

Rise 351

Chapter 351: Facing the Sacred Audience

The young eunuch who had gone inside to deliver the report soon returned. Without much delay, he led Zhu Ping'an into the outer hall of the great palace, instructing him to wait there. Inside, His Majesty was still receiving another person in audience, and only after that person departed would Zhu Ping'an be permitted to enter.

The moment Zhu Ping'an stepped into the outer hall, an overwhelming wave of incense greeted him. The fragrance was so dense and lingering that for an instant, if judged by scent alone, he might have believed himself to be standing within the meditation halls of a grand temple. Yet a single glance downward dispelled that illusion—the floor beneath his feet was paved not with stone or tile, but with gleaming bricks of gold. No temple in the realm could ever boast such extravagant flooring.

Raising his eyes, he saw three statues of the Daoist Sanqing enshrined within the hall, before which incense burned unceasingly. And yet, aside from these, another imposing figure stood at the eastern side of the chamber. The plaque beside it identified this image as "Xiang Yi Dijun." The statue stood a little taller than a man, dressed in a blue Daoist robe patterned with the Bagua. Its face was thin and ascetic, but carried a natural majesty that pressed down upon all who gazed at it.

Zhu Ping'an blinked. The longer he looked, the more he felt his suspicion harden.

Wasn't this statue's face eerily similar to the very same face he had glimpsed during the palace examination—the countenance of the Jiajing Emperor himself?

A wry smile tugged at his lips. Truly, the Jiajing Emperor was a peculiar man. To commission a Daoist idol in his own likeness, and then to canonize himself as the “Xiang Yi Dijun”—what greater example of self-consolation could there be? It was audacious, ridiculous... and yet, in a strange way, brilliant.

Zhu Ping’an had waited for less than three minutes when he saw a man striding out of the inner hall, guided by a eunuch. The man’s chest was thrust forward, his steps bold and full of vigor. His whole bearing radiated the haughty confidence of one who believed the world already lay within his grasp.

“Ouyang Brother,” Zhu Ping’an called softly, a smile curving his lips as he cupped his hands in greeting.

The man was none other than Ouyang Zishi, whom Zhu Ping’an had previously encountered at the Yan residence. Judging by his expression and lofty stride, Ouyang clearly believed his audience had gone exceedingly well.

Hearing Zhu Ping’an’s greeting, Ouyang spared him only the briefest of glances. He nodded faintly, almost dismissively, before striding out of the grand hall, his bearing still brimming with self-importance.

Not long after, another eunuch emerged from the great hall. His attire was noticeably more ornate than the one who had first escorted Zhu Ping’an—his robes brighter, his sash embroidered with finer threads. Wearing a genial smile, he approached and spoke with practiced courtesy:

“Lord Zhu, if you would follow me. His Majesty now wishes to see you.”

Zhu Ping’an cupped his hands and bowed slightly. “I am grateful, Gonggong.”

“There is no need for such formality,” the eunuch replied warmly, then turned and beckoned for Zhu Ping’an to follow.

Thus, Zhu Ping’an entered the inner sanctum of imperial authority.

At once, the fragrance of sandalwood thickened, cloying at the senses. The chamber was uncomfortably warm, the air dense from the incense smoke curling from countless braziers. Despite the brightness of day outside, tall candles burned everywhere, filling the room with a sharp, flickering brilliance.

At the center stood an enormous alchemical furnace—a “Two Dragons Playing with a Pearl” Bagua cauldron, taller than a man, its presence commanding and strange.

Before this furnace lay a Bagua cushion, gold-rimmed and jade-inlaid. Upon it sat a middle-aged man in a blue Bagua Daoist robe, cross-legged in serene composure. His features were lean yet handsome, with an air both austere and imperious. He looked strikingly similar to the statue outside.

There was no need to guess—this was none other than the Jiajing Emperor himself.

The eunuch who had guided Zhu Ping’an immediately dropped to his knees. Zhu Ping’an followed suit. Though inwardly he felt exasperated—having grown up in an era where kneeling to another man was long abandoned—he knew well enough not to flaunt modern sensibilities here. “When in Rome, do as the Romans

do,” he reminded himself. He had no desire to stand out as a crane among chickens, only to be “cooked like a crane with the zither.”

Bowing deeply, he declared with due solemnity: “Your servant Zhu Ping’an, newly entered among the scholars, humbly greets Your Majesty. Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor, for ten thousand years!”

He struck the floor with his forehead nine times, performing the full three bows and nine prostrations exactly as the eunuch had instructed. His voice trembled faintly, his face arranged in a mask of reverent excitement—an “audience before the Son of Heaven” performance that even he thought was quite convincing.

The Emperor seemed pleased. Perched on his Bagua cushion, Jiajing surveyed him with narrowed eyes and nodded slightly. Yes... this was how one should look when seeing the sovereign for the first time—awed, overwhelmed, trembling with devotion. To the Emperor, this was as it should be. Was not the pursuit of immortality and longevity merely a means to preserve such reverence forever? To remain the axis about which all men turned?

Zhu Ping’an knelt in silence, waiting. The hall was so quiet he could hear the crackling of candle flames. At last, just as his knees began to ache and impatience stirred within him, a deep, resonant voice finally broke the stillness.

“Beloved subject... you are Zhu Ping’an?”

The Emperor’s tone was magnetic, his words deliberate, carrying both weight and grace.

Zhu Ping'an pressed his forehead once more to the ground. "Your Majesty is most perceptive. I am indeed Zhu Ping'an."

"Mm. And you hail from the Xiahe region?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty. This humble servant's home is in Xiahe Village."

Zhu Ping'an kept his eyes fixed respectfully on the ground, though inwardly he was a little startled. How thorough—His Majesty had even inquired into his humble origins.

"Zhu Ping'an of Xiahe... an excellent name."

The Emperor's gaze softened with recognition. Slowly, he recited Zhu Ping'an's background in detail, as if testing his memory. Then he nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting faintly.

In truth, earlier that morning, when reviewing the examination scripts, Jiajing had paused at this very name. In that instant, it had struck him like a divine revelation—like a bolt of lightning tearing through the clouds, illuminating all.

Yes. The dream had been deciphered.

He recalled: the founding ancestor, standing by a river thick with duckweed, pointing to his feet before ascending into the heavens.

Xiahe (Lower River). Duckweed banks.

Xiahe—Peace.

Zhu Ping'an.

With Zhu Ping'an, the Zhu dynasty's rivers and mountains would remain safe and sound!

This was Heaven's will, the mandate bestowed by the ancestor himself.

As for the other candidate, the so-called top scorer Ouyang Zishi—"Yang," which hinted at "illness." Could the Zhu dynasty's empire be allowed to fall into illness? Impossible. He, Jiajing, was no foolish monarch. He would not permit the legacy of blood and steel left by his ancestors to falter.

“Your Majesty’s kindness humbles me,” Zhu Ping’an replied, his voice tinged with awkwardness. He had never before been complimented on his name, much less by the Emperor himself. It felt strange—unreal, almost.

The Emperor chuckled, amused by the young man’s simple gratitude. Others, when praised, would surely protest with false modesty, declaring themselves unworthy. But this boy? He merely accepted the compliment and gave thanks. Such honesty was refreshing.

“Rise, beloved subject,” Jiajing said with a smile.

Zhu Ping’an bowed again, murmured thanks, and then rose slowly to his feet.

The Emperor, now seated upon the Dragon Throne, leaned forward and spoke in a measured tone: “You dwell in Xiahe, where mountains and rivers are vast and treacherous. The mountains are lairs for tigers; the rivers, the hiding place of dragons. Living amidst such lands... tell me, have you ever seen a tiger or dragon?”

Zhu Ping’an’s mind raced. Tiger? Well, he had seen wild boars, caught rabbits, even fished for shrimp and minnows. But a tiger? If he truly had encountered one, would he still be alive to stand here? And dragons? That was even more absurd—where in this world was there such a thing as a dragon?

Still, he could not give such a plain answer. This was not idle conversation—it was an examination in its own right. To earn favor, he must reply cleverly.

The Emperor, after all, was known to enjoy words that pleased him.

So Zhu Ping'an's eyes gleamed with sudden inspiration. He bowed deeply, then raised his voice with solemnity: "In answer to Your Majesty: living in the mountains, I often encounter tigers. But only today, upon entering this hall, have I been blessed to behold the countenance of the dragon."

The words struck home like a well-aimed arrow.

The corners of Jiajing's mouth lifted at once. The praise was subtle, elegant, without crude flattery—yet unmistakable. Tigers may dwell in the mountains, but the true dragon, the Son of Heaven, was before him now.

Unseen, the eunuch Huang Jin, ever by the Emperor's side, regarded Zhu Ping'an anew. His eyes lingered with unspoken admiration. This young man is no ordinary scholar.

Chapter 352: The Secret Within the Reward

"Your servant dwells among mountains and rivers, where tigers are a common sight. Yet only today, in the presence of Your Majesty, have I truly beheld the face of a dragon!"

The words were simple, but the moment they were spoken, Huang Jin, the eunuch attending beside Emperor Jiajing, felt them etch themselves deep into his memory. His gaze lingered on the young man bowing low before the throne — a youth whose every word carried clarity and reverence.

Huang Jin had served Emperor Jiajing since the latter's days as the heir of Prince Xingxian. Now, after nearly forty years at the emperor's side, he had seen more officials than he could count — great and small, bold and timid. Yet, to encounter a young man who left such a vivid first impression was something that could be counted on one hand.

This one... is no ordinary youth.

As Huang Jin continued to observe Zhu Ping'an, the emperor and the young man exchanged a few more rounds of conversation. Most of the time, it was the emperor who questioned, and Zhu Ping'an who answered.

The questions were not difficult — about life in the mountain village, his age, and even a few topics from the examination essays on current affairs.

Zhu Ping'an answered them all one by one, his speech steady, clear, and full of youthful vigor.

"Youth truly is a blessing," the emperor mused with a faint smile. "When I was your age, I too first arrived in the capital. Though you are young, you must set your ambitions high — learn much, see much, and do much."

“This humble servant will remember Your Majesty’s gracious teaching,” Zhu Ping’an replied earnestly, bowing once more, his face radiant with gratitude.

By this point, Zhu Ping’an thought the audience was drawing to an end — surely the interview was over.

But just as he relaxed inwardly, the emperor made a small, unexpected gesture. With a wave of his hand, a young eunuch stepped forward, bearing a tray draped in crimson silk. The tray gleamed with several golden figures — a rooster, a fish, a pig, a cow, and a duck — each carved from pure gold.

Though no larger than a finger’s length and no heavier than a few taels, their craftsmanship was exquisite, lifelike enough to seem ready to move.

“You have shown excellence,” the emperor declared. “It would not do for Us to withhold a reward. Choose one, and it shall be yours.”

So it was a test of choice, then. Zhu Ping’an stifled a sigh of relief behind a facade of reverent joy.

“This humble servant thanks Your Majesty for the gracious reward,” he said, kneeling once again.

“No need for such ceremony,” Jiajing waved his hand. “Rise, and make your selection.”

After bowing, Zhu Ping’an stood and offered a polite nod to the eunuch holding the tray. “Thank you for your trouble,” he said softly, then reached out, intending to casually pick the largest one.

But just as his fingers brushed near the golden figures, a sudden realization struck him.

The emperor's reward — could it truly be so simple? No. This was no mere token of favor; this was the final test.

Golden rooster, golden fish, golden pig, golden cow, golden duck... though the emperor had said to "choose freely," there was no way the choice was without meaning.

The golden fish caught his eye — exquisitely sculpted, a carp leaping upward.

A carp leaping over the Dragon Gate... an omen of great fortune!

There was an old legend: in the eastern rivers stood a towering Dragon Gate, and each spring, carps would struggle against the current. Those who leapt over the gate would transform into dragons. It symbolized success in the imperial examinations — the rise from obscurity to glory.

Choosing the golden carp would seem the most auspicious.

His hand hovered over the fish... but then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the faintest flicker of the eunuch's gaze. Zhu Ping'an's heart trembled.

He froze.

No... it's not that simple. Of course not.

A carp that transforms into a dragon — but the dragon... the dragon is His Majesty! Would it not be presumptuous for anyone to reach for such a symbol? Did he not recall the most chilling taboo etched into the emperor's legend — the Curse of the Two Dragons Not Meeting?

Emperor Jiajing was an enigma of Ming history — eccentric, devout, and bound by superstition. Ever since he learned of that curse, he had lived his life in its shadow.

In the thirteenth year of Jiajing's reign, after thirteen long years of struggle, the emperor finally welcomed his first son. Yet tragedy struck — the crown prince died within three months of birth. The emperor was inconsolable.

It was then that his most trusted Taoist priest, Tao Zhongwen, revealed the omen to him:

“Your Majesty is the true dragon of Heaven, born with the mandate and blessed with divine fortune. Yet your sons too are dragon-born. Two dragons cannot meet — as two tigers cannot share a mountain. Should the two dragons face one another, disaster will fall upon one.”

The emperor had broken into a cold sweat upon hearing this.

And from that day forth, he lived by it.

Three years later, Emperor Jiajing successively fathered more sons — Zhu Zaihe, Zhu Zaihou, and Zhu Zaichen. Yet, he never forgot the “curse of the two dragons.” The image of his firstborn prince’s death still haunted him, so Jiajing refused to see his new sons. He dared not even name a crown prince, fearing that doing so might bring disaster once again.

To outsiders, the emperor’s behavior seemed absurd. Courtiers whispered among themselves, and even the Empress Dowager could no longer stand to watch. She took her son aside and lectured him at length. Unable to withstand his mother’s rebuke, Emperor Jiajing reluctantly agreed to meet his eldest surviving son, the second prince Zhu Zaihe.

They spoke briefly, and the emperor personally sent him off to the academy. Zhu Zaihe was already fourteen — this was practically the first time he had ever seen his own father. Overwhelmed, the boy was ecstatic. Yet fate, ever cruel, struck again.

That very night, Prince Zhu Zaihe fell ill. Within days, he followed his elder brother into the afterlife.

The emperor was terrified, nearly driven to madness. The curse of “two dragons must not meet” became an unshakable truth to him. From that day onward, he dared not even look at his two remaining sons, Prince Yu (Zhu Zaihou) and Prince Jing (Zhu Zaichen). Even when they met by chance in the palace, or during major ceremonies that required his presence, he would not utter a single word to them.

And now, if you were to choose the golden carp — are you wishing for it to leap over the Dragon Gate and transform into a dragon?

If you become a dragon, then I, Jiajing, am also a dragon.

What are you thinking? Do you not know that “two dragons must not meet”? Are you trying to bring misfortune upon me, Jiajing?

It might sound like Zhu Ping’an was overthinking, but given Jiajing’s obsession with Daoist alchemy and immortality — and the fact that he ingested heavy-metal elixirs daily — hallucinations were perfectly normal for him. The emperor was always eccentric and paranoid. For someone like him, better to believe it’s true than risk it being false!

With that thought, Zhu Ping’an withdrew his hand from the golden carp. Calmly, he reached past it and picked up the golden rooster beside it.

“Your servant thanks Your Majesty for this gracious gift.”

Kneeling, Zhu Ping’an held the golden rooster in both hands and bowed deeply before the emperor.

“Oh? The golden rooster?”

Eunuch Huang Jin, who stood by the emperor’s side, was astonished. Zhu Ping’an’s choice had completely defied expectation — all the others who had been summoned earlier had chosen the golden carp without exception. Was this youth acting on purpose, or was it pure coincidence? If by accident, his luck was remarkable. But if by design... then this young man was extraordinary indeed.

“Oh? And why has my loyal subject chosen the golden rooster?” Jiajing asked slowly, nodding with faint approval yet clear curiosity.

Of course, it was not a random choice. I had given it careful thought. Jiajing believed in Daoist alchemy and immortality — and I, having read plenty of xianxia novels in my own time and studied Daoism, knew something about its symbolism. In Daoism, every creature in heaven and earth holds different meaning, but none is more cherished than the rooster. The founder of Daoism, upon ascending to immortality, left behind the saying: “When the rooster and the dog ascend to heaven.” Moreover, many early patriarchs of the Daoist sect shared a deep affection for roosters.

There is even a tale of a Daoist master who, during a fierce battle against evil spirits, was saved by a heroic rooster. Exhausted after days of struggle, the master was near defeat when the rooster crowed loudly, summoning the dawn and banishing the demons.

As for fish, Daoism favors the scaleless blackfish — not the carp.

Ordinary folk despise the blackfish, for after giving birth, the mother sometimes devours her own young — an act so cruel that even tigers do not commit it. Thus, common people scorn the creature as vile and unnatural.

But to Daoists, the story is told differently. They see in the blackfish a sacred act of devotion. The mother blackfish spends months bearing her young, pouring every ounce of her life's essence into them. When her strength is spent and blindness overtakes her, she can no longer hunt and awaits death. Yet her young, moved by filial piety, swim willingly into their mother's mouth — offering themselves as sustenance so that she might live a little longer.

What kind of love is this? What kind of devotion? Compared to the crow feeding its parents or the lamb kneeling to nurse, this — this self-sacrifice of the blackfish — transcends them all.

Thus, Daoism elevates the blackfish as a symbol of ultimate filial piety.

And so, Daoists admire the blackfish, not the carp.

That, precisely, is why Zhu Ping'an chose the golden rooster — and not the golden carp.

Chapter 353: An Unexpected Delight

The Choice Between Fish and Chicken — The Reason Lies Here

When Emperor Jiajing's question echoed through the grand hall, Zhu Ping'an knew he could not answer carelessly. The truth was simple enough — yet to utter it plainly would sound far too religious, far too utilitarian. Even if correct, such an answer might still earn the Emperor's displeasure.

As a believer, such an explanation might have satisfied the Pope. But as a subject, it would never satisfy the Emperor. A minister's answer must reflect the heart of a minister — loyal, sincere, and grounded in virtue.

Zhu Ping'an bowed low, his hands respectfully cradling the golden rooster he had chosen. Then, in a steady, heartfelt voice, he began to speak.

"Your Majesty, the chicken is a creature of five virtues.

Since childhood, my mother has often instructed me on this. She told me that among all creatures, the chicken embodies five noble qualities.

When I was young, our family was poor. My mother raised chickens — selling their eggs to buy my brushes, my ink, my paper. Everything I have achieved today, I owe to my parents' sacrifice. Thus, I have always held deep gratitude toward this humble bird."

He paused, his gaze softening with memory before continuing solemnly.

“The chicken possesses five virtues.

First — its comb upon the head symbolizes literary virtue, for it resembles the crown of a gentleman, standing upright with dignity.

Second — its sharp spurs and strong talons speak of martial virtue, for they serve it in battle.

Third — it is brave and unyielding. When confronted with a powerful foe, it never retreats but fights with all its might. This is the virtue of courage.

Fourth — when it finds food, it never eats alone but calls its companions to share. Such generosity reveals its benevolent virtue.

And fifth — the rooster announces dawn faithfully, unafraid of wind, snow, heat, or cold. Never once does it fail in its duty. This is the virtue of trustworthiness.”

Zhu Ping’an’s voice grew firmer, carried by conviction.

“As Confucius said, ‘Among three men, there must be one I can learn from.’ I believe this truth applies to all things beneath Heaven.

Thus, I chose the golden rooster — not merely for its form, but to learn from its five virtues.

As long as I live, I shall study without end; I shall grow old, yet never cease to learn — for the heart of scholarship must endure forever.

Though I am a scholar, I will not neglect martial resolve. When the enemies of Great Ming rise against us, even if I cannot wield a blade on the battlefield, I will still serve Your Majesty with strategy and resolve, aiding from behind the curtain if not upon the field.

The northern barbarians are arrogant; the southern pirates cruel. Yet I, with the blood of the Great Han in my veins, shall never yield to fear.

Through Your Majesty’s grace, I have been granted the chance to serve. I will cherish the virtue of benevolence, no matter where I stand.

And above all — a man without integrity cannot stand. Thus, I will forever uphold the virtue of faith. My words shall be deeds, and my deeds shall be resolute.”

He raised the golden rooster high, his eyes shining with genuine devotion.

“These five virtues, Your Majesty, I will etch into my heart and put into practice — to add my humble strength, one brick and one tile at a time, to Your Majesty’s splendid realm.”

The hall fell silent.

Zhu Ping’an’s voice lingered like a clear bell, his expression earnest, his words organized yet impassioned. Even from atop the dragon throne, Emperor Jiajing could feel the youth’s sincerity.

That answer — thought the Emperor — could easily stand as a polished essay in the Imperial Examinations.

The Five Virtues of the Chicken.

To learn as long as one lives.

When two paths cross, the brave shall prevail.

To add bricks and tiles to my Emperor's glorious realm.

How pleasant these words sounded! How refined the reasoning, how profound the meaning! "To learn till old age" — simple words, yet boundless in wisdom. And "the brave shall prevail when paths collide" — what spirit! If only all Ming soldiers held such resolve, the northern tribes and southern pirates would not dare to test the empire's might.

And to "add bricks and tiles" — such humility, such sincerity! No boast of conquest, only the quiet wish to serve.

Every phrase struck a deep chord within Jiajing's heart. Zhu Ping'an's words, infused with the logic and clarity of a mind touched by modern thought, utterly conquered the Emperor.

Here stood a subject — filial, studious, understanding, and loyal. Where could one find another like him?

Beside the throne, the eunuch Huang Jin listened quietly, eyes widening as Zhu Ping'an spoke. When the youth finished, Huang Jin could not help but steal a few more glances.

A remarkable young man, he thought. This one's future will be limitless. Best to remember him... and perhaps, befriend him while I can.

“Rise,” said Emperor Jiajing at last, his tone softened with emotion. “My loyal subject — such pure filial devotion!”

He paused, then added warmly, “You truly have a good mother.”

Zhu Ping’an, just lifting himself from the ground, froze. Before he could stand, the Emperor’s next words struck like thunder.

“Huang Ban,” the Emperor called to his attendant, “choose an auspicious day and have the Hanlin Academy draft an edict. Zhu Ping’an’s mother, Lady Chen, has shown virtue, wisdom, and grace in raising her son. She is to be conferred the title of Sixth-Rank Lady of Grace.”

The golden words flowed from the Emperor’s mouth like a divine decree.

Zhu Ping’an’s heart leapt — then his knees hit the floor with a thud.

“Your Majesty’s boundless grace!” he cried, trembling with joy.

It was an unexpected miracle, a joy beyond all measure.

He had often comforted his mother, promising that one day he would win her an imperial title. But such honors were rare, reserved for those of extraordinary merit. In all the Ming Empire — indeed, throughout the feudal world — an imperial edict was no small thing.

From the first to fifth ranks, the Emperor's decrees were called Gao Ming; from sixth to ninth, Chi Ming. And the wives and mothers of these officials, when honored, were known as Ladies of Imperial Grace.

The title alone brought immense prestige, even if it held no official power — enough to bring glory to one's ancestors for generations.

A sixth-rank official's wife or mother was titled An Ren — Lady of Grace. And now, Zhu Ping'an's mother had received precisely that honor.

Such things were not granted lightly. It required not merely an official position, but exceptional merit — service so outstanding that the Emperor himself would take notice.

No wonder Zhu Ping'an was overwhelmed. His speech earlier had been sincere but never calculating; he had only wished to show gratitude and win the Emperor's favor. Never had he dreamed of such a reward.

Emperor Jiajing watched the young man's astonished, almost childlike joy and couldn't help but chuckle. Truly a pure-hearted youth.

“Enough — you may withdraw,” the Emperor said with a smile, waving his hand.

“Your Majesty’s grace is boundless. This humble servant takes his leave.”

Zhu Ping’an kowtowed once more, every word steeped in gratitude, then rose and departed the hall.

Even after stepping beyond the grand gates of the palace, his heart still raced with disbelief. The reward was too sudden, too grand — a blessing that felt like a dream.

He could already picture it: his mother, Chen, standing proudly in their humble village as the imperial edict was read aloud, the villagers’ eyes wide with awe and admiration.

The image filled him with warmth. A smile, bright and unrestrained, bloomed across his face and refused to fade.

Chapter 354: The Imperial Bestowal of Robes

By the time Zhu Ping’an returned from the Western Garden to the Marquis of Linhuai’s residence, the sun was already hanging high overhead. The warmth of midday spilled over the courtyard stones, and as he stepped through the carved wooden gate, the quiet dignity of the household greeted him.

Not long after his return, a servant from the Bureau of Ceremonial Rites under the Ministry of Rites arrived, bearing a large lacquered chest. Inside was a complete set of ceremonial attire — the official jinshi crown and robes — prepared specially for the grand ceremony at the Golden Luan Hall the next morning.

This outfit was to be worn when the emperor personally proclaimed the results of the imperial examination. The full ensemble consisted of five principal pieces: the cap, robe, tunic, belt, and shoes — along with a surprising array of smaller accessories, each crafted with meticulous precision.

Li Shu, graceful as ever and with the calm authority of the mistress of the house, led the lively young maid nicknamed “Baozi” and several older attendants into Zhu Ping’an’s chamber. Together, they carefully unpacked and arranged the attire.

The set included so many intricate components that Zhu Ping’an himself, had he been left alone, would have had no idea what half of them were for. Baozi, with her round cheeks and sparkling curiosity, could hardly contain her excitement.

Her voice chirped constantly as she handled each piece — marveling, exclaiming, and gasping in turn, as though every item were a treasure unearthed from legend.

The first item was the cap — the jinshi guan. It resembled the traditional wusha hat worn by officials, but upon closer inspection, it bore subtle distinctions. The inner frame was formed from fine rattan strips, lacquered in deep black for sturdiness and sheen. Its structure was slightly slanted, lower in the front and higher in the back, giving it a poised, dignified angle.

Across the top stretched a thin layer of black gauze that shimmered faintly when it caught the light. The crown was mostly flat, but on each side extended a narrow, rectangular “wing” about fifteen or sixteen centimeters long, curving upward at the tips with a delicate arc. From each tip dangled a thin silk tassel of black threads that swayed with even the faintest movement.

For decoration, six ornate hairpins adorned the surface — each shaped from brass tinted with green enamel to mimic jade leaves, paired with blossoms of red velvet. These jeweled accents lent the sober black hat a festive brilliance, like spring flowers blooming against dark stone.

Near the junction where the crown’s height shifted from low to high on the right side, a small, intricate copper plate was embedded, engraved with three refined characters: “恩宴” — The Banquet of Grace and Honor.

Baozi picked up the hat gingerly, holding it at arm’s length, her round eyes widening. “This hat is so strange! Look at these wings — they’re so long! If two people wore them side by side, wouldn’t they poke each other in the face?”

Li Shu rolled her eyes with practiced elegance and reached out to flick Baozi lightly on the forehead. “Foolish girl. You say it’s strange, but there are countless men in the empire who’d give their right hand to wear one.”

“Ow, that hurt, miss!” Baozi pouted, rubbing her forehead with both hands. “Still, it’s weird. Why make them so long?”

Zhu Ping’an, amused by their chatter, took the hat gently from her hands. “This wusha hat,” he explained, “was designed for the emperor’s use — to supervise his officials.”

Baozi blinked. “What? The emperor supervises you with... a hat?” Her incredulity was written all over her face. How could a hat possibly report anything to His Majesty? Surely the young master was teasing her.

Even Li Shu, who prided herself on knowing courtly customs, tilted her head with curiosity. She knew the wusha hat had long been the mark of officialdom — decreed by the founding Emperor Hongwu himself — but she had never heard it described as a tool of imperial supervision.

Zhu Ping’an lifted the hat and gave it a slight shake. The long black wings trembled delicately, causing the tassels to sway like twin ribbons in the air. “See these wings?” he said. “Originally, wusha hats didn’t have them. It was His Majesty who ordered them added.”

“But... why?” Baozi frowned. “It’s not like the hat can talk.”

“Oh, it speaks — in its own way.” Zhu Ping’an’s smile deepened, his eyes gleaming with quiet mischief.

“You’re lying again!” she protested.

“Once, during court assembly,” Zhu Ping’an began, lowering his voice as if recounting an old secret, “the emperor noticed that some officials whispered among themselves while he was speaking. He grew furious. To put a stop to it, he ordered that every wusha hat be fitted with these long, stiff wings.

Now, whenever an official nods or turns his head to gossip..." — he demonstrated with a playful shake — "...these wings flutter or bump into the next person's. The emperor, seated high upon the Dragon Throne, can easily spot any movement. Those who fail to show respect are punished accordingly.

So, you see — the hat doesn't need a mouth to speak. It tattles with every careless nod."

Baozi's mouth formed a perfect "O" of awe. Her eyes shone with admiration. "Wow... Master Zhu, you're amazing! You know everything!"

Li Shu's gaze softened briefly with pride before she quickly masked it beneath her usual air of dignified disdain — chin tilted up like a proud little peacock.

After the hat was properly arranged on the desk for tomorrow's ceremony, Baozi pointed to another object in the chest — a slender board of polished locust wood, roughly half a meter long. "Master, what's this for?"

"That," Zhu Ping'an replied without looking up, "is an office notebook."

"Notebook?" Baozi blinked, utterly puzzled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Zhu Ping'an caught himself — ah, right, there were no "notebooks" in this era.

He smiled faintly. "It's a tool used in court sessions. Officials hold it in both hands to jot down the emperor's decrees or reminders of what they wish to say. It helps them remember important matters."

"Ohh..." Baozi nodded solemnly, though her wide eyes betrayed more admiration than understanding.

Next came the jinshi robe — deep blue in color, woven from fine gauze, with a round collar and wide sleeves. Azure silk trimming lined the edges, lending it a touch of elegance without excessive ornamentation.

A long belt of darkened oxhide accompanied the robe, its ends capped in black leather. When Zhu Ping'an tied it around his waist, the excess hung down behind him like two neat tails. Beneath the robe was a simple white tunic for layering, and with it came a pair of silk-linen socks and sturdy leather boots — the very likeness of an official's court attire.

When Zhu Ping'an tried on the full set, the women in the room fell momentarily silent. Even Baozi forgot to chatter.

Clad in the jinshi robes, Zhu Ping'an seemed transformed. His scholarly composure took on a quiet majesty; the air around him filled with the poise of one destined to stand before the throne.

The only flaw was the fit — the outer robe and inner tunic were a little too large, clearly made for an older man. The Ministry's tailors had not imagined that a youth of such tender age would rank among the successful jinshi.

Li Shu promptly summoned the household seamstress. With quick, precise hands, the woman measured and adjusted while Li Shu oversaw every stitch. In less than an hour, the attire was altered to perfection.

When Zhu Ping'an donned it again, Li Shu stepped back, eyes narrowing with critical grace. Then, after a pause, she nodded approvingly — though not without a hint of mischief. "There's still one thing missing," she said thoughtfully. "A sachet or a jade pendant. Something to complete the look."

Ten minutes later, a small embroidered sachet depicting a plump duck dangled proudly from his belt, paired with a jade ornament that caught the light beautifully.

The duck motif was... peculiar, to say the least, but somehow the colors harmonized perfectly with the attire. Thanks to Li Shu's refinements, Zhu Ping'an's outfit was now impeccable — worthy of tomorrow's imperial audience.

To express his gratitude, Zhu Ping'an offered Li Shu the golden rooster the Jiajing Emperor had given him that morning — a finely crafted piece of art, gleaming with life-like brilliance.

Li Shu's lips curved in a proud little pout. "Who wants your silly trinket?" she sniffed.

Zhu Ping'an chuckled and began to put it away, but before he could, she snatched it from his hands with the speed of a cat.

He blinked, amused and a little startled.

"What are you staring at?" she said, her cheeks faintly pink. "That sachet and jade pendant I gave you weren't cheap. This golden rooster will do nicely as payment."

Her tone was airy, almost imperious, but the flicker in her eyes betrayed a softer emotion beneath the pride — one that made Zhu Ping'an's lips curve into a quiet, knowing smile.

Chapter 355: The Imperial Ceremony of Proclamation (1)

Before even the first rooster's cry echoed through the darkness, before any dog barked to greet the dawn, the world outside was swallowed in a heavy, velvety black. Not a single glimmer of light pierced the night.

Zhu Ping'an rose quietly, the faint rustle of his robes the only sound in the silent house. He washed and dressed by lamplight, his movements unhurried, precise — a man who had long since learned the discipline of early hours. Breakfast soon arrived, borne by the little maid nicknamed Baozi, who carried a lantern that cast a gentle circle of golden light through the gloom. She set down a tray of freshly steamed buns, pickled vegetables, and porridge.

He ate in silence. The buns were soft yet springy, their fragrant filling bursting with savory flavor. The porridge was mild and smooth, and the side dishes crisp and refreshing — the kind of breakfast that left

warmth lingering in both the body and heart. Even half-awake, Zhu Ping'an could recognize the skillful hand behind it. This must be the work of the Li family's chef again, he thought, savoring the taste. The man's culinary progress had been remarkable.

A diligent one, Zhu Ping'an mused, setting his chopsticks down. To prepare such a meal, he must rise at least half an hour earlier than I. A faint smile touched his lips. I ought to thank him in person someday. These days, I've lived half on that man's cooking. Gratitude, after all, should never be left unspoken.

Once breakfast was done, Baozi helped him don the new ceremonial attire of a freshly minted jinshi — the highest title of the imperial examination. The black gauze hat, the deep-blue robe, the gleaming belt — everything was spotless, crisp, new. Adjusting the folds, Zhu Ping'an glanced once at his reflection in the bronze mirror, then stepped out of the Marquis of Linhuai's residence. His destination: the Forbidden City.

Yesterday, the Ministry of Rites had sent messengers to deliver this new robe along with a formal notice — the Chuanlu ceremony, where the rankings of the palace examination would be announced, was to be held in the Hall of Preserving Harmony within the Forbidden City.

The Forbidden City — a city within a city — was known in later ages as the Imperial Palace. Yet the Ming Dynasty's version differed greatly from the one history would remember. There were no tourists here, no ticket gates or bustling crowds. It was sacred ground, the beating heart of imperial power. Only the most exalted among men walked its courtyards.

The Chuanlu, in essence, was the imperial announcement of success — when the Emperor himself would reveal the ranking of the top scholars.

By the time Zhu Ping'an reached the Meridian Gate, the horizon was softening. The east glowed faintly, the first timid hint of dawn. Flowers seemed to blush beneath the growing light, the willows shimmered with the promise of green, and the golden-glazed tiles of the Forbidden City gleamed with a brilliance that hinted at wealth and majesty beyond measure.

Outside the gate, a sea of people had already gathered — dense, orderly, and buzzing with restrained excitement. The crowd split naturally into two camps. On one side stood the civil and military officials in their formal robes, arranged according to rank and office. On the other were the newly appointed jinshi, each clad in the same official attire as Zhu Ping'an — fresh-faced scholars on the cusp of their destiny.

The air vibrated with emotion. The officials were restless with anticipation; for many, this would be their first glimpse of the Jiajing Emperor in years. Only those of the highest rank had been permitted into the palace during the previous examination. To see the Son of Heaven again was a rare privilege indeed. As for the young scholars — their hearts thundered with excitement. This day was the culmination of a decade of study, sleepless nights, and relentless pursuit. Today, they would finally learn the fruits of their labor.

The palace gates had yet to open, so conversations bloomed among the crowd. Laughter, speculation, nervous chatter — all carried beneath the pale light of dawn.

Zhu Ping'an soon spotted his friends, Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, and joined the cluster of four hundred new jinshi.

The most popular topic, unsurprisingly, was the identity of the coming Zhuangyuan — the champion of the imperial exam. No one, not even the senior officials, knew the final rankings of the top twenty candidates. Those results were sealed by the Emperor himself and would remain secret until the formal announcement.

Rumors, of course, were plentiful. Many of these young men came from noble families or had connections within the court. Through whispers and “accidental” leaks, scraps of information from the eight chief examiners — including the powerful Grand Secretary Yan Song — had made their rounds.

Adding fuel to the fire, word had spread that the Emperor himself had summoned the top twenty candidates for an audience the previous day. With the mystery of the results wrapped around such tantalizing hints, speculation flared like wildfire.

“Logically speaking,” one scholar began confidently, “the Huiyuan from the provincial exams stands a strong chance. History often favors him.”

Before his words had even faded, another young man chuckled and shook his head. “Ah, you know half the story, brother, but not the whole.” His grin held a glint of gossip.

“Oh? Then enlighten me.”

“I’ve reliable word — my father’s colleague serves under one of the chief examiners. Last night, over wine, he mentioned that when His Majesty reviewed the top papers, your so-called Huiyuan, Zhu Ping’an, received only seven ‘O’ marks out of eight! Before the Emperor’s inspection, his ranking was... eleventh.” The speaker’s tone was dripping with satisfaction, clearly enjoying the collective gasp that rippled through the group.

“Eleventh?” someone repeated, aghast. “That’s not even top ten! Forget Zhuangyuan — he’ll be lucky to scrape into the second tier!”

Another chimed in eagerly, “And to think — that was after Grand Secretary Yan personally intervened! I heard the first review gave him only six ‘O’s. If not for Yan’s favor, he wouldn’t even have been in the running.”

The crowd buzzed, energy rising. The idea that the former Huiyuan had fallen from grace thrilled many who secretly hoped to climb in his place.

Ah, thought Zhu Ping’an, listening quietly as they dissected his supposed failure. He smiled faintly, unbothered. When a few sympathetic glances turned his way, he simply nodded, calm and mild.

To others, his composure only deepened their assumptions. He must be crushed inside, they thought. A man laughing on the outside, heartbroken within.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, standing close by, tried to console him. “Don’t lose heart, Brother Zhu. The results aren’t out yet. Anything could happen.” Yet their tones betrayed doubt — they, too, believed the rumors.

Zhu Ping’an only chuckled softly. “No need to worry. To have come this far is enough. As for the title of Zhuangyuan — if fate grants it, I’ll be grateful; if not, it simply wasn’t mine to claim.”

His words carried a quiet strength.

“If I gain it, it’s my fortune; if I lose it, it’s my fate,” Zhang Siwei murmured in admiration. “What a heart at peace! Truly, Brother Zhu, your outlook humbles me.”

Wang Shizhen nodded, equally impressed.

Of course, not everyone shared their reverence. Some sneered inwardly. Keep pretending. Let’s see how serene you look when the results are read aloud.

“I, for one, believe the champion will be Ouyang Zishi,” another scholar declared. “I’ve heard from reliable sources that all eight examiners gave his paper top marks.”

That statement electrified the crowd. Nearly everyone nodded in agreement, and those standing near Ouyang immediately began to heap flattery upon him. The man himself offered modest replies — “Oh, you jest,” “The results are yet to come” — but his eyes gleamed with pride, his posture easy, confident.

Soon, talk shifted to yesterday’s imperial audience.

“I heard His Majesty allowed each of the top twenty to choose a gift,” one man said eagerly. “What did everyone pick?”

“Golden carp,” someone replied promptly. Others echoed the same — “Yes, a golden carp, symbol of leaping through the Dragon Gate!”

When they turned to Ouyang Zishi, he smiled faintly. “I, too, chose the golden carp. What could be more fitting for a scholar’s ascent?”

Laughter and agreement rippled through the group — until someone turned to Zhu Ping’an.

“And you, Brother Zhu? You were summoned too, were you not? What did you choose?”

“Ah.” Zhu Ping’an’s tone was simple, his expression serene. “A golden rooster.”

For a heartbeat, silence fell. Then, as if a ripple passed through water, whispers and muffled laughter spread. A golden rooster? Not the carp, the age-old emblem of examination triumph, but a rooster?

They exchanged glances, smirking. Foolish choice. Even with Grand Secretary Yan’s help, he’d barely scraped into the top ranks — and now this? A rooster instead of a carp?

Across the crowd, Ouyang Zishi’s lips curled in amusement. He murmured under his breath, “Utter nonsense,” and his smile widened — bright, smug, and utterly certain of victory.

Chapter 356: The Imperial Ceremony of Proclamation (2)

One was showered with glory — eight perfect circles of approval, a flawless “o”. The Emperor himself had rewarded him with a golden fish, that most prestigious token reserved for the champion of the imperial examinations.

The other, though repeatedly praised and carefully recommended, had earned but seven “o” and a single “△” in his evaluation — a small, jarring imperfection. When the time came for imperial reward, the Emperor, in a curious twist of fate, bestowed upon him not the fish but a golden rooster — a symbol that had nothing whatsoever to do with academic triumph.

And yet, it was this very second man, Ouyang Zishi, who had arrived in the grand sedan chair of Elder Yan himself. The connection was obvious, and in the minds of nearly everyone present, his victory seemed all but sealed.

Thus, when the murmuring crowd of scholars gathered in the courtyard, they surrounded Ouyang Zishi like moths drawn to a flame, their lips dripping with honeyed flattery.

Just as laughter and polite congratulations filled the air, the deep, resonant dong... dong... dong of the drums atop the Meridian Gate shattered the morning calm. The sound rolled across the heavens, echoing through the crisp air — three solemn beats that silenced every voice.

At once, the civil and military officials standing ahead arranged themselves according to rank, robes rustling as they formed neat, orderly lines. The imperial palace awaited.

Prompted by the Ministry of Rites officials, Zhu Ping'an and the other four hundred successful candidates lined up as they had during the palace examination, each man falling into place with disciplined precision.

At the head of one line stood Zhu Ping'an; at the head of the other, Ouyang Zishi. Zhu Ping'an clasped his hands respectfully and offered a friendly smile. Ouyang Zishi, however, merely inclined his head in the faintest of acknowledgments — his expression cool, his eyes carrying the serene arrogance of a swan glancing disdainfully at a pig wallowing in the mud.

As the fifth watch approached, the palace bells tolled. The great doors of the Forbidden City groaned open, revealing the mysteries within.

Ranks of officials — civil mandarins in flowing robes and warriors in gleaming armor — stepped forward in synchronized grace. Behind them came the newly appointed scholars, guided carefully by the Ministry officials. Zhu Ping'an and Ouyang Zishi followed close behind, their hearts quickening as they passed through the towering Meridian Gate.

The walls loomed more than ten meters high, vast and austere like a mountain of stone. Zhu Ping'an could not help but feel a deep awe as he gazed upward. The Meridian Gate — the front entrance of the Forbidden City — did not open into a crowded maze of palaces, as one might expect, but into a broad, sweeping courtyard that seemed to stretch endlessly beneath the pale morning sky.

On both sides stood rows of armored guards, their spears gleaming coldly, their eyes sharp and unyielding as hawks'. One false step, Zhu Ping'an thought, and their blades would descend without hesitation.

Beyond that, the golden stream of the Inner Golden Water River wound gracefully between the Meridian Gate and the Gate of Supreme Harmony. Five bridges of pure white marble spanned its flow — the Golden Water Bridges, carved with exquisite precision, as luminous and noble as moonlight frozen into stone.

When the officials reached the bridges, they paused once more to adjust their robes and ranks before proceeding toward the Hall of Preserving Harmony.

Upon passing through the Gate of Supreme Harmony, Zhu Ping'an immediately sensed a change — an invisible weight pressing down upon the air itself. The palace grew solemn, its grandeur tinged with an almost sacred severity.

If the Meridian Gate had been guarded by warriors, here the vigilance had multiplied. The palace guards were not only greater in number, but their armor gleamed brighter, their postures straighter, their very presence sharper. Every motion spoke of absolute discipline and silent threat.

Even the imperial censors among the officials had taken up their duties, their sharp eyes watching for the slightest breach of etiquette. From this point on, every step, every glance, every breath of the newly appointed scholars was under scrutiny. A single misstep could be noted and reported — perhaps even ruin a career before it began.

As they walked deeper into the heart of imperial power, the scholars' awe only grew. Each successive hall loomed higher, each courtyard wider, each column more richly gilded. Zhu Ping'an's pulse thrummed with mingled reverence and disbelief.

By the time they reached the Hall of Preserving Harmony, mouths hung half open in silent wonder.

The hall stood upon a vast, three-tiered terrace of white marble, its base seven meters high. From every layer of the stone balustrade jutted thousands of dragon heads, exquisitely carved, their eyes fierce and eternal. The hall itself soared nearly thirty meters, supported by towering golden columns coiled with dragons, the air shimmering faintly with reflected light.

At the center, a broad flight of stairs led up to the hall — the imperial steps, or bi. Between each section of stairs lay a flat expanse called chi, painted a festive red to signify joy and fortune. In the middle gleamed the Imperial Path, a massive slab of marble twenty meters long, four meters wide, its surface carved with nine dragons rising from the sea in a scene so vivid it seemed the creatures might burst forth and roar.

The civil and military officials took their places upon the crimson chi, arranged strictly by rank. The newly appointed scholars, being of lowest station, stood behind them, at the very edge of the red steps — close enough to glimpse glory, yet still separated by an invisible chasm of hierarchy.

Many among them clenched their fists quietly, hearts burning. Today they saw their goal embodied — power, grandeur, destiny itself.

Because Emperor Jiajing would personally preside over the ceremony, every element of ritual perfection was in place. Above the hall's eaves fluttered a yellow parasol embroidered with nine golden dragons. To either side stood ornate incense burners, gilded vessels, and ceremonial implements — basins, pots, stools, and trays gleaming in orderly splendor.

Musicians in magnificent robes waited motionless beneath the eaves, while imperial guards armed with sabers, bows, and spears stood rigid along the marble steps — row upon row, layer upon layer — their silent presence radiating power.

Then, the cry came:

“Sound the whip!”

A tall, imposing guard stepped forward, holding a long whip woven from golden silk. He raised it high and brought it down upon the stone. Crack! The sound exploded through the courtyard like thunder from a clear sky — the signal known as the “purifying whip,” warning all ministers to stand in utmost reverence.

Moments later, the Emperor’s procession approached. The air filled with solemn music from the palace orchestra, the sound rising and falling like waves of gold. Zhu Ping’an could only glimpse the splendor of the approaching retinue — banners, guards, and ceremonial attendants — but in his mind, he could already picture the Emperor ascending to the Dragon Throne.

When the music ceased, a eunuch’s voice echoed faintly from within, followed by the rustle of thousands of robes as every official fell to their knees. Zhu Ping’an followed suit, bowing low in the ritual of three kneelings and nine prostrations.

Then came the solemn reading of the imperial decree:

“In the thirtieth year of Jiajing, on the fifteenth day of the third month, under the grace of Heaven, the palace examination has been concluded. Those of the First Rank are granted the title Jinshi and Rank, those of the Second Rank, Jinshi, and those of the Third Rank, Associate Jinshi...”

Though the exact words were muffled, the meaning was clear — the Emperor had approved their success.

A eunuch then carried the sealed list of rankings — the Golden Roll — to the Grand Secretary, who received it kneeling, then carefully placed it upon the table to the east of the hall. The golden seal was broken, the scroll unfurled, and the names of the Empire’s brightest sons prepared to be sung.

The air crackled with anticipation.

No one’s eyes shone brighter than Ouyang Zishi’s. His breath came fast; his fists trembled. He had already imagined the moment a thousand times — the announcement, the cheers, his triumphant steps along the central Imperial Path to kneel before the throne. His acceptance speech, even, had been composed in his mind.

“Come,” his heart pounded. “Call it. Announce it already. This glory belongs to me.”

The Golden Roll Is Read

At last, the official from the Ministry of Rites stepped forward, unrolled the golden list, and cleared his throat. The hall fell silent.

“In the thirtieth year of Jiajing, in the Xin Hai Grace Examination — the first of the First Rank...”

A breathless pause.

“...Zhu Ping’an!”

The voice rang out, clear and final, cutting through the air like a blade.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. The announcement was then repeated by guards stationed throughout the hall — echoing outward, from one to the next, until it reached even the courtyard beyond.

“First of the First Rank — Zhu Ping’an!”

Ouyang Zishi’s heart jolted.

“Ah, they’re announcing it!” he thought first with excitement. “The First Rank — the Zhuangyuan! That’s me. I should step forward now, along the Imperial Path. Yes, the very path only the Emperor and the Zhuangyuan may tread. What an honor! What—”

Then, confusion.

“...Wait. Did he just say Zhu Ping’an?”

Then disbelief.

“No... no, that’s wrong. I am Ouyang Zishi. Not Zhu Ping’an. He must have misspoken.”

And then, horror.

“What?! The First Rank is Zhu Ping’an? Impossible! I had eight perfect circles! He had seven and a triangle! This—this must be a mistake!”

His foot, already lifted to step forward, hovered awkwardly in midair. His face drained of color. He looked as though he had taken a blow below the belt — frozen, broken, absurdly helpless.

The hall resounded again:

“First of the First Rank — Zhu Ping’an!”

And still again, repeated by the guards in unison, echoing down the crimson steps of the Hall of Preserving Harmony.

Zhu Ping’an. The name rolled across the marble like thunder.

The name of the true Zhuangyuan.

Chapter 357: The Imperial Ceremony of Proclamation (3)

The First Place of the Imperial Examination — Zhu Ping’an!

The herald’s voice echoed across the grand hall for the second time, sonorous and majestic — “First place of the Imperial Examination’s First Rank... Zhu Ping’an!”

The shout was like thunder rolling across still water, shattering the dull haze that had settled over Ouyang Zishi, who had been standing among the rows of new scholars like a walking corpse, his movements mechanical, his thoughts blank.

He blinked. Wait... what?

He suddenly realized that he had taken two steps forward, almost as if sleepwalking. His body froze mid-step, the confusion flooding in. Why am I out here? How did I move? What's going on?

"Are you Zhu Ping'an? Please, follow me."

The official from the Honglu Temple — who had descended from the dais after the second announcement — spotted a young man stepping out from the line of four hundred newly appointed scholars. Naturally, he assumed this must be the newly crowned Zhuangyuan, the top scholar himself.

The official's actions were perfectly by the book. According to ancient ceremony, the name of the first-ranked scholar — the Zhuangyuan — must be proclaimed three times. Afterward, a Honglu official would lead him forward, to kneel on the Imperial Path, the sacred walkway beneath the palace steps, and offer thanks to the emperor for his boundless grace.

Thus, when the official saw "Zhu Ping'an" — or rather, Ouyang Zishi, who had prematurely stepped forward in his daze — he smiled, mistaking the gesture for eagerness.

"Ah, our new Zhuangyuan is truly moved," he thought approvingly, walking up to guide him toward the Imperial Path.

But just as the official approached, something strange happened. Ouyang Zishi's face suddenly went scarlet, the color rushing up as if all the blood in his body had surged to his cheeks. His expression twitched uncontrollably, like a puppet whose strings had been yanked too tight.

The official paused, slightly taken aback. What's wrong with him? Has he... gone mad with joy?

Then, through clenched teeth and sheer humiliation, Ouyang stammered, "N-no, I... I'm not. I'm Ouyang Zishi."

His voice was barely above a whisper, but the shame in it could have filled the entire courtyard. He wished the earth would open up beneath him so he could vanish forever.

Fortunately, he had only taken a few steps forward. The ceremony was being conducted outside the great hall, beyond the gaze of the grand ministers and court elders seated inside. The Honglu official, who knew of Ouyang Zishi's connection with Grand Secretary Yan Song, decided to turn a blind eye. After all, the young man hadn't done anything truly inappropriate.

The imperial censors, watching from afar, shared the same sentiment — they quietly pretended not to notice.

Among the remaining scholars waiting in the courtyard, a ripple of shock spread through the ranks. None of them were much better off than Ouyang Zishi himself.

Zhu Ping'an? How could it be him?

He was known to have scored only seven "o"s on the examination papers, and he had chosen the Golden Rooster, hardly considered the best. How could he possibly take first place?

Murmurs, disbelief, and wide-eyed astonishment filled the air. Ironically, their collective shock spared Ouyang much of his embarrassment.

Only Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen remained calm. After their initial surprise, both men broke into genuine smiles — they were sincerely happy for Zhu Ping'an.

As for Zhu Ping'an himself, he seemed utterly composed, even serene. His expression betrayed neither excitement nor surprise.

But to Ouyang Zishi, that calmness was pure provocation. Look at him — pretending not to care, acting all lofty and detached. Hah! As if he's not thrilled beyond belief!

To Ouyang, it was the very definition of arrogance — a quiet, smiling kind of pretentiousness that made his teeth grind.

Zhu Ping'an, however, had noticed Ouyang's predicament. With impeccable timing, he stepped forward, clasped his hands, and said politely to the official:

"Your humble student, Zhu Ping'an."

The Honglu official blinked in mild embarrassment, coughed twice, and quickly gestured, "Ahem... yes, please, follow me."

Under the envious gaze of the entire assembly, Zhu Ping'an followed the official forward. His steps were measured, calm, but there was a quiet energy about him — the steady confidence of one who had reached the pinnacle through his own strength.

Before him lay the Imperial Path, gleaming white under the morning light.

This path, reserved only for the emperor's feet, was sacred beyond compare. Only on this day — the day of the palace examination results — could three men walk upon it: the Zhuangyuan, the Bangyan, and the Tanhua — the first, second, and third of the realm.

Every other soul under heaven, no matter how noble, could not set foot upon it.

Ouyang Zishi watched as Zhu Ping'an's figure ascended the path, his robe catching the sunlight like flowing ink on white jade. A storm of emotions churned within him — envy, jealousy, resentment, and a helpless sense of loss.

That should have been his back, his glory.

At the official's signal, Zhu Ping'an knelt on the left side of the Imperial Path. His voice rang clear and steady:

"Your servant, Zhu Ping'an, humbly thanks His Majesty for the boundless grace!"

He bowed deeply, his forehead touching the stone.

And in that solemn moment, beneath the vast sky of the capital, a new "Son of Heaven's disciple" was born.

After the Zhuangyuan's name was sung three times, the crier moved on.

"Second place of the First Rank... Han Yupeng!"

Another Honglu official descended, leading Han Yupeng to the path, where he knelt to the right and behind Zhu Ping'an.

Then came the third — the Tanhua, his name sung three times as well. He too was guided to kneel behind the first two.

By now, Ouyang Zishi's spirit had all but collapsed. His face burned as though aflame.

Not the Zhuangyuan. Not the Bangyan. Not even the Tanhua.

How could this be?

He thought of all the flattery he had received before the rankings, the confidence, the whispers of his inevitable triumph — and now? The humiliation was unbearable.

Inside the hall, even the venerable Grand Secretary Yan Song was struck speechless, unable to steady his breath.

The crier continued reading names — now the second rank, sung only once, and without the ceremonial walk to the Imperial Path. Those privileges belonged solely to the top three.

Finally, when the crier reached Second Rank, Second Place, Ouyang Zishi heard his own name.

But it was cold comfort. The title that had once seemed glorious now felt hollow, mocking.

His eyes lifted to the youth standing proudly at the head of the Imperial Path. That position — that very stone beneath his feet — should have been his.

Mine, he thought bitterly. That should have been mine!

When all names were read, the Herald of Proclamation stepped forward once more. The three top scholars — Zhu Ping'an, Han Yupeng, and the third-ranked Tanhua — were led to the front, all the way to where the Imperial Path joined the palace steps.

There they stood in formation, waiting for the presentation of the Golden List.

Zhu Ping'an's position was central and slightly forward, forming a subtle triangle with the other two.

As he waited, his gaze fell to the first stone slab beneath his feet — it was unlike the others.

Carved upon it was the figure of a mighty turtle-dragon, its body like a tortoise, its head a dragon, the symbol of enduring strength. The creature's head was exactly where Zhu Ping'an's foot now rested.

He smiled faintly. So this was the origin of the saying — “to stand upon the head of the Ao, the turtle-dragon” — the symbol of supreme scholarly triumph.

How fitting.

A soft breeze drifted through the courtyard, carrying the warmth of the sun. The light shimmered upon the polished stones and danced across Zhu Ping'an's robes.

For the first time, emotion swelled within him — deep, quiet, and powerful.

From herding cattle at the foot of Nanshan, he thought, to secretly learning outside the village school, to carving characters on wooden boards by lamplight...

Every dawn, every night — it all led to this.

From a humble mountain boy to the first scholar of the realm — it was unbelievable, and yet, somehow, it felt inevitable.

That day, under the golden light of the palace, the herald's voice rose once more:

“He who once presented his essay on peace before the throne,

now stands alone — First among men, the one who rides upon the head of the Ao.”

Zhu Ping'an lifted his gaze toward the imperial gates.

“Great Ming,” he murmured in his heart, a surge of pride and destiny filling his chest,

“I am here.”

Chapter 358: When Immortals Clash, Mortals Suffer

With Zhu Ping'an standing alone at the very top of the list, the Imperial Examination Announcement Ceremony finally came to an end.

Once the Chuanlü official received the golden list from the hands of the court scribe, musicians outside the palace struck up the solemn notes of “The Ode of Jiajing.” The music, stately and resonant, filled the crisp spring air of the imperial court.

All the civil and military officials, together with the newly ranked jinshi, knelt once again in unison, performing the ritual of three kneelings and nine prostrations. Their sleeves brushed the cold marble floor as they bowed toward the emperor.

Under their reverent gaze, Emperor Jiajing rose and departed on his imperial palanquin, the golden dragon embroidery glinting under the sunlight. He was heading back toward his Western Garden—no doubt, to resume his alchemical pursuits once more.

As the emperor vanished beyond the gates, officials from the Honglu Temple carefully handed the freshly written Golden List to Minister of Rites Xu Jie. Xu Jie examined it line by line with calm precision, then passed it on to Minister of Personnel Li Mo for confirmation.

Around them, high-ranking ministers crowded in, eyes gleaming with curiosity. Everyone wanted a glimpse of this year’s palace examination results.

Rumors had already been circulating long before the exam began: Ouyang Zishi, the nephew of the powerful Grand Secretary Yan Song, was participating this year. What’s more, Yan Song himself had overseen the grading of the examination papers.

Whispers had spread that Ouyang's paper had been ranked first among all by the examiners—many had assumed that the title of Zhuangyuan (Top Scholar) was already his.

Yet when the results were officially announced, the impossible happened—Ouyang Zishi's name was nowhere near the top three. Not the Zhuangyuan, not even the Bangyan or Tanhua.

If someone were to say that Yan Song had acted completely without favoritism, not a single person in the court would have believed it.

After all, if the Grand Secretary were truly impartial, how did his nephew's paper come to be ranked first during the ministerial review?

Besides, everyone had heard another interesting piece of gossip: Zhu Ping'an, the very man who had now claimed the first place in the empire—the Huiyuan of the provincial exam—had originally been ranked eleventh by the same panel of examiners.

Ordinarily, that ranking would never have reached the emperor's desk. But by a stroke of fortune—or divine whim—His Majesty had decided this year to personally review the top twenty examination papers.

Some officials, who secretly resented Yan Song but dared not oppose him openly, took great pleasure in this outcome.

"Ah, how the mighty have fallen," one of them whispered behind a sleeve. "The Grand Secretary schemed too cleverly for his own good. Now, the emperor's favorite stands tall as the Zhuangyuan, while his own nephew barely scraped a second place in the second tier."

Truly, it was poetic justice.

“Oh, Lord Yan,” came a voice from the side. “You must seize this moment to look upon the golden list yourself. In a few minutes, it shall be hung for all to see at Dong Chang’an Gate.”

The speaker was an elderly official with a beard white as frost—Minister Li Mo himself. His tone was mild, but his eyes gleamed with mischief. He held the golden list aloft, waving it slightly as though offering an innocent invitation.

Everyone knew his words carried a sharp edge.

Zhu Ping’an, standing not far away, glanced at the gray-bearded official with curiosity. Who was this man, so bold as to taunt Yan Song in public? In these times, few possessed such courage.

Yan Song, however, did not take the bait. Instead, he chuckled softly, his old face radiant as he stroked his beard.

“Ahem, Lord Li, how very thoughtful of you—such filial concern for an old man’s failing hearing! My ears are not what they used to be. When the names were read just now, I confess a few escaped me. Since you are so kind as to offer, then yes, I shall take a look. My thanks.”

His tone was gentle, grandfatherly even, yet every word was dipped in honeyed sarcasm.

Li Mo blinked. He had expected the old fox to flare up in indignation, not to smile so serenely, as though amused by a child's prank.

Before he could reply, a burly, round-bellied man with one sharp, gleaming eye pushed through the crowd. The officials instinctively stepped aside.

It was none other than Yan Shifan, Yan Song's infamous son.

"Hehe, Lord Li's concern truly moves me," Yan Shifan said mockingly as he accepted the list with both hands. "On behalf of my father, I thank you for your... filial piety."

Though he performed a shallow bow, his face bore not a trace of respect—only a smirk of ridicule.

Li Mo snorted coldly, tossed the list into Yan Shifan's waiting hands, and stepped back. Behind him, several officials glared daggers at the younger Yan, their expressions united in quiet contempt.

Yan Shifan only smiled wider, his single eye glinting with menace. So, Li Mo grows bolder by the day, he thought darkly. A year ago, he was but a gatekeeper during the Tatar invasion, guarding Zhengyang Gate. Now, after a single promotion, he thinks himself my father's equal.

A spark of cold calculation flashed across his face. It seems time to remind this old fool who truly holds power in the court.

Yan Shifan handed the list respectfully to his father. Yan Song opened it, scanning the gilded names, then descended the marble steps toward the line of jinshi waiting below.

He stopped directly before Zhu Ping'an—the young man who had just seized the title that was meant for his nephew.

"Zhu Ping'an," Yan Song began, his voice deep but measured. "You are now the Zhuangyuan, the top scholar of our Great Ming. You are even younger than Fei Hong of Jiangxi, who once held the same honor—by more than six years. Fei Hong was twenty when he triumphed; you, however, are but fourteen."

The air trembled slightly as murmurs spread among the officials. Even those who disliked Yan Song could not hide their surprise.

Zhu Ping'an bowed low, his face composed though his heart beat fast. Before him stood one of the most powerful men in the empire, second only to the emperor himself.

Though he despised Yan Song inwardly, he kept his expression humble, his every movement respectful.

Yan Song seemed pleased with the display. Stroking his beard, he nodded approvingly.

“Such talent at so young an age,” he continued warmly. “It speaks both of your diligence and of our emperor’s wisdom. When I first read your paper, I knew it was extraordinary—though fate nearly played a cruel trick. Thankfully, His Majesty’s divine insight prevailed. You must never forget the emperor’s grace, nor fail his boundless love for talent.”

Zhu Ping’an bowed again, replying evenly, “This humble student will remember your instruction, my lord.”

To onlookers, the scene was touching—a wise elder praising a respectful youth.

Yet to those who knew better, it was a subtle performance, both sides playing their roles perfectly.

“Hmph! Birds of a feather—scheming both young and old,” came a muttered voice.

It was Li Mo again. He turned his head away, speaking as though to no one in particular, but everyone understood the barb. With a cold snort, he led several officials past the scene.

After a few steps, he paused, bowed slightly, and said curtly, “My health is poor. The task of posting the list at Dong Chang’an Gate shall be handled by the Left Vice Minister.”

Without another glance, he departed.

From behind, Yan Shifan called out cheerfully, “Take care, Lord Li! Rest well—His Majesty will surely need your tireless service again soon!”

Li Mo’s stride faltered for an instant, betraying his anger. Yan Shifan’s laughter rang through the courtyard, dark and triumphant, his single eye glinting like obsidian.

So it begins, Zhu Ping’an thought, suppressing a sigh. When gods fight, it’s mortals who suffer.

He recalled Li Mo’s final cutting remark—“birds of a feather”—and could only smile bitterly. I’ve done nothing, yet somehow I’ve offended a powerful man by merely standing here. Heaven help me.

Then it struck him. Wait... Li Mo—the Minister of Personnel? The man who oversees the promotions of every official in the empire?

Zhu Ping'an felt a chill crawl down his spine.

Truly... fate has a cruel sense of humor.

Chapter 359: Rising to the Pinnacle of a Eunuch's Power

It's not that easy... to find someone who truly understands you.

As he watched the grey-bearded official and his entourage leave, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but hum the lyrics of "It's Not That Easy." His heart was filled with bitter helplessness — truly, being an official was not that easy...

Whether it was gods clashing or great men bickering, the procedures following the imperial examination's results still had to continue.

Next came the grand highlight — the Imperial Street Parade of Honor. This was a ceremonial procession where the top scorers of the palace examination paraded through the imperial avenue. The Zhuangyuan Lang rode proudly on a tall horse through the capital's main street, basking in the admiration and praise of the masses. Of course, the Bangyan (second place) and Tanhua Lang (third place) would follow behind him, though less gloriously. As for the remaining Jinshi (successful candidates), they had to walk on foot.

The true purpose of this parade was to honor the top scholars and inspire ambition throughout the realm — especially among the students. It was meant to encourage them to emulate the Zhuangyuan Lang, to study diligently, strive for excellence, and serve the Emperor and the Empire through the imperial examinations.

Under the arrangement of the Ministry of Rites and the officials of the Honglu Temple, Zhu Ping'an, along with the Bangyan and Tanhua Lang, was led to a side hall. The Parade of Honor was a matter of prestige — thus, the top three had to change into bright, festive robes befitting their new titles.

Inside the side hall, eunuchs and palace maids had already drawn curtains to divide the space into three separate changing rooms. Each of the three men was guided into one, to be dressed in their exclusive ceremonial attire.

As Zhu Ping'an stepped into his curtained chamber, he was surprised to see that the eunuch waiting inside was someone he'd met before — the very same one who had winked at him the previous day, when he had been choosing his reward before the Emperor. In truth, his current title of Zhuangyuan was, in a way, connected to that very wink.

"Oh, it's you, Gonggong. Yesterday, due to the circumstances, Ping'an was unable to thank you properly in person. I hope you won't take offense. Many thanks for your hint yesterday," Zhu Ping'an said with a respectful bow upon recognizing the eunuch.

"Hehe, Zhuangyuan Lang is too polite. This humble one did nothing at all yesterday. Your success today is due first to His Majesty's favor, and second to your own intelligence and talent — it has nothing to do with me," the eunuch replied with a gentle shake of his head and a smile.

"Gonggong jests. I may not be clever, but I know the meaning of gratitude. Without your hint yesterday, I might have made a grave mistake," Zhu Ping'an said earnestly.

"Zhuangyuan Lang truly overpraises me. I really did nothing," the eunuch said, though the faint expression on his face betrayed a subtle admission.

“May I ask how I should address Gonggong?” Zhu Ping’an asked politely, bowing slightly.

“It’s just a lowly name — hardly worth mentioning. This one’s common name is Feng Bao. I fear it might sully Zhuangyuan Lang’s ears,” the eunuch replied humbly.

Oh, Feng Bao, is it?

Zhu Ping’an initially didn’t think much of it. But just as he was about to speak again, it suddenly struck him like a bolt of lightning. Wait a minute — what did you say your name was? Feng Bao...?!

Feng Bao! Damn it — this was a future giant among men! A battle-hardened rooster among eunuchs!

This Feng Bao would become none other than Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng’s most crucial political ally — the man who helped Zhang triumph over his rivals time and again. Whether it was toppling Gao Gong or jointly ruling the empire under Emperor Shenzong, Feng Bao’s influence would be monumental.

In history, Feng Bao was a man of two faces — on one side, brilliant, educated, and ambitious; on the other, greedy for wealth and power, and according to some unofficial histories, even lustful. He was known as the “Eunuch Statesman.” In the years to come, he would rise to hold the Imperial Seal of the Directorate of Ceremonial Supervisors, command the Eastern Depot, oversee the Imperial Stables, and even serve as a

Grand Minister entrusted with the Emperor's will. At the height of his power, his influence was unmatched — he had elevated the eunuch profession to its absolute peak!

Zhu Ping'an was utterly dumbfounded — the eunuch before him, this unassuming young man, was actually Feng Bao!

Just after saying his name, Feng Bao noticed the Zhuangyuan Lang staring at him, eyes wide as though struck by lightning.

"Zhuangyuan Lang...?" Feng Bao asked in confusion.

Snapped out of his shock by the eunuch's voice, Zhu Ping'an looked straight at him and spoke solemnly, "About yesterday, Ping'an truly owes you his gratitude, Gonggong Feng. That is a fine name you bear. Whether you believe it or not, though this is my first time hearing it, I believe Gonggong will one day leave a lasting mark upon history."

"Zhuangyuan Lang must be joking. This humble servant is but a menial in the palace — unworthy of your thanks. Besides, I am merely a castrate. What use is a good name to someone like me? How could I ever dream of leaving a mark on history? Please, Zhuangyuan Lang, don't tease me so," Feng Bao said with a faint shake of his head. A shadow passed over his face, as if recalling that painful day when the knife had fallen — and he sighed softly.

"There are three hundred and sixty trades in the world, and in each, one may find a Zhuangyuan. Gonggong need not belittle himself so," Zhu Ping'an said gently.

“But I am only a eunuch. What future could there possibly be for me?” Feng Bao replied with a self-mocking smile.

The Feng Bao standing before him was nothing like the cunning, all-powerful figure that history would later record. Instead, he radiated a faint sense of inferiority — and a touch of uncertainty.

This—this was a rare opportunity worth seizing. If he were to invest now, the future returns would be immense. Even Zhang Juzheng’s rise to prominence would one day owe much to this man—so why shouldn’t he take a share of the profit himself?

Suddenly, Zhu Ping’an recalled a popular saying from the modern world—one that suited this moment perfectly. Truly, this was a convergence of heaven’s timing, the earth’s advantage, and human accord.

So, Zhu Ping’an suddenly raised his voice, cutting off Feng Bao with righteous conviction.

“Eunuch Feng, forgive me, but I must disagree!”

“Oh? And why does the top scholar speak so?” Feng Bao looked puzzled by Zhu Ping’an’s sudden passion.

“Why, you ask?”

Dare I ask, does Eunuch Feng know who wrote ‘To explore the boundary between Heaven and Man, to comprehend the changes through ancient and modern times, and to form one’s own school of thought’—the greatest universal history under Heaven?

Dare I ask, does Eunuch Feng know who improved the art of papermaking, allowing the light of civilization to be passed down through the ages, who made paper so affordable that even sons of poor families could study the words of the sages—who brought such grace and blessing upon all scholars beneath Heaven?

Dare I ask, does Eunuch Feng know who, after Empress Wu Zetian’s abdication, when Emperor Zhongzong ascended the throne and the crown prince Li Chong led the imperial guards in rebellion, while all ministers stood helpless and the emperor wept bitterly—who was it that volunteered, struck down the rebel vanguard with a single blade, turned the tide, and saved the collapsing empire? And later, in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, when the chieftain of Vietnam, Mei Xuancheng, rose in rebellion—who took the same narrow path once used by Ma Yuan of the Eastern Han, struck straight at the enemy’s heart, and pacified the southwest in one decisive move?

Dare I ask, does Eunuch Feng know who braved fire and water, journeying seven times to the Western Seas, carrying the mighty prestige of Great Ming across ten thousand miles?

After repeating, “Why, you ask?” in a rising tone, Zhu Ping’an unleashed a storm of rhetorical questions—one after another, pa pa pa!—like a roaring dragon’s gale, sweeping over the young eunuch Feng Bao and washing his mind blank.

“Sima Qian... Lord Cai... Yang Sixu... Lord Zheng...” the little eunuch murmured unconsciously, dazed beneath the onslaught of words.

“And what were their origins? What did they all have in common?” Zhu Ping’an pressed on, striking while the iron was hot. “Just now, Eunuch Feng belittled himself—was that not also to belittle them?”

Under the force of Zhu Ping’an’s words, the young eunuch’s eyes suddenly brightened. In that instant, a seed—one called ambition—took root in his heart and began to sprout.

Sima Qian was not of the orthodox kind, yet he suffered castration under Emperor Wu of Han—he was a eunuch.

Cai Lun, Lord Cai, was a eunuch.

Yang Sixu was a eunuch.

Zheng He, Lord Zheng, was a eunuch.

If they could achieve greatness—if their names could shine forever in history—then why couldn’t he?

The seed of ambition in young Feng Bao's heart took root, sprouted, and began to flourish!

"Many thanks to you, Zhuangyuan-lang, for awakening me!" Feng Bao's eyes burned brightly as he looked at Zhu Ping'an, his voice sincere from the depths of his chest.

"Eunuch Feng jests. I've done nothing at all," Zhu Ping'an replied, wearing the very same faint smile that Feng Bao himself had shown earlier.

Then, the two men exchanged a knowing glance—and laughed together.

The wheels of history roared past, never stopping for an instant. They crushed over a small pebble, jolted briefly—and rolled onward without pause...

Chapter 360: Boasting on the Imperial Street

With Feng Bao's assistance, Zhu Ping'an changed into the attire of a Zhuangyuan—the champion scholar. The garments radiated a sense of superiority distinct from other jinshi; they were much closer in design to the court robes of high-ranking officials. Upon his head sat a two-beamed ceremonial crown, fastened with a pure gold hairpin, from which hung blue silk cords that looped neatly beneath his chin.

The Zhuangyuan robe was made of crimson silk gauze, different from the azure robes of the other jinshi—strikingly bright and elegant. Around his waist was the plain silver belt of a sixth-rank official, from which hung a jade pendant inlaid with pearls and tassels.

The only thing that felt a bit awkward was the pair of jeweled floral ornaments on his hat—far larger and more ornate than those worn by other jinshi. For a grown man to wear two rows of diancui hairpins, it did feel rather strange.

“Zhuangyuan-lang, you truly look the picture of grace and talent,” Feng Bao complimented after Zhu Ping’an had finished dressing.

“Eunuch Feng jests,” Zhu Ping’an replied with a faint smile, shaking his head. “I’m probably the least handsome Zhuangyuan-lang since the founding of Great Ming, haha.”

He had no illusions about his looks. Even with the grandeur of the Zhuangyuan robes, he couldn’t be called striking.

Once Zhu Ping’an and the other two top scholars had changed into their ceremonial attire, they returned to the front of the Grand Hall. A few palace attendants approached, each carrying a tray bearing a cup of imperial wine. They presented them respectfully to Zhu Ping’an, the Bangyan (second place), and the Tanhualang (third place). The three lifted their cups, bowed deeply in the direction of the Western Garden where Emperor Jiajing resided, and then drained them in a single motion before setting the cups back on the trays.

Thus began the official Yujie Kuaguan procession. In essence, it was a ceremony where the Zhuangyuan led the new jinshi to the Left Gate of Chang’an to witness the posting of the Imperial Examination’s Golden Roll before returning home.

Officials from the Ministry of Rites and the Honglu Temple carried the golden list at the head of the procession. Zhu Ping'an, with the Bangyan and Tanhualang beside him, followed in the middle, while the rest of the jinshi walked behind.

They walked together—but not on the same path.

Zhu Ping'an and the two top scholars were permitted to walk upon the imperial road itself, while the others had to keep to the sides. This imperial road was reserved for the Emperor alone. Even the Empress was allowed to tread it only once in her lifetime—on her wedding day.

Of course, Zhu Ping'an and his companions would walk it only this once. Yet for the countless scholars of the Great Ming, this single step upon the imperial road was the highest possible honor—an unattainable glory they dreamt of day and night.

Zhu Ping'an himself felt rather calm as he walked. But behind him, the Bangyan and Tanhualang were visibly trembling with emotion. When Zhu Ping'an glanced back, he almost laughed—their faces were streaked with tears, and they looked so overwhelmed they could barely walk.

Surely it's not that emotional? he thought. But after a moment's reflection, he understood. Of life's three great joys, "the moment one's name appears on the golden list" ranked first.

Han Yupeng, the Bangyan, watched Zhu Ping'an's composed figure ahead of him and felt overwhelming admiration. Truly worthy of being the Zhuangyuan, he thought. Look at that calmness, that self-restraint—not elated by success, not saddened by failure.

As for himself—he could hardly keep steady. He hadn't expected to rank as Bangyan at all. His connections weren't strong—certainly not as powerful as Ouyang Zishi's—and in the previous Huishi (provincial exam), he'd only placed sixth. The Huiyuan, Zhu Ping'an, and others had far outshone him. So when the results of the Dianshi (palace exam) were announced and his name appeared second, he had been struck dumb with joy. Were it not for the solemnity of the imperial hall and the need to spare Ouyang Zishi's feelings, he might have screamed aloud in delight.

Now, walking upon the imperial road—the path only the Emperor could tread—his excitement was beyond words.

Knowing this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Zhu Ping'an slowed his pace to let the others savor the moment.

What should have taken ten minutes to reach the Gate of Supreme Harmony ended up taking nearly half an hour.

The Bangyan and Tanhualang could have given Zhu Ping'an a hundred praises for his thoughtfulness.

Passing through the Gate of Supreme Harmony, they continued straight through its central portal—another privilege reserved for the Emperor alone—and then onward to Meridian Gate (Wumen).

The Wumen, also known as the “Five Phoenix Tower,” consisted of five gatehouses. Its central structure, resembling a phoenix spreading its wings, gave the gate its name. From the front, one could see three archways, but from behind, there were five.

When Zhu Ping’an and his companions arrived, the guards opened both the main gate and the two side passages—doors visible only from the sides.

Zhu Ping’an led the Bangyan and Tanhualang through the central gate, while the civil officials guided the remaining jinshi through the eastern passage, and the military candidates took the western one.

Beyond the Wumen, the sound of drums and music filled the air. Under the accompaniment of the imperial guards’ fanfare, they exited through Duanmen, then Chengtianmen, and finally crossed a vast square before arriving at the Left Gate of Chang’an, at the northeast corner of the Daming Gate.

Every year, the Golden List of the Palace Examination was posted at the Left Gate of Chang’an—also known as the Dragon Gate, symbolizing the carp’s leap over the dragon gate, signifying the transformation of scholars into honored elites.

Today, the gate was decorated in grand celebration. A temporary “Dragon Pavilion” had been built, hung with red silk and great lanterns. Zhu Ping’an and his peers entered the pavilion to watch the officials of the Honglu Temple and the Ministry of Rites post the Golden List.

The magnificent list, sealed with the great imperial jade stamp, gleamed beneath the sunlight. The newly appointed jinshi gazed upon it with tears glistening at the corners of their eyes.

Once the list was posted, the Prefect of Shuntian—who had long been waiting—stepped forward with two attendants. With congratulations, he draped a wide crimson sash diagonally over Zhu Ping'an's chest, affixing a great red flower at the center. Another was pinned atop his hat.

The other two officials did the same for the Bangyan and Tanhualang.

The rest of the jinshi looked on in admiration, none more so than Ouyang Zishi, whose eyes burned with envy and frustration.

Soon after, three splendid scarlet horses were led forward. Their saddles gleamed with gold, and their whips were woven with golden threads. Zhu Ping'an mounted the most magnificent of the steeds, golden whip in hand, leading the procession, with the Bangyan and Tanhualang close behind. The rest followed on foot as they proceeded toward Chang'an Avenue.

At the head of the procession, attendants carried banners of red and gold reading "Zhuangyuan Zhu Ping'an" and "Triumphant in All Three Examinations," while musicians beat drums and blew horns, filling the air with a thunderous clamor.

Yet the greatest excitement came from the people of the capital.

At that moment, all of Beijing poured into the streets of Chang'an. The sidewalks, balconies, and rooftops were crowded with people craning their necks for a glimpse.

Even the young women who seldom left their homes had dressed in their finest, hurrying out just to see what the Zhuangyuan-lang looked like.

For once, their families didn't stop them.

Chang'an Avenue was packed—shoulder to shoulder, the entire city emptied into the streets to watch the Zhuangyuan-lang!