of the ages. Long live His Majesty! Countless strategies swelled in their chests, clamoring for the brush!

All around the hall, the scholars' faces shone with fervor, hearts pounding as if ready to spill blood for their sovereign. Each one braced to craft the perfect essay of statecraft.

“Silence! No clamor!”

A stern voice rang out. One of the Ministry of Rites officials barked the command. At once, the scholars sat straighter, their earlier excitement barely concealed upon their faces. Quiet returned, though the hall still hummed with suppressed energy.

Soon, more officials came forth, distributing the answer sheets. These were also made of snowy-white xuan paper, but on a grander scale. This was large folio paper, each sheet long and broad, foldable into eight pages. Upon each page, twelve red-inked vertical lines marked the columns for their writing.

This was the answer paper of the palace examination.

The scholars touched the sheets reverently, nervous yet thrilled. This paper was not mere paper—it bore their fates, their future careers, and would be read by the Emperor himself.

Suppressing their excitement, they dipped brushes into ink, but did not yet begin their essays. First, as custom demanded, they wrote their names, ages, appearances, and places of origin upon the paper—personal details required of all candidates.

Only then did they lay down their brushes, gathering their minds to outline their visions for governing the realm.

Zhu Ping'an, too, finished his details and set down his brush. Again, he pressed his fingers to his aching forehead. Fatigue bore down upon him heavily. His eyelids fought to close; had this not been the solemn palace examination, he might have rested his head upon the desk. But here, in the Emperor's own hall, such disrespect could not be risked. To be caught napping would be deemed grave insolence. He had no choice but to grit his teeth and force himself awake.

How should he answer?

What strategy should he propose?

What angle should he take?

How could he distinguish himself above all others? The title of Zhuangyuan was not won by chance.

His mind, clouded by exhaustion, churned with tangled thoughts, no clear path emerging. He shook his head vigorously, but the fog remained, his brain a knot of chaos.

Across the hall, seated in the foremost position on the western side, Ouyang Zishi sat upright, brimming with confidence. His expression was calm, his manner assured, his mind evidently clear. Catching sight of Zhu Ping'an on the opposite side, pale and weary, Ouyang's lips curled ever so slightly into a smile—the smile of one who already saw victory within his grasp.

Chapter 344: The Palace Examination (Three)

Within the grand hall of the palace examination, the atmosphere was already tense with the rustle of brushes on paper. Many candidates had begun drafting their essays, thoughts pouring forth like an endless spring, their eyes glimmering with determination.

Some, well-versed in the livelihood of the common people, chose to write from the perspective of improving civil life. Others, familiar with the calamities of flood and drought, focused on methods to prevent or remedy natural disasters. Still others, with keen insight into current affairs, turned their attention to the threats of the northern barbarians and the coastal pirates.

Among them sat Ouyang Zishi, brimming with confidence. His lips curved into a faint smile of assurance as he prepared to set his brush to paper. He had no doubt that victory was within his grasp.

Just then, a subtle disturbance occurred. A supervising official from the Ministry of Rites, while passing by, brushed against Ouyang's desk ever so slightly—too deliberate to be accidental. With his other hand, the man made a faint downward pressing gesture.

Ouyang's heart gave a sudden jolt. His brush hovered in the air as if caught mid-flight, and he froze. He recognized that man—he had seen him before at the residence of his uncle, Yan Song. This official was one of Yan Song's close adherents. Why would he signal to him in such a manner here, of all places?

His eyes lifted instinctively to seek his uncle among the proctors. There was Yan Song, hands clasped behind his back, pacing calmly through the rows, his expression as placid as still water. He gave no sign, no movement, nothing to betray involvement.

And yet—no action was the greatest action of all.

Ouyang knew his uncle well. That gesture could only have been given under Yan Song's orders. But what did it mean? Why the downward pressing of the hand?

Was he being told to suppress something? To lower his tone? To restrain himself?

Ouyang's brow furrowed. His mind spun with questions even as the scratching of brushes filled the hall around him. The other candidates were writing with feverish speed, pouring every drop of energy into their essays, while he sat rooted in place, pondering.

Elsewhere in the hall, Zhu Ping'an sat quietly, gathering his thoughts. At last, clarity began to emerge from the fog of exhaustion.

Yes... perhaps it would be best to use that essay he had polished so many times before—the one titled On Pacifying the Japanese Pirates. He had drawn upon countless sources, revised it again and again, refining it until it gleamed like polished jade. Among all the essays he had ever written, it was surely a masterpiece.

In this sea of policy essays, his Pacifying the Japanese Pirates would surely stand out like a crane among chickens. With his high ranking in the provincial exams, passing the palace examination should present no obstacle.

“The needs of the Japanese pirates,” he recalled the opening line, “are all things born of the vast and boundless Middle Kingdom.”

Though his mind and body were wrung with fatigue, he could still recite every word of that essay flawlessly, as though it were etched into his bones.

“Yan Shifan would never expect this...” Zhu muttered under his breath, rubbing his aching forehead. At last, a small smile curved his lips. He dipped his brush into ink, intending to write out the draft first. There was plenty of time—he would polish it carefully before copying it onto the official examination paper.

But as soon as he lifted the brush, an immense wave of weariness crashed over him. His eyelids drooped heavily, his very arm felt like it bore the weight of a thousand catties. His hand shook.

Not like this. His handwriting would suffer, and in the palace examination, calligraphy was no trivial matter—it could decide the difference between glory and disgrace.

“Better nothing than mediocrity,” he thought bitterly.

With that, he lowered his brush, closed his eyes, and leaned back to rest, forcing himself to recover before attempting to write.

As he folded his hands, his fingers brushed against a hard object hidden close to his body. It was the ginseng root he had carried with him.

It was not contraband—during the body search before entering the hall, no examiner had confiscated it.

At the very instant his fingertips touched it, his eyes snapped open, glittering with sudden hope.

Ginseng—the king of all medicinal herbs, the very essence of the earth, famed for strengthening the body and prolonging life.

Without hesitation, Zhu drew it forth, and—like a farmer biting into a cucumber—sank his teeth into it with a sharp crunch.

Sweetness burst across his tongue.

And then—miracle!

As the ginseng dissolved in his mouth, a wave of warmth surged from his throat and spread to every corner of his body. Just like the inner energy described in those fantastical martial arts tales, it was as though a thousand years of cultivated strength had suddenly been poured into his veins.

Exhaustion vanished. His spirit blazed with clarity. All the negative weights dragging him down—weariness, sluggishness, despair—were banished in an instant.

Strength doubled. Energy doubled. Clarity doubled.

Every part of him was alive with renewed vigor. He felt as though the heavens themselves had crowned him with blessings.

“This... this is my peak,” he thought, his heart surging. “Now—now I can write my best words, compose my finest essay. This is my moment of triumph. Even if the whole world stands against me, no one can prevent me from seizing the laurel of the champion!”

His lips curled into a victorious smile as he raised his brush once more, ready to inscribe *Pacifying the Japanese Pirates* upon the paper.

But just as his brush was about to fall, his gaze drifted—almost unconsciously—to the official exam question spread open before him.

His hand froze mid-air.

That single glance struck him like a bolt of lightning across a pitch-black sky, tearing open the veil of darkness. His heart thundered in his chest.

“Ah... so that’s it...”

The smile on his lips twitched, stretched, and refused to fade, as though mocking fate itself. He had nearly walked straight into a trap.

Zhu slowly lowered his brush, sweeping his gaze across the hall. He saw Ouyang Zishi still frowning, lost in thought. He saw Yan Song, upright and austere, patrolling with perfect impartiality.

And then his eyes hardened with resolve.

“Forgive me,” he whispered inwardly, “no matter what schemes you weave—this time, I will win.”

At this moment, he no longer merely hoped for victory. He knew he held it in his grasp, because he had pierced the very heart of the question.

Did the Jiajing Emperor truly want his ministers to point out his shortcomings?

Did he truly want advice on governance?

Hah. What fools. How naïve.

They did not understand him at all.

Had they forgotten how Xia Yan died?

Years ago, when Minister Zeng Xian memorialized to reclaim the Hetao region, the Jiajing Emperor had clapped his hands in delight, praising it as a marvelous plan. Even Xia Yan, then serving as Senior Grand Secretary, had approved heartily.

But within days, the emperor reconsidered. Too troublesome, he thought—how to deploy troops, how to supply them with food, would success even be possible?

At that moment, Yan Song seized the opportunity to accuse Xia Yan of coercing the emperor and misleading others. Those two words—coercing the emperor—sealed Xia Yan’s fate. To offend the emperor’s pride was a death sentence.

And ten years later, what of Yan Shifan? Though the others here could not know the future, Zhu Ping’an did.

When Yan Shifan was finally condemned, the Ministry of Justice, the Censorate, and the Court of Judicial Review added charges of murdering loyal ministers like Yang Jisheng and Shen Lian. But those very deaths had been decreed by the emperor himself!

If they pressed such charges, would that not imply that the emperor had erred?

It was Xu Jie who twisted the charges into something else: secret collusion with Japanese pirates, illegal construction, conspiracy. Only then was Yan Shifan destroyed.

Again and again, history proved one thing: the Jiajing Emperor valued face above all else.

He would never admit fault.

He would never accept blame.

He was proud, haughty, and would rather let others suffer than acknowledge imperfection.

And yet here, this examination question asked the candidates to present criticisms and suggestions—as though to say, “the emperor is lacking, here is how you can do better.”

What insolence!

To advise him thus was to imply the Son of Heaven was incompetent. Was a mere scholar greater than he, who had cultivated immortality for decades, consumed a hundred jin of divine elixirs?

“Ha,” Zhu Ping’an thought, his smile sharp as a blade. “If you are so capable, why stop at champion scholar? Why not take the throne itself?”

Chapter 345: The Palace Examination (Four)

The Brush That Stirs Storms, The Strategy That Moves Spirits

The instant their brushes touched the paper, it was as though wind and thunder shook the hall, as though even spirits wept at the force of their words!

Inside the grand examination hall, the tribute scholars bent earnestly over their desks, their sleeves rolled high, their wrists suspended with dignity. Each stroke of ink carried the burden of their aspirations, their loyal visions of governance, and their painstakingly refined strategies for bringing peace and prosperity to the empire. Excitement burned hot in their chests, trembling in every movement as their brushes raced across the scrolls.

We have studied day and night, tempered both literature and martial skill, for this moment alone. To serve the throne, to present our hearts to the Son of Heaven—my Emperor, this is what we have been waiting for!

The sound of writing filled the vast hall: shua, shua, shua— an endless rustle, feverish and unyielding. No one wished to pause, no one dared to lose momentum.

Compared to this frantic tide of scholars pouring their souls onto the page, Zhu Ping'an remained unusually calm. His brush did not flail in excitement; his eyes did not burn with reckless eagerness. He had already come to understand the mind of Emperor Jiajing. Once you grasped the ruler's heart, the question before them was no longer so difficult.

Opinion?

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Forgive me, Your Majesty. This unworthy student possesses shallow learning and dares not offer reckless suggestions. Under the reign of our peerless Emperor Jiajing—a sovereign of unmatched talent in both civil and martial affairs—the realm prospers. The world is at peace, four seas united, the people secure.

The Emperor, burdened by cares great and small, frets not only over the northern tribes and the southern pirates but also the very sores and itches of his subjects' daily lives. Such vast magnanimity belongs only to a ruler destined to be recorded among the wise sovereigns of all ages. For us, the people of the realm, this is a fortune unparalleled.

Compared to such brilliance, what are we scholars? Even combined, all of us together are not worth a ten-thousandth of His Majesty's wisdom. Our only duty is to rally around His Imperial Person, to uphold his strategies and decrees. As long as we adhere to his governance, the realm will surely remain stable, tranquil, and everlasting.

As for why, under such a perfect reign, troubles like the northern raiders and the southern pirates still persisted? Zhu Ping'an's brush moved with steady rhythm: The blame lies not with the sovereign, but with the officials beneath him. They fail to grasp the Emperor's intention, fail to enforce his strategy with true sincerity, fail to implement his will with honesty and precision. In short: the ruler is wise, but the ministers are negligent.

Of course, he would not simply heap praises and leave it at that. Zhu Ping'an knew well—mere flattery would never secure him the highest place in the examination. The principle was clear: the Emperor was never at fault; it was the bureaucracy beneath that faltered. From that foundation, Zhu Ping'an began to develop his own views on administrative reform. Drawing not only from his own insights but also from the echoes of future knowledge—borrowing inspiration from Zhang Juzheng's later reforms—he wrote about the selection of officials, the regulation of duties, strict evaluation, removal of redundancies, and systems of supervision. His suggestions formed a complete, structured proposal, one that balanced realism with foresight.

Yes. That should suffice.

Having mapped the structure in his mind, Zhu Ping'an sat back just as eunuchs and palace maids began to file into the hall. With faces calm and eyes lowered, the maids placed simple breakfast trays before each examinee, their movements quiet, as if the air itself held its breath. A respectful bow, a rustle of silk, and they withdrew like shadows.

Zhu Ping'an lifted the lid of his tray, only to feel a flicker of disappointment. Two plain vegetable dishes, a bowl of porridge, and two white buns—nothing more. The fare was austere, almost pitifully simple, not a hint of meat or richness.

Is this because the Emperor practices alchemy, forbidding meat from his table? Impossible. If he truly followed Taoist purity, he would abstain from women as well... but everyone knows His Majesty is far from restrained in that regard. Zhu Ping'an's lips twitched at the thought. If anything, he is famed for the opposite. Shao Yuanjie and Tao Zhongwen earned his favor by preaching that intimacy not only failed to hinder Taoist progress but could, in fact, prolong life. With such indulgence, surely His Majesty is no ascetic vegetarian. Even if he is, must the rest of us scholars suffer the same fate?

Another suspicion crept into his mind. Could it be... saving money for his alchemy furnaces?

Suppressing a sigh, Zhu Ping'an picked up a bun, then lifted his chopsticks to take a piece of tofu. The moment it touched his tongue, his body froze. His eyes widened, his breath halted. Slowly, reverently, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, savoring the taste.

Forgive me, Your Majesty—I have wronged you.

This was no ordinary tofu. Each bite carried a depth of flavor that eclipsed even the rarest delicacies. It was as though he were chewing on bear's paw itself, yet richer, more refined, more transcendent. The memory of Yan Shifan's banquet, where he had once tasted genuine bear's paw, paled in comparison. Not even the most exquisite dishes of modern cuisine could compare.

Indeed, such taste had its price. This tofu was simmered with the essence of twenty bear paws, slow-steeped over ten days, fused with rare herbs and precious ingredients to create a honeyed broth of impossible richness. The skill of the imperial chefs was worthy of every legend.

Zhu Ping'an devoured the two vegetable dishes clean, not a leaf or crumb left behind. His fervent appetite drew sidelong glances from others in the hall.

Shameless, some whispered with disdain.

But Zhu Ping'an ignored them. With his stomach content, his spirit surged anew. His brush was steady, his mind sharp as steel. After a short rest, he bent once again to write his draft.

His opening lines poured onto the page with solemn reverence:

"Your servant humbly replies: This servant's learning is shallow, his wisdom insufficient, unworthy of answering Your Majesty's great inquiry. Yet under Your Majesty's reign, where civil glory and martial prowess shine, the four seas rest in peace and the world thrives. Your Majesty worries before the people worry, loves them deeply, mourns their hardships—such is the mark of a sage-king. Truly, it is the fortune of the people, of the realm, of us all. Yet why, then, do the northern raiders and southern pirates still plague us? Why do natural disasters still trouble the farmers?"

“Is it not because the officials fail to understand Your Majesty’s intent? Or because they execute it without diligence, their efforts empty and insincere? This, above all, is what terrifies me.”

Line by line, Zhu Ping’an built his case. “The governance of officials is the bridge between ruler and people. It is the backbone of the state. Respect the throne, choose the right men, measure their duty, supervise their conduct, reward and punish with fairness—these are the roots of lasting peace. I dare not offer hollow words or empty praise to cloud Your Majesty’s hearing. If my essay is found shallow or untrue, let the authorities discard it and punish me. I would don plain robes and accept my guilt without complaint. This is the truest cry of my heart, and to present it before Your Majesty is my greatest fortune.”

With a final flourish, he concluded, trembling with both fear and gratitude:

“This humble, unlearned scholar has risked his life to speak before Heaven’s Son. I tremble in awe. Thus, I submit.”

In little more than an hour and a half, Zhu Ping’an completed his draft. Though only a draft, he poured every ounce of skill into it—his brushstrokes strong, his script vigorous and full of spirit. The characters seemed like sails straining against the wind, ready to leap from the page with heroic force, brimming with righteous energy.

On calligraphy alone, Zhu Ping’an believed none among the gathered scholars could surpass him.

By the time he laid down his brush, the sun outside had climbed high into the sky. Around him, other scholars were also finishing their drafts. Some wrote bold essays exposing flaws in the empire’s military system.

Others—reckless in their honesty—penned lengthy arguments against the Emperor’s Taoist alchemy. (How such men hoped to survive after this exam was anyone’s guess.)

As Zhu Ping’an stretched his fingers, a Ministry of Rites official strolled past his desk. With practiced subtlety, the man cast more than one glance at Zhu Ping’an’s draft, committing both phrases and brushstrokes to memory. Moments later, he drifted casually toward another corner of the hall, where he bent close to whisper with Grand Secretary Yan Song. The two shared quiet words, then separated once more, returning to their duties as if nothing had passed between them.

Across from Zhu Ping’an, Ouyang Zishi still scribbled furiously, his face flushed with excitement. He cast scornful looks at the other examinees, Zhu Ping’an included. When the official passed by a second time, offering a barely hidden signal, Ouyang finally grasped his uncle Yan Song’s intention.

Like a tiger gaining wings! His heart soared with confidence. With this, victory is mine. None of these fools could hope to compete. The laurels of First Place are destined for me, Ouyang Zishi!

With feverish passion, his brush swept across the paper.

At last, as the sun set and crimson clouds flooded the horizon, the day’s palace examination came to an end. The gates of the Western Garden swung open once more. After a full day of struggle, the scholars filed out, their hearts buoyant with pride and relief.

Who will seize the laurels of the Champion? Who will stand alone at the top? That will be known only three days hence.

But for now, each man exhaled the tension of ten years of study and sacrifice. The grueling gauntlet of the imperial examinations was over.

No matter the result—whether they won the top rank or fell short—every one of them would see their names on the rolls. No one would be cast aside. And that alone was cause enough for celebration.

Chapter 346: The Buddhist Scriptures

The setting sun slipped slowly into the western horizon, leaving behind a sky awash with crimson clouds. A faint veil of mist drifted lazily over the earth, soft and ethereal, as though the mortal world had been wrapped in a dreamlike haze. Within that dusk-tinted veil, the Marquis of Linhuai's grand residence, too, seemed to shimmer and fade, half-real, half-illusory, like a painting brushed with strokes of mist and light.

In the quiet of the rear courtyard, a little maid with cheeks round as a steamed bun sat nodding off. Her tiny head bobbed forward and back in a rhythm of exhaustion—two or three heavy nods followed by a sudden start, as though she frightened herself awake each time. Every time her blurred eyes lifted and fell upon her young mistress—seated at the desk by the window, back straight, brush poised, copying Buddhist sutras with serene devotion—the maid would let out a faint sigh of relief. Convinced her mistress was still safely immersed in scripture, she would allow herself to drift again into that endless cycle of dozing and jolting awake.

The bun-faced maid was unbearably sleepy.

No wonder—last night, the noisy and inconsiderate Duke of Wei's household next door had set off firecrackers the whole night through. The incessant explosions had rattled her small heart nearly out of her chest and robbed almost everyone in the Marquis's residence of sleep. Even her mistress had not closed her

eyes once. When the crackling din finally ceased at dawn, the household—masters and servants alike—took turns stealing moments of rest throughout the day to make up for their sleepless night.

But not the young mistress.

Instead of lying down, she rose in the morning, personally sent off a century-old ginseng root from Changbai Mountain as a gift to brother-in-law, and then seated herself at the desk with quiet resolve. From that moment until the sun was sinking again in the west, she had been faithfully, unceasingly copying Buddhist scripture. She said it was for the sake of her father and her three brothers, who were all far from home, to pray for their safety and fortune. Since her mistress had chosen not to rest, how could the bun-faced maid dare sleep? She had to remain nearby to serve, and so her small head now drooped again and again, heavy with drowsiness.

The glow of sunset spilled gently through the window lattice, mingling with the soft curl of incense smoke within the room. Together with the pale mist outside, they gave the young lady seated at the window an almost otherworldly aura. She wore a floor-length gown of fine silk that hugged her slender frame, embroidered with plum blossoms in red thread. At her waist was tied a ribbon of deep azure satin, its color accentuating her grace. Her glossy black hair was arranged into a graceful falling-horse bun, adorned with a hairpin strung with delicate lilies. The ornament swayed ever so slightly, its elegance edged with a faint trace of bewitching charm.

In her slender, jade-like hand she held a brush tipped with flower-soft bristles. Her large, limpid eyes—clear as spring water—were fixed intently upon the page. Each stroke she laid upon the pure white paper carried both solemn care and a reverence that seemed to flow directly from the depths of her heart.

The Sutra of Great Compassion and Wish-Fulfillment by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara—

“The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, with the wisdom of Prajñā Pāramitā, sees all things as without form. Where the heart has desire, there is suffering...”

Under Li Shu’s brush, the words of the scripture unfurled in graceful, flowing strokes. Her delicate small script resembled a mountain spring hidden among snow-laden peaks, trickling down in a stream so clear and cool it refreshed the heart merely to behold it.

Upon the table before her lay not one page but an entire thick stack of copied sutras. Each sheet carried the same scripture, every character carefully wrought, every line perfectly ordered. The pages seemed to breathe with tranquility, their neatness soothing to the soul.

One needed no further proof of how earnest and devout the young lady had been throughout the day.

Her soft cherry lips parted ever so slightly as she wrote, shaping silent words. From the faint movement, one could tell she was reciting the sutra under her breath, her whispered prayers blending with her brushstrokes. Yet curiously, at the end of each silent vow, the last three syllables always seemed to form the words: “stinking toad...”

It was, perhaps, a private jest. Or perhaps the stubborn remnant of some childish grudge.

In the old days, it was common for people—especially women—to copy Buddhist sutras as a form of prayer and devotion. They prayed for their parents’ health, their husband’s success, their children’s safety. Buddhism taught that the act of copying, reading, or reciting scriptures generated merit. As written in the Diamond Sutra: “If there are those who hear this teaching, accept it with faith, and do not doubt, their blessings shall surpass all others. How much more so if they copy, recite, or explain it for others?” Thus, the more earnestly one wrote, the more powerful the blessings were believed to be.

And Li Shu was nothing if not devout. Each character she wrote seemed to contain the weight of her heart.

“Miss! Miss!”

The sudden call broke the serenity of the courtyard. Rapid footsteps echoed outside, followed by the hurried creak of the door being pushed open.

Startled, Li Shu’s brush faltered, blotting a character with unsightly ink. She looked down at the blemish, her brows knitting ever so slightly. Then, with eyes cool and bright as autumn water, she lifted her gaze toward the intruder.

The bun-faced maid, who had been nodding off, jerked awake at the noise. Her round face contorted in fright, pudgy hands pressed against her racing heart as she, too, turned her wide eyes to the doorway.

“Miss—Miss, the young master... he has returned from the examinations!”

The little maid who rushed in stopped dead in her tracks. Under the chill of her mistress’s frosty gaze, her knees went weak, her voice stammered, and her words nearly stuck in her throat. But just as quickly, it seemed her imagination had played a trick on her. For in the very next heartbeat, that icy look melted away, softening into something almost tender, as though the coldness had been nothing more than the haze of her own breathless panic.

“What—he has returned?” The bun-faced maid’s sleep vanished in an instant, her whole round face lighting with excitement.

“This time, I will let it pass. But next time you dare to barge in so recklessly... I will not forgive you so easily.” Li Shu laid down her brush, her voice calm and faint, though her glance carried enough weight to make the intruding maid bow her head in trembling apology.

“Thank you, Miss. I won’t ever do it again,” the maid murmured, wiping away cold sweat.

“Miss, Miss, let’s go quickly! I want to see how the young master fared in the exam!” The bun-faced maid was nearly bouncing in her seat with impatience.

“What is the rush?” Li Shu’s long lashes lowered as she gave a small, dismissive smile. “He is not going anywhere.”

Still, as she rose from her seat, her slender fingers smoothing the sleeves of her gown, the faintest curve of a smile tugged at her lips. She carefully placed the copied sutras upon the highest shelf of the bookcase, her movements slow and refined, like those of an immortal untouched by earthly dust. But in the corners of her eyes shimmered a sweetness she could not hide.

The bun-faced maid flushed red, sticking out her tongue playfully at her mistress’s teasing words.

Li Shu washed her hands, changed into a fresh gown, and then led her small retinue—two younger maids and two older matrons—out of the courtyard and toward the front hall.

The Marquis of Linhuai's residence was already ablaze with lanterns, festively adorned. The Marquis himself had returned early in the afternoon to oversee preparations. Banquets and wine had been ordered to welcome back Zhu Ping'an from the palace examinations. On his way back through the gates, the Marquis had even caught sight of his mischievous son, squatting in the dirt beside a little maid and digging at the ground. The boy turned, saw his father's dark scowl, and nearly wet himself from fright. Fortunately for him, the Marquis was too busy with the evening's arrangements, and the boy escaped with only a fierce scolding.

Zhu Ping'an had arrived at the Marquis's residence just as the sun began to dip. On the road, he had fallen into deep conversation with Wang Shizhen and Zhang Siwei. Zhang remained calm and measured, but Wang was almost uncontrollably excited, exclaiming again and again about how Emperor Jiajing had shown the vigor of a true sovereign. He confessed that, unable to restrain himself, he had written ten separate proposals for governing the realm directly onto his exam paper—so strong was the righteous fervor of a scholar's heart in his chest.

Had their families not been waiting anxiously in the capital, Zhang and Wang might have kept Zhu Ping'an talking deep into the night.

The Marquis's residence, resplendent with lanterns and banquet tables, awaited Zhu Ping'an with open arms. The warm welcome, however, left him a little unaccustomed, even uneasy.

After all—ten years of silent toil at a scholar’s desk often went unnoticed. Yet with a single success, one’s name was known across the world.

Truly, the ancients had not lied.

Chapter 347: I, the Emperor, Have a Dream

Once the imperial palace examination concluded, the tribute scholars—those young men who had made it this far after years of grueling study—were finally released back to their homes. They went off light-hearted, eager to relax after days of tension.

Their four hundred answer papers, each dense with classical rhetoric and polished essays, were carefully processed: received, checked, sealed, and finally locked away in the secret archives. In theory, it should have been the Jiajing Emperor himself who would personally read these papers during the allotted three days of marking. But the emperor was preoccupied with loftier pursuits. Alchemy, immortality, the quest for transcendence—such things left him with little patience for combing through reams of essays.

And so, following established custom, the emperor had already delegated the task. He appointed Yan Song, his trusted Grand Secretary, together with seven other senior officials, as reading examiners. From the second day onward, the eight of them would take turns reading through every paper, one after another. When their work was done, they would handpick the top ten scripts and present those to the emperor. From that final selection, the emperor alone would decide who would be Number One Scholar, Number Two, and Number Three—the highest laurels of the empire’s civil service.

The scholars returned home buoyant in spirit, and the emperor himself was in rare good humor—for after nearly a month of anxious watching, the celestial elixir he had been refining at last reached completion that very night.

This was no ordinary pill. According to Tao Zhongwen, the Celestial Master who had risked his life to obtain the recipe, it came from a forgotten ruin across the seas, where he had battled a serpent demon that had guarded the formula for ages.

The pill required eighty-one rare ingredients, each costly and hard to procure. More shocking still, the recipe demanded a hundred drops of the first menstruation blood of virginal maidens, and nineteen pieces of “truth-bearing clots”—coagulated remnants found in the mouths of newborns at birth. Added to these were dragon-born incense, fragments of meteorite from beyond the heavens, and nineteen other exotic substances. For thirty days and nights the master had labored, following secret rites, until the elixir finally condensed within the cauldron.

As the medicine was born, the skies themselves responded. A pale mist rolled across the Western Garden, shrouding the pavilions in mystery. According to Tao Zhongwen, this elixir could extend one’s life, fortify the body’s essence, increase vitality, and grant heirs. Taken three days in succession, it would even allow a man to lie with multiple women through the night without exhausting his strength.

When the great alchemical cauldron opened, the sight within was wondrous. Nine scarlet pills, round and lustrous as quail eggs, glimmered like vermilion cinnabar upon a jade tray. They radiated a faint, enigmatic aura—as if the very air around them pulsed with power.

The emperor was too impatient to wait until morning. That very night, he ordered a eunuch to summon Grand Secretary Yan Song, who was then still working late at the wooden barracks of the Western Garden. As a token of favor, the emperor bestowed upon him one pill.

Yan Song, overwhelmed by such grace, broke into uncontrollable tears.

“The taste is bitter at first, yet afterward it leaves a sweet echo. My chest and lungs burn with warmth, and I feel younger by several years—as though youthful impulses stir once again within me. This old servant could never repay such divine generosity, even if I shattered my body into pieces!”

So he reported an hour later, his voice choked with gratitude.

The emperor listened, smiling with satisfaction.

“Your sincerity is touching, Weizhong. It pleases Us greatly.”

Indeed, Yan Song had labored tirelessly of late—composing ritual prayers, supervising the palace examination, and handling countless affairs. One young eunuch whispered that Yan Song had worked so relentlessly he had not even bathed for seven or eight days. Amused, the emperor turned to his attendant, Huang Jin, and commanded softly:

“Go to the Imperial Household Department. Have a silver plaque inscribed with the words ‘Loyal, Diligent, Responsive, and Perceptive.’ Choose an auspicious day, and deliver it to Weizhong’s household.”

“Loyal, Diligent, Responsive, and Perceptive”—those four characters represented the highest possible praise a ruler could bestow upon a minister.

At the news, Yan Song, the venerable Grand Secretary with his snow-white hair and beard, lost all composure. Like a sentimental girl, he collapsed to his knees, forehead striking the ground with a loud thud. When he lifted his head, his face was a river of tears and snot.

“This unworthy old servant thanks His Majesty for such profound kindness! Even should I give my life a thousand times over, I could never repay the favor of being so deeply recognized.”

The emperor chuckled, shaking his head.

“Weizhong, what is this? You are already advanced in years—why must you cry so easily? Rise, and rest well tonight. Tomorrow the papers await your review. Do not disappoint Us.”

“The emperor’s favor is as deep as the sea, and this servant’s loyalty as weighty as a mountain. I shall devote myself wholly and ensure the papers are judged with fairness and utmost care.”

Yan Song kowtowed once more before respectfully withdrawing.

When Yan Song had left, the emperor turned his gaze upon the remaining pills. Desire stirred in his eyes; he could no longer hold back.

He dressed himself in fresh Daoist robes, lit three sticks of incense, and seated himself solemnly upon a mat inscribed with the Taiji Eight Trigrams. Following Tao Zhongwen's guidance, he circulated his breath in a full cycle of Daoist internal alchemy before preparing to ingest the pill.

A young palace maid, her round face still tender with youth, approached on her knees. Her slender jade fingers held the vermilion pill, while her other hand balanced a translucent jade cup brimming with dew collected at dawn. With reverence, she offered both to the Son of Heaven.

The emperor accepted, placed the pill in his mouth, and swallowed it down with a sip of morning dew.

As Yan Song had described, the initial bitterness gave way to a lingering sweetness. Warmth surged from his abdomen, racing into his channels and meridians. Soon after came a wave of unstoppable vitality, fierce and throbbing like an untamed tide.

Flushed with energy, the emperor stood.

"Summon Lady Lu, Noble Consort An, and Beauty Xi from the Palace of Jade Radiance," he ordered, his face glowing red with desire.

And so, as ancient verse once sang—a maiden fair as jade, her garments slipping loose, bringing joy into the night—the emperor passed the evening in unbridled pleasure. By dawn, the summoned ladies were escorted back to their own chambers, while the emperor himself remained content and deeply rested.

At daybreak, the emperor hastened to summon Tao Zhongwen, the Celestial Master. It was not because the pill had failed—on the contrary, he had slept better than he had in years, even dreaming.

And it was this dream that troubled him.

Tao Zhongwen was an elderly Daoist, his hair and beard pure white yet his face smooth and unwrinkled, giving him the uncanny air of one who aged in reverse. Draped in a gray-and-white robe marked with the Eight Trigrams, he seemed more immortal than mortal.

When ushered into the emperor's presence, he bowed low. The emperor, grave-faced, recounted his vision:

“Last night, after taking the pill, I felt refreshed in spirit and slept deeply. Yet near waking, I dreamed. In that dream, I beheld our ancestor, the Great Founder, the Hongwu Emperor himself. He stood upon the bank of a river thick with floating duckweed, and he gazed at me... gazed long and silently.

I was stricken with fear. I confessed that I had not well-governed the empire he had left behind, calling myself an unworthy descendant.

But the Great Founder only looked. He spoke no word. At last, he pointed to the ground at his feet... and then, like an immortal, ascended into the heavens.

What meaning lies in this dream, Tao Zhongwen?”

The emperor’s voice faltered, laden with unease.

Chapter 348: Reviewing the Papers

The very first ray of morning light spilled down from the heavens, piercing the pale horizon like a blade of gold. It streamed through the octagonal lattice windows of the Cheng’en Hall in the Western Garden, falling across the great hall in a dazzling yet solemn glow. The sunlight cast a perfect pattern of the Eight Trigrams upon the stone floor—its lines stark, its divisions mysterious, as though Heaven itself had descended to draw an omen.

At the two poles of this luminous diagram stood two figures. One was a man in a resplendent dragon robe, his bearing commanding and grave—the Son of Heaven himself, the Jiajing Emperor. Opposite him stood another, clothed in a gray-and-white Daoist robe embroidered with the Eight Trigrams, his air calm and inscrutable—the court’s famed diviner, Tao Zhongwen.

A heavy silence lingered in the vast hall, until the Emperor’s voice broke through, low yet edged with unease:

“This dream of mine—how should it be interpreted?”

Tao Zhongwen listened carefully, his expression solemn. Then, bowing respectfully to His Majesty, he closed his eyes. From the wide sleeves of his robe, his right hand slipped forth. His fingers bent and straightened with practiced precision, forming seals, calculating fate.

He murmured in a voice as light as drifting smoke:

“One counts as Kan, two as Kun, three as Zhen, four as Xun...

Five rests in the Central Palace, six is Qian...

Seven is Dui, eight Gen, nine Li—Heaven’s gates are thus revealed...”

His muttering, rhythmic and steady, seemed to fill the hall with the faint pulse of the cosmos itself.

Two minutes passed, every second drawn out by the Emperor’s impatient heartbeats. Suddenly Tao’s eyes snapped open, gleaming with light. Joy broke across his face like dawn. He dropped into a deep bow and declared, his voice brimming with delight:

“Congratulations, Your Majesty! Felicitations upon Your Majesty!”

The Emperor felt the tension in his chest dissolve at once. His face softened, relief loosening the muscles that had been taut with worry. Yet curiosity flared immediately after, sharp and insistent.

“From whence does this joy come?”

Tao's white beard gleamed beneath the morning sun as he straightened, his voice resonant with certainty.

“Xun within Ying, Kan within fullness—this is the sign of great prosperity, of a dynasty enduring through ages. It is the image of eternal stability, of rivers and mountains secured.”

The way he spoke, with the sunlight bathing him in golden brilliance, made him seem less a man than a celestial seer descended from Heaven itself.

The Emperor's eyes brightened with unrestrained joy.

Yet, as swiftly as joy rose, doubt followed. His brow furrowed slightly, and he spoke again, quieter this time:

“But then why, in my dream, did Taizu, the Grand Ancestor, stand silently upon a riverbank choked with green duckweed? He said not a word. He merely pointed at his feet... before ascending to the heavens as an immortal?”

The hall fell still once more.

Tao Zhongwen lowered his gaze, his expression carrying the perfect blend of gravity and mystery. Slowly, he shook his head, lips curving into the subtle smile of one who knows much but will not say.

“This concerns Your Majesty’s family affairs. As an outsider, this minister dares not intervene.”

That was all.

If Zhu Ping’an had been present, he would have rolled his eyes and cursed aloud: What nonsense! After all that, you end with this? The Emperor bares his soul, and all you do is push it away with this cheap trick?

It was the ultimate evasion, and a brilliant one at that. After all, the Emperor’s visions, born of dreams and medicine alike, could mean anything—or nothing. Who could decipher them truly? By declaring it a “family matter,” Tao placed it beyond question, beyond blame. For who could dispute that the words of ancestors, when revealed in dreams, belonged solely to the Emperor’s own household?

The Emperor, however, thought in ways unlike ordinary men.

He nodded thoughtfully. Indeed. The Grand Ancestor would not visit me in a dream without purpose. Such matters must concern the destiny of our house, of our imperial bloodline. Truly, this is not the realm of statecraft but of family heritage. Tao Zhongwen is right—the words of ancestors cannot be carried by another’s mouth.

And with that thought, the Emperor's doubts eased, replaced by solemn conviction.

While the Emperor pondered dreams in the Western Garden, matters of the realm unfolded outside the southern gate, Yangde Gate, within the straight lodges reserved for the Grand Secretariat.

Inside, eight ministers—handpicked by Jiajing himself as chief examiners for the palace examinations—were bent over tables stacked high with scrolls. The room was thick with the scratch of brushes, the rustle of paper, the steady rhythm of judgment.

At their head sat Yan Song, the Grand Secretary and unquestioned leader of the cabinet. His role as chief examiner was beyond contest. Around him were seven others of weighty repute—Ministers of the Six Boards, great scholars of the Hanlin Academy, stern judges of the Censorate, and dignitaries from the highest courts. Together, they bore the responsibility of shaping the future of the Empire's scholar-officials.

The palace examinations had concluded; in three days, the results would be proclaimed. Yet before that, these eight must labor ceaselessly, sorting, grading, and ranking. Unlike the provincial exams, the palace examination admitted no failures. Every candidate here would pass into office. But the ranking—the order of merit—was everything. To be named Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, Tanhua—the top three laureates—was to ascend to eternal glory.

Their method, however, was slow. Each scroll passed from hand to hand, each examiner adding his mark. Five grades were used, simple symbols for weighty judgment: “o” for first-class excellence, “△” for second, “∟” for third, “1” for fourth, and “x” for the lowest.

In the end, the scrolls with the most “o” marks would be elevated. By convention, to even qualify for the top two tiers, a candidate needed at least seven “o” out of eight. Less than that, and one could abandon all hope of standing among the foremost.

The task was exhausting, yet they pressed on with diligence. Yan Song, especially, read every scroll with grave care. None could accuse him of partiality—or so it appeared. He judged only on quality, save for two exceptions, which he disguised beneath the veneer of impartiality.

Two scrolls in particular stood out.

One bore the line: “The governance of officials must bridge ruler and subject; this is the nation’s foundation. To honor the sovereign’s authority, to select and appoint wisely, to assess their duties, to oversee their conduct, to reward and punish with fairness...”

The other declared: “All under Heaven belong to the public; a sage ruler unites the realm. Above, he inherits Heaven’s mandate; below, he embodies the people’s will...”

Both texts stirred admiration. Yan Song awarded each the highest mark without hesitation. Five of the other ministers followed suit.

But two dissenters broke the harmony—the Vice Minister of Rites, and one of the Grand Secretariat’s assistants.

When they reached the first scroll, the Vice Minister's eyes darkened. The phrases struck him as too familiar—he remembered precisely which candidate, seated on the eastern side during the examination, had penned those words. Without hesitation, he marked it “△.” As he passed the scroll to the Secretariat assistant, he pressed his hand twice against the other's, a subtle signal. The assistant nodded imperceptibly and followed suit, also giving a “△.”

Their maneuver was clever. They could not risk giving the scroll too low a mark, for disparities beyond three levels invited suspicion and punishment. But by marking it slightly lower, they effectively denied it entry into the Emperor's sight.

Thus the first scroll, though otherwise brilliant, received only six “○” and two “△.” By rule, it would never make the top ten. No matter how dazzling its words, no matter how lofty its vision, it would never reach the Emperor's eyes. The path to Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, or Tanhua was forever closed.

Meanwhile, the second scroll—praised unanimously—received eight full “○.” It would certainly be placed before the Emperor himself.

The Vice Minister of Rites, seeing the outcome, allowed himself a satisfied smile, the kind only a man confident in his subtle victory could wear.

Chapter 349: Plans Never Keep Up with Change

The night was deep, yet within the Hall of the Inner Cabinet, lanterns blazed so brightly that the chamber was almost as luminous as day. Shadows of ministers flickered upon the walls as candlelight shimmered against the lacquered beams, and the muffled rustle of silk robes mingled with the scratching of brushes. The place was alive with tension and diligence, as if the fate of the empire itself rested upon the parchment spread before them.

Since the hours before dawn—around the fourth or fifth watch—the ministers had begun their solemn task of reviewing the imperial examination scripts. Except for brief pauses to take a hurried meal, every breath of their time had been consumed by the reading and grading of essays. At last, as the hour of the Boar approached—around ten at night—the final paper had been marked, each assessed according to the five-tier symbol system: circles and triangles, signs of merit or mediocrity.

But the labor was far from finished. Once the individual markings were complete, there remained the crucial phase of collective deliberation. The chief reviewing minister, the grand scholar presiding over the process, was to gather all opinions, weigh them, and pronounce the tentative order of merit. Each examiner was permitted to speak freely, and only after their voices fell silent would the chief adjudicator fix the rankings.

That chief reviewer was none other than Yan Song, the venerable Grand Secretary. Under his leadership, most papers were judged strictly in accordance with the tallies of symbols. Yet there came one exception.

As the deliberations reached a paper containing the striking passage:

“The governance of officials lies in connecting the sentiments of high and low; this is the essence upon which the nation rests. Honor the sovereign’s authority, select officials with care, test them by their duties, supervise their conduct, and mete out rewards and punishments justly...”

Yan Song lifted his eyes from the text. This essay had earned six “o”s—marks of excellence—and two “△”s, a sign of hesitation from certain reviewers. The old scholar paused, fingers tightening around the paper. After a brief silence, he set it deliberately upon the table, his gaze sweeping across the assembled ministers.

“This script,” he intoned, voice carrying the weight of seasoned authority, “is written with elegance, its words resplendent, its arguments alive with vigor. I cannot help but feel that its score is open to discussion. What say you, gentlemen?”

At once, one examiner leaned forward, his tone brimming with admiration. “Lord Yan speaks truly. This is a masterful work! Its proposals for reforming officialdom cut to the very heart of governance. Such insight deserves to rank within the first or second class.”

A murmur rippled through the chamber as several others nodded in agreement, echoing the sentiment.

Yet not all were so convinced. Among them, the Vice Minister of Rites furrowed his brow, momentarily stunned. Only yesterday, at the Yan family banquet, he had carefully explained to Lord Yan that this very essay—penned by the candidate Zhu Ping’an—was a dangerous contender for the top spot. If it were presented to the emperor, it could jeopardize the chances of Yan’s nephew, Ouyang Zishi, securing the title of Zhuangyuan (Number One Scholar). To avoid such peril, he had urged Yan to quietly sideline the essay.

Why, then, was Lord Yan now praising it so openly? Had he changed his mind? Could it be he no longer intended for his nephew to seize the top laurels? The Vice Minister’s mind whirled in confusion, suspicion biting at him.

Another grand secretary beside Yan cleared his throat. His tone was cultured, laced with metaphor.

“This essay’s calligraphy and rhetoric are like jade from the Eastern Hills, or the music of zithers upon the Western slopes—how fine, how pleasing! Yet...” He let the words hang before continuing with solemn caution. “Yet, within white jade lies a hidden flaw; amidst resonant tones, one may catch a discord. The treatise on official governance is sharp indeed, but in practice, might it not stray into empty formality? Our

dynasty thrives upon the ancestral system of governing officials—could such structures be overturned by a few elegant phrases?”

He paused, then offered a conciliatory smile. “Still, the intention behind it is commendable. As Lord Yan himself has noted, the calligraphy is splendid, the prose vigorous. Perhaps I was overly severe in my earlier judgment. In encouragement, I am willing to raise my evaluation by one tier.”

The Vice Minister of Rites stiffened. Raise it? That would mean six “o”s and only one “△”! Was the essay now destined for the second tier, dangerously close to the top ranks? His heart sank. Had he failed to make himself clear last night at Yan’s residence? Why was everything turning against him?

Self-reproach gnawed at him.

“Very well,” Yan Song finally declared, nodding with gravity. “Then let us review it once more.”

Review it again? The Vice Minister’s thoughts nearly burst aloud. What are you playing at, Grand Secretary?!

Just then, his eyes caught a subtle gesture from Yan Song. The old fox’s fingers pressed lightly together as he lifted the paper, as though by chance, before he calmly added his own mark—another “o”.

The Vice Minister suddenly understood. That small hand sign had been for him. You give it another △.

Realization washed over him. Indeed, Yan Song was thinking far ahead. After all, Zhu Ping'an was already Huiyuan—the top scorer of the provincial exams. To block him entirely from even entering the second tier of the palace exam would seem far too suspicious. Even the Emperor himself might question it. But allowing him to remain in the second tier while denying him entry into the top three—Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, Tanhua—was perfectly reasonable. How many in all of Ming history had managed to win all three titles in succession? Only one! It was almost impossible.

Thus, Zhu Ping'an could safely be placed in the second tier, placating appearances, while Yan's nephew's path to the very top remained open.

The re-evaluation ended with seven "o"s and a single "△".

Another half hour passed in weary calculation, and the tentative ranking list emerged. Of course, this was only the examiners' version; the final authority rested in the Emperor's hands.

The top ten scripts were carefully set aside for submission. Though sealed to prevent favoritism, everyone knew which essays shone with brilliance. Among them, one began with the phrase:

"All under Heaven belong to the public; a sage-king unifies the realm, upholding Heaven's mandate above, and embracing the people's will below..."

Yan Song could not praise it enough.

And yet, there was another essay he had praised just as highly—the one beginning with “The governance of officials lies in connecting the sentiments of high and low...”

Alas, after much deliberation, that essay placed eleventh. By a single step, it was excluded from the final set to be presented before the Emperor. What a pity! Had it entered the top ten, perhaps Zhu Ping’an might still have contended for a place among the Three Laureates.

Yan Song shook his head regretfully. But fairness must be seen, even if his heart inclined otherwise. Eleven was eleven. At least it still secured a place in the upper second tier.

By then, the bronze clepsydra struck midnight. The ministers were bone-weary, their eyes red from hours of study. It would be unthinkable to disturb the Emperor’s rest at such an hour. Thus Yan Song decided they would present the top ten scripts at dawn.

Everything, for now, was proceeding according to plan.

At first light, Yan Song gathered the seven other chief examiners. Together, they carried the ten chosen papers and made their way toward the Western Garden, where the Emperor resided.

As they entered the palace gates, they chanced upon the powerful eunuch Huang Jin, striding briskly with two junior attendants.

“Lord Huang, whither so urgently?” Yan Song called, halting respectfully with a smile, folding his hands in a distant salute.

“Ah, Lord Yan, you have arrived at last!” Huang Jin exhaled in relief. “His Majesty spoke of you all day yesterday. He sent me early this morning to hasten you along.”

Yan Song chuckled lightly. “Then fortune smiles upon us—we are indeed on our way to present the scripts.”

“How fortunate indeed, how perfect the timing,” Huang Jin exclaimed, delighted.

“Let us not delay further, then,” Yan Song said, aware that the Emperor’s impatience was no small matter.

But Huang Jin raised a hand. “No haste, no haste. May I ask—how many papers do you bring for His Majesty’s review?”

“According to custom,” Yan Song replied carefully, “the top ten from the palace exam.”

“Not enough,” Huang Jin said flatly, shaking his head. “Add ten more.”

A murmur rippled among the ministers. Twenty? Tradition dictated only ten! Why should the Emperor now demand twenty?

“Do the honored ministers question His Majesty’s will?” Huang Jin’s eyes narrowed, the smile never reaching his lips. His tone, though soft, carried a razor’s edge.

The examiners bowed their heads at once. “We dare not, we dare not...” Who would dare oppose the Son of Heaven? If the Emperor wished to read twenty, so be it; if he wished to read thirty, who could object?

Still, among them, faces turned pale and uneasy. Only one explanation seemed possible: the Emperor, who for years had buried himself in Taoist alchemy and neglected governance, was suddenly exerting unusual diligence.

But the truth was far less noble.

For in truth, the Jiajing Emperor was plagued by guilt. In a dream, he had seen the founding emperor, Taizu, gazing at him in silence. No rebuke was spoken, yet that silence had cut deeper than any words. Once, in his early reign, Jiajing had indeed ruled with vigor, bringing a brief revival to the realm. But decades had since passed in which he abandoned state affairs for his quest for immortality, leaving governance to rot.

Now, shaken by his dream, he sought to display renewed effort. The palace exam was a matter of state, touching the very lifeblood of the dynasty. Where his predecessors had reviewed ten papers, he would review twenty. Twice the effort, twice the diligence! So that if he dreamt again of Taizu, he might meet his gaze without shame.

Chapter 350: The Minor Proclamation at the Palace Gate

At the break of dawn, the crimson sun rose slowly from the horizon. It was as if a bride on her wedding night, veiled in scarlet silk, was shyly lifting her head covering, revealing a delicate face flushed with bashful beauty. That timid, glowing countenance gazed down at the earth as though embarrassed by her own brilliance.

“Damn this sun! Why does it have to rise so early? Now this young master has no choice but to wake up too!”

Inside the guest courtyard of the Marquis of Linhuai’s residence, a chubby-faced boy glared at the eastern sky with the look of someone burdened by great injustice. He stretched out his stubby little hand, clawing at the air as though he could snatch the glowing red sun right out of the heavens and drag it down like a hot fried pancake.

Watching him, Zhu Ping’an couldn’t help but laugh softly.

Ever since the palace examination ended, the Marquis of Linhuai had insisted that this mischievous child—his nephew, known to all as the family’s little terror—be sent to Zhu Ping’an’s care early each morning.

Zhu Ping'an himself enjoyed rising early to practice calligraphy. Though now he had all the ink, brushes, and paper he could want, habit bound him to an older method: dipping a brush in clear water and practicing strokes on a wooden board. And so, day after day, he followed the same routine at dawn.

At the same time, he did not neglect his duty as tutor. With quiet firmness, he supervised the boy's morning readings. No matter how many excuses the child invented—a thousand reasons, each more ridiculous than the last—none could withstand Zhu Ping'an's steady gaze. In the end, the little rascal always slumped back into his seat, clutching his book with a face twisted in exaggerated misery.

The courtyard had yet another regular visitor: a little girl, no more than seven or eight, who introduced herself with great seriousness as Niu'er. She had taken a liking to Zhu Ping'an's company. Whenever he grew tired of reading or writing, he would tell her stories—fairy tales, legends, even the tale of the mischievous monkey born from a stone. Each time, she listened wide-eyed and utterly enthralled, reluctant to leave. She often clung to her excuse of "accompanying Brother Rui in his studies," but in truth she stayed for the stories.

And, truth be told, the mischievous boy was the same. Though he pretended to despise Zhu Ping'an—finding fault with him in every possible way—whenever the storytelling began, he wore the exact expression of someone deeply infatuated: "You can scold me a thousand times, brother-in-law, but I will always love you the same." His round face would hang slack in bliss, as he listened with shining eyes.

After the morning lessons and calligraphy practice were done, servants of the Marquis's household brought in breakfast. The meal was modest yet plentiful: bowls of lean pork congee, small dishes of pickled vegetables to whet the appetite, three plates each of hot meat and vegetable dishes, along with steamed buns and freshly boiled eggs.

The sight alone was enough to stir hunger.

But the little rascal, still sulking from being forced to read, sat down with a defiant pout. His plump face was full of challenge, and whatever Zhu Ping'an said, he would counter immediately, just for the sake of opposition.

Zhu Ping'an merely chuckled at his antics. Deliberately mysterious, he picked up an egg from the table. Holding it up against the sunlight, he studied it with a solemn air—tilting it this way and that, running his fingers along the smooth shell, even sniffing it under his nose. Finally, as though calculating on invisible abacus beads, he nodded with authority.

“This,” he declared gravely, “is an egg laid by a hen.”

The boy blinked in astonishment, then immediately scrunched up his face in doubt. “How could you possibly know that? Hah! I don't believe you!”

Seated nearby, sipping her congee daintily, Niu'er rolled her eyes. “Stupid Brother Rui! Of course it's laid by a hen. Roosters don't lay eggs!”

The boy froze. His cheeks puffed up, and then—

Pffft!

The mouthful of porridge he had been holding in sputtered out as he choked. His round face turned as dark as the bottom of a pot. Once again, he had been tricked.

Just as Zhu Ping'an was finishing his breakfast and before the table could be cleared, the peaceful courtyard was suddenly broken by a commotion outside. The hurried sound of footsteps, shouts, and barking dogs echoed closer.

"Master Zhu, Master Zhu—quickly! Quickly! A decree has arrived!"

Zhu Ping'an looked up in surprise just in time to see the steward burst in, panting as if chased by hounds, several attendants scrambling behind him.

A decree?

That couldn't be right. It was only the second day after the palace examination! The official rankings wouldn't be released until the third day. And even then, weren't results simply posted on the golden board? Why would a decree be delivered straight to his home?

Still, though suspicion gnawed at him, Zhu Ping'an dared not take the matter lightly. In a time when the word "Sacred" carried the weight of heaven itself, no one could risk disrespect. He followed the steward at once.

Upon reaching the front hall, the truth revealed itself. It wasn't a decree at all—merely a eunuch sent from the palace, summoning Zhu Ping'an for an audience with the Emperor.

The eunuch explained: after the palace exam, the reviewing ministers would select the ten best papers and present them to the Emperor. In the Emperor's presence, the seals were broken to reveal the candidates' names. His Majesty would then personally assign rankings—choosing the Zhuangyuan (First Scholar), Bangyan (Second Scholar), Tanhua (Third Scholar), and the next seven of the Second Class.

Moreover, the Emperor traditionally summoned the top examinees for a private audience, known in history as the "Minor Proclamation Ceremony" (Xiao Chuanlu). The final results—including the names of the top three and the first seven of the Second Class—were only confirmed after this meeting. Then, three days later, the official Golden List would be announced to the world in the grand Chuanlu Ceremony.

This time, however, the eunuch whispered, the Emperor had gone even further—he had reviewed not ten, but twenty papers.

Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but compare it to the modern civil service exams he remembered: the palace exam was like the written test, and those ranked among the top—this time, the top twenty—earned the right to proceed to the interview, the Xiao Chuanlu. The Emperor himself was the interviewer, and out of twenty candidates, three would be chosen for the highest honors.

He allowed the eunuch to lead him to a carriage belonging to the Marquis's household. As they rattled toward the Western Garden of the palace, Zhu Ping'an discreetly slipped a small red envelope into the eunuch's hand. The man's face immediately lit up with smiles, his tongue loosening. He chattered cheerfully the rest of the way, offering detailed advice on the proper etiquette when appearing before the Son of Heaven.

At the palace, Zhu Ping'an was made to wait in a side hall. An hour passed before another eunuch entered, glanced at him, and announced briskly:

"Zhu Ping'an, Master Zhu—His Majesty summons you."

"Thank you for your trouble," Zhu Ping'an said, bowing respectfully.

"No trouble at all, Master Zhu," the eunuch replied with a grin, gesturing for him to follow.

Step by step, Zhu Ping'an walked deeper into the palace, his heart beating faster. This was it—the chance to meet the Jiajing Emperor himself. A thrill of excitement coursed through him, mingled with an unavoidable edge of nervousness.

After ten minutes of walking through vast courtyards and echoing corridors, they finally reached a resplendent hall. Its roof was crowned with golden glazed tiles, its eaves curved high like wings, each corner adorned with carved animal heads of the zodiac. Jade pillars gleamed, carved with intricate patterns of clouds and dragons.

Twin flights of stone steps led up to the hall, and between them stretched a massive slab of jade, carved with a coiling dragon soaring through clouds. In the morning sunlight, the dragon seemed to come alive, its head raised proudly, its tail lashing in unseen winds.

The majesty of the imperial palace left Zhu Ping'an inwardly stunned.

"Master Zhu, please wait here for a moment while I announce your arrival," said the eunuch, pausing at the entrance.

"You have my thanks," Zhu Ping'an replied, bowing slightly.

And so he stood at the threshold, waiting to be summoned into the presence of the Son of Heaven.