

Rise 361

Chapter 361: Even If You Turn to Ashes, I Would Still Know You

“Once mired in obscurity, now unrestrained and boundless in thought.

With the spring wind at my back, my steed gallops swiftly—

In a single day, I behold all the blossoms of Chang’an.”

— Meng Jiao, “After Passing the Imperial Examination”

The streets and alleys overflowed with people, a tide of excitement so fierce it seemed to ignite the very air. The broad avenue of Chang’an was packed so tightly that not even a drop of water could seep through.

Zhu Ping’an rode slowly into the avenue, his horse’s hooves clicking steadily upon the stone road. The sight before him stirred a single thought in his heart—the poem After Passing the Imperial Examination.

Truly, ten years of silent study, and now, with one stroke, the world knows your name.

As Zhu Ping'an's horse stepped onto the grand avenue, the crowd—who had been waiting since morning—erupted in sheer euphoria. The moment their eyes fell upon him, the air boiled over with excitement.

“Look, look! The Zhuangyuan Lang is so young—he’s even younger than my little brother!”

“Isn’t that right? He doesn’t even look like he’s of age yet! What kind of upbringing did he have? What did he eat to become so brilliant?”

“Heavens above, I can hardly believe my eyes! Such talent at such a young age—this trip was worth it after all. I didn’t squeeze through the crowds for nothing! Now I’ll have something to tell the old woman when I get home—maybe she’ll stop spoiling our grandson so much!”

Cries of astonishment rippled through the sea of faces. It was as if an alien had descended upon the earth—each person shouting in disbelief and awe.

“You all don’t know the half of it,” said a burly uncle with a smug grin. “My seventh uncle’s eighth cousin’s little nephew works at a high official’s residence, and that official happens to be close friends with a grandee of the Ministry of Rites. I just heard the news myself—not long ago! This Zhuangyuan Lang is only fourteen this year! The youngest in the history of our Great Ming!”

The man’s words drew gasps and shrieks of shock. Pleased by the attention, he glanced proudly around before continuing, urged on by the clamoring crowd.

“And that’s not all! This Zhuangyuan Lang came from humble roots—a hanmen, you hear? No family ties in court, no noble backing! His family tills the fields at the foot of the mountain. He became top scholar entirely on his own merit!”

The revelation sent another wave of astonished cries through the crowd. Similar gossip broke out all along Chang'an Street—each storyteller spinning their own thread of admiration and envy.

In any age, nothing delighted the common folk more than the tale of a poor youth rising to greatness. And what could be more inspiring than a farmer's son becoming the Zhuangyuan himself?

The people's gazes burned hotter, their screams swelling like an ocean storm.

Especially the young maidens—dressed in silks and ribbons, faces flushed with excitement, eyes sparkling like spring peaches. With graceful, slender hands, they tossed embroidered handkerchiefs and fragrant sachets toward Zhu Ping'an, until the air seemed to rain with silken tokens of affection.

Clad in crimson robes, crowned with red flowers, astride a golden-saddled steed, Zhu Ping'an rode at the center of fanfare and splendor—banners fluttering, drums beating, attendants clearing the way. All eyes were on him; the second-place and third-place scholars were but shadows behind him, and the other jinshi trailing on foot were entirely forgotten.

It should have been me upon that horse!

Ouyang Zishi walked among the procession, his handsome face twisted with jealousy as he watched the crowd's adoration, the handkerchiefs raining down upon Zhu Ping'an.

While the common folk filled the streets to catch a glimpse of the Zhuangyuan Lang, the wealthy watched from comfort. They had long since reserved private rooms on either side of the avenue, their servants arranging everything for a leisurely view.

One such room, on the second floor of a roadside teahouse, belonged to the Yan family—not that it needed to be “reserved,” for the establishment itself was one of their properties.

Inside, a refined chamber had been prepared: soft couches laid with brocade quilts, porcelain vases of flowers, glass lanterns glimmering faintly—every detail elegant and serene. A beaded curtain of crystal strands hung before the window; from within, one could see the street clearly, while those outside saw only a shimmer of light.

Miss Yan Er stood before the window, lifting a corner of the curtain with her slender, jade-like fingers. Her eyes—bright as autumn water—looked out upon the bustling street, calm and unruffled, as placid as a still lake.

Behind her stood several young maids, their excitement brimming over. They craned their necks eagerly toward the window, standing on tiptoe, eyes wide with anticipation for the parade of scholars to pass below.

“Miss, Miss! When Young Master left, he told the steward to ready this room especially—it really does have the best view of Chang’an Street! Look, you can see everything from here!”

“And Young Master said the Zhuangyuan title this time was practically guaranteed! The Master even said that once the palace examination is over, he’ll have Young Master come forward to propose—Miss, you are truly blessed!”

“That’s right, that’s right! Soon, Young Master himself will be leading the procession on horseback right beneath our window...”

The little maids chattered endlessly, their voices bright and lively, “Young Master this” and “Young Master that,” as they pressed closer to the window, eager for the moment their guy—their future lord—would pass by.

“What nonsense are you spouting? Who’s calling him my husband-to-be? I never agreed to anything! Say that again, and I’ll have your hides!”

Miss Yan, the second young lady of the Yan household, tore her gaze from the window, turned her head sharply, and bit her lip as she swept her glare across the group of young maids.

The little maids shrank their necks, stuck out their tongues, and offered embarrassed grins.

Suddenly, a wave of noise erupted from outside — drums thundering, gongs clanging, and firecrackers exploding in unison. The few maids standing by the window instantly perked up like cats catching a whiff of fish, craning their necks eagerly toward the street.

Not far away, down Chang'an Avenue, a grand procession was making its way along the imperial road. Before long, they spotted a man in a bright red robe, a crimson flower pinned to his chest, riding a magnificent red horse at an unhurried pace.

"The young master—the young master is here!"

"Miss! Quick, look! The young master's here!"

In an instant, the little maids were beside themselves with excitement.

Their cheers came in waves, one after another—but as the man in the red robe, the red flower, and atop the red horse drew near, their chatter suddenly died out, as if a hand had clamped tight around a chicken's throat.

Wait—something's wrong. That's not the young master at all! Who on earth is that?

The maids stared, wide-eyed and dumbfounded.

Just as their voices fell silent, a sudden shriek split the air from within the room.

“Ahhh—!”

Their usually calm, gentle-as-water Miss Yan, at that very moment, let out a scream sharp enough to pierce the heavens.

As her scream rang out, the maids thought to themselves: See, even Miss is shocked now! Just moments ago she said she wouldn't agree, told us not to call him 'young master,' but now she's all worried. She must've been shy earlier—now her true feelings are showing...

Their gossipy imaginations had barely begun to ignite before her next words snuffed them out completely.

“Ahhh—! So it's you, you shameless scoundrel!”

Miss Yan's furious shout froze the maids in place.

S-Scoundrel...?!

They stood there, mouths agape. What was going on? Did Miss... have something with that scholar in red?

Please don't scare us like this, Miss!

But before the thought had even settled, they witnessed a scene that nearly sent their souls flying out of their bodies—

Their Miss, after shouting, looked around sharply, then bit her lip, snatched the gold hairpin inlaid with kingfisher enamel from her hair, and hurled it with all her strength out the window—straight toward the scholar on the red horse.

M-Miss... had just thrown her favorite hairpin... at that man?!

The maids' hearts filled with panic. No wonder Miss opposed the marriage with the young master—so this was the real reason?

When did this happen? And why do we know nothing about it?

If Master finds out, won't he flay us alive?!

They turned pale as they saw Miss Yan reaching next for her embroidered shoe, preparing to throw that next.

Meanwhile, Zhu Ping'an was smiling and nodding politely to the cheering crowds on both sides of the street when a glinting object whizzed past his horse's head. He blinked—looked like a hairpin. He figured it must be some shy maiden tossing a token of affection like a handkerchief, and thought nothing of it.

But after a few more steps, something else came flying—smack! An embroidered shoe landed squarely on the horse's head.

Throwing handkerchiefs or hairpins, I can understand... but a shoe? That's going too far!

He raised his head to see who dared such a thing—and immediately felt his soul leave his body.

At the second-floor window of a building facing the street stood a young woman, teeth clenched, glaring down at him with fiery eyes, one shoe still in hand, ready to throw. Several terrified maids clung to her arms, pleading desperately.

That young woman... was none other than Miss Yan—the very same second daughter he had accidentally walked in on during her bath at the Yan residence!

Zhu Ping'an's heart nearly stopped. He ducked his head at once, pulled up his sleeve to cover his face, and pressed his heels into the horse's sides, muttering under his breath as he sped up, "You can't see me... you can't see me..."

"Scoundrel! Even if you turn to ashes, I'll recognize you!"

With her heart ablaze, Miss Yan turned grief into fury, broke free from her maids' restraining hands, and hurled her embroidered shoe straight at the retreating Zhu Ping'an with all her might.

Chapter 362: The Scholar's Crimson Crown and the Jinshi's Green Hat

Because Second Miss Yan's emotions had surged far beyond her control, her movements became erratic. And just as she hurled her embroidered shoe with righteous fury, Zhu Ping'an suddenly spurred his horse into a burst of speed. The shoe missed its intended target entirely — sailing through the air before landing with a clang! squarely on the head of poor Ouyang Zishi, who had been trailing behind and eating dust.

What the—?! This was too much! An insult beyond reason!

The top scholar isn't me, the second place isn't me, even the third isn't me! The flowers, the applause — none of it belongs to me! As if that weren't miserable enough, now someone's pelting me with shoes?! Is there no justice left in the world?!

Seething with indignation, Ouyang Zishi bent down and picked up the embroidered shoe that had struck him. His face darkened as he looked up to identify the culprit — only for his heart to seize in disbelief. There, leaning out of the second-floor window of a teahouse, was none other than his beloved Second Miss Yan. Her

slender frame leaned forward, her delicate figure trembling with anger as she glared daggers toward the figure galloping away on horseback.

Her voice, trembling with fury, rang out over the noise of the street.

“You shameless scoundrel! Even if you turned to ashes, I would still recognize you!”

Ouyang’s heart dropped straight into his stomach.

Those fluttering lashes, that quivering voice — why are you looking at him like that while saying such words?!

No... it couldn’t be. Could it? Was it possible that— that she and he—?!

At that thought, Ouyang Zishi nearly spat blood on the spot. His eyes bulged, veins pulsing as he glared at Zhu Ping’an’s distant back. You vile, despicable thief! he cursed inwardly. You’ve already stolen my rightful place as top scholar, and now you’ve dared to reach your filthy hands toward my betrothed?!

You’ve dyed your scholar’s cap red—

—and turned my official hat green!

You heartless monster, Zhu Ping'an! Your sins are beyond measure! Ouyang Zishi clenched his fists and vowed in his heart: If I do not avenge this humiliation, I am no man!

"Y-Young Miss... I think the shoe... hit the future son-in-law," the little maid beside Second Miss Yan stammered, eyes wide with dismay. She had seen the shoe describe a perfect arc through the air before landing squarely on the head of an unfortunate new scholar — who, upon looking up, revealed a face that looked strikingly like that of the young master.

"Who asked you to speak?!" Second Miss Yan snapped, eyes blazing. Her chest rose and fell as she tried to steady her fury, but the reminder only fanned the flames further.

Meanwhile, across the bustling avenue, some twenty or thirty paces away, the second floor of another, far more lavish restaurant was filled with laughter and lighthearted chatter. Inside sat several young ladies of the Marquis of Linhuai's household — all unmarried — including Li Shu herself. The women reclined gracefully by the window, their gazes falling upon the vibrant, festive spectacle of Chang'an Street below.

"Fifth Sister," the Marquis's Second Miss said softly, tracing the rim of her porcelain teacup with a slender jade-like finger. "It must have cost quite a bit to rent out this entire floor."

A musical laugh followed. "Just a few silver coins, what of it? Today is the day of my future brother-in-law's results — who knows, perhaps by nightfall Fifth Sister will be the wife of the top scholar," the Sixth Miss chimed in sweetly, tilting her round, rosy face upward with a smile that seemed innocent on the surface, yet carried a teasing undertone sharp enough to cut.

In truth, the Sixth Miss had never thought highly of Zhu Ping'an. True, his talent was undeniable — the last provincial exam had proven that. But for this imperial examination? She doubted him greatly. After all, the day before the exam, the Yan family had dragged him off to drink. He'd returned home late at night, and the neighboring Duke Wei's household had set off firecrackers till dawn. The servants had even said Zhu Ping'an arrived at the palace gates with dark circles under his eyes!

How could such a man become the top scholar? she thought with a huff. The runner-up from the last exam was, after all, Elder Yan's nephew — more than capable and well-rested. Surely, this year's laurels will belong to someone else.

And she hadn't forgotten the embarrassment Li Shu had caused during the last exam — the scandal with that maid Hongjian still made her grind her teeth. So when her Second Sister spoke up, she couldn't resist the urge to add her own barbed words.

You think you'll flaunt your good fortune in front of us by inviting us here? she sneered inwardly. Please. Do you think becoming the wife of the top scholar is so easy? Every man who's earned that title has been a genius among men, a crane among chickens. As for your rustic fiancé... ha! He still reeks of the countryside. He looks nothing like a future zhuangyuan.

The more she imagined Li Shu's disappointment later — after spending so much silver, only to find the top scholar's laurels adorning someone else's head — the more the corners of her lips curled in quiet, malicious delight.

Oh, Fifth Sister... let's see how long your pride lasts.

“It wasn’t that expensive, really. Sixth Sister jests,” Li Shu replied with her usual calm grace, her voice as soft as a spring breeze. She sat by the window, the light playing gently across her serene face, a faint smile curving her lips.

At that moment, the little round-faced maid nicknamed “Baozi” suddenly pressed her palms against the window and pointed outside, eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Miss! Miss! Look — that man on the big horse at the front — he looks just like the young master!”

The ladies blinked, startled. A man on horseback? Leading the procession? Looking like Zhu Ping’an?

No... surely not?

They all turned to look.

Though the distance blurred the details, the outline — tall, straight-backed, confident — was indeed somewhat familiar. Yet there were many new scholars that year. Tall or short, plump or lean, it wasn’t so strange for one to resemble Zhu Ping’an. Surely, they told themselves, it couldn’t be him.

“Ugh! These women are shameless,” Baozi muttered, puffing out her cheeks as she watched the crowds of infatuated girls on both sides of the street throw hairpins, embroidered pouches, and handkerchiefs toward the riders. “How can they throw such things at the young master!”

Then she froze, gasping. “Ah! That one’s throwing a shoe! Miss, look! Someone’s throwing a shoe at young master! There’s a bad woman throwing her shoe at him!”

Her round cheeks puffed up in outrage.

“He’s coming this way! Miss, young master’s coming this way! Ah— do you think he knows we’re here? He’s speeding up!”

Baozi’s voice rose with excitement as she narrated every motion of Zhu Ping’an like a live commentator, her chubby hands waving animatedly.

The moment she said “the top scholar is coming,” every young lady in the Marquis’s household leapt to their feet, their gazes turning to the window in anticipation. Even the skeptical Sixth Miss held her breath, clinging to one last hope — Please, not Zhu Ping’an. Please, let it be anyone but Zhu Ping’an.

But her hopes were dashed.

Down the avenue, the top scholar galloped forth — dressed in splendid crimson robes, wearing a matching scarlet crown, mounted on a majestic red horse. His face shone with that unmistakable, slightly foolish grin that everyone knew so well.

Who else could it be but Zhu Ping'an?

Every young lady in the room was struck dumb. None of them could quite believe what they were seeing. The rustic young man they had once mocked — he was the new top scholar of the realm.

Especially the Sixth Miss. Her expression twisted as if she'd seen a ghost.

Fifth Sister's husband... Zhu Ping'an... really became the zhuangyuan?!

That bumpkin who had been laughed at the day he first entered the Marquis's household — that same awkward, countryside scholar — had actually claimed the highest honor under Heaven!

And below the building, among the crowd of mischievous children, one particularly plump-faced boy puffed out his chest with unrestrained pride, pointing toward the rider on the red horse and declaring in a triumphant voice for all his friends to hear:

"See that man on the horse? That's my brother-in-law!"

Chapter 363: The Proud Little Rascal

“See that man on the horse? That’s my brother-in-law!”

The shout came from a pudgy-faced little rascal, his voice brimming with pride. He stood among a group of children, his round face tilted high, puffed up like a triumphant rooster surrounded by his brood. The look of envy in the eyes of his playmates only made him more pleased with himself. His vanity swelled until it nearly overflowed.

If one looked closer, they would notice another tiny figure standing just behind him—a little girl, fair and rosy like a porcelain doll. Her bright eyes blinked curiously as she bit her finger, innocence and sweetness radiating from every inch of her small frame.

“You say he’s your brother-in-law, and that makes it true? Go on then, call out to him and see if he answers. Anyone can shout ‘brother-in-law’ if they like,” one of the boys jeered, puffing out his cheeks in defiance.

“Heh, that’s because you don’t know how badly that country bumpkin wants to be my brother-in-law!” the pudgy boy snorted, slapping his own chubby cheek as if brushing off imaginary dust. “I usually can’t even be bothered to acknowledge him—but since you’re all so doubtful, I’ll be generous and call him once. Just once!”

He wore the air of one bestowing a great favor, as though letting Zhu Ping’an hear the word brother-in-law from his lips were some magnificent honor.

“Then call him! I bet he won’t even look your way,” another child challenged, clearly unconvinced.

“Fine, fine,” the pudgy boy folded his arms, tossing his head with exaggerated arrogance. “I’ll do it for your sake.”

These children were all the spoiled offspring of noble families—little young masters of privilege. Their attendants had long since cleared a section of the busy street for them, standing guard to ensure the small lords had a perfect view of the passing parade.

At that very moment, Zhu Ping’an was approaching, astride a tall horse at the head of the grand procession that celebrated his scholarly triumph down the imperial avenue.

“Brother-in-law!”

The pudgy boy’s voice pierced through the clamor of drums and cheers, sharp and shrill as only a child’s could be. His expression remained one of smug superiority—as if he were conferring an honor upon the man himself.

Even amidst the noise and bustle, that small, piercing voice reached Zhu Ping’an’s ears. Curious, he turned his head toward the sound.

The pudgy boy smirked, folding his arms and looking pleased as Zhu Ping’an’s gaze met his. Then, turning to his friends, he raised his chin even higher—a silent See? I told you so.

Zhu Ping'an's brows lifted slightly in surprise. "Oh? What are you doing here?" he asked with a faint smile from atop his horse.

That single sentence was enough to make the boy's round face glow with pride. Did you hear that? he wanted to shout. He's surprised! He's happy to see me! In his mind, Zhu Ping'an's tone was proof of admiration and longing, a dream come true for the scholar who had once been just a humble "country bumpkin."

Around them, the other children were beside themselves with excitement. The "Number One Scholar"—the Star of Literature descended from the heavens—had looked right at them! Their families had told them that the top scholar was a blessed star incarnate, a celestial being. To see him in person was like meeting a living god.

The boy—Li Yangong, as the others called him—soaked up their admiration like a sponge. His chest puffed out until it seemed he might float away.

"I'm just wandering around," he replied coolly, folding his arms again, as if being addressed by the top scholar were nothing special.

Then, to the astonishment of all, Zhu Ping'an guided his horse closer, smiling warmly. "It's dangerous to stand around in the street. Come on, hop up. I'll take you home."

For a moment, the pudgy boy's brain nearly stopped working. His round face lit up like a lantern. He's going to let me ride with him! The country bumpkin brother-in-law had become a hero of the capital—a man admired by tens of thousands—and now, he was going to share in that glory! He imagined the look on his friends' faces, their envy burning like torches.

He was just about to feign reluctance, planning to say something like, Oh well, I suppose I'll give you this one chance, when Zhu Ping'an suddenly reached out a hand toward him.

He must be thrilled that I called him brother-in-law, the boy thought smugly as he lifted his chubby little hand, preparing to be lifted onto the horse.

But before he could react further, a soft, sweet voice chimed from beside him.

"Brother-in-law~!"

A blur of pink and white shot forward—and the next thing everyone knew, the adorable little girl from before was already sitting safely in Zhu Ping'an's arms atop the horse, smiling sweetly.

The pudgy boy froze. His outstretched hands hung in midair as his mind went blank. What... just happened?

Zhu Ping'an gently adjusted the little girl on his lap and chided softly, "Niuniu, why did you run out here? There are so many people—it's dangerous. What if you got lost?"

With one arm holding the tiny girl securely, Zhu Ping'an tugged the reins with the other. The tall horse neighed softly and began to move forward again, its tail swishing just close enough to almost brush the stunned boy's round face.

Laughter erupted from the other children.

"Hahaha! Li Yángong's full of hot air!"

"The cow's flying in the sky because Li Yángong's blowing it from below!"

"Hahaha! He didn't even look at you! You liar, you braggart!"

The pudgy boy's face twisted through a rainbow of emotions—shock, outrage, humiliation. His round cheeks quivered as he glared after the departing horse. You bumpkin! Are you blind? How dare you ignore me, Li Yángong! Just you wait!

But just as his resentment reached its peak, Zhu Ping'an suddenly pulled the reins again, stopping the horse after only a few steps. He turned his head slightly and called back, his tone firm yet kind:

“Li Yángong! Go home with the attendants at once. I’ll be checking your homework later!”

The words hit the boy like a thunderclap. His sulky face instantly bloomed with joy, the clouds of embarrassment swept away. Straightening his back, he shouted after the retreating figure with all the pride he could muster, “Yes, sir!”

The laughter around him fell silent.

Meanwhile, the image of Zhu Ping’an riding tall and elegant through the streets, a little girl nestled in his arms, etched itself deeply into the hearts of every onlooker. To the young women lining the streets—the maidens and newlyweds of the capital—it was a sight of irresistible tenderness.

A scholar so gifted, yet so gentle with a child—how could any heart not flutter?

One after another, embroidered handkerchiefs and silk sachets rained down toward him like petals in the wind, accompanied by coy, suggestive words.

Though couched in flowery metaphors like “The spring breeze arrives—let the wild geese carry my letters,” their meaning was all too clear.

In modern terms, it was no different from shouting:

“Top Scholar, marry me!”

or

“Top Scholar, I want to bear your children!”

The grand procession wound through the main streets of the capital before turning toward the Marquis of Linhuai’s residence—the home of Zhu Ping’an. As the stately entourage arrived, fireworks and drums erupted in celebration.

Zhu Ping’an dismounted gracefully, then lifted the little girl from the saddle. After bidding farewell to the officials who had accompanied him, he led her through the ornate gates of the Linhuai Marquisate, disappearing into the courtyard as the cheers echoed behind him.

Chapter 364: The Battle Within the Inner Chambers

The sunlight was warm and golden, flooding the capital in a radiant glow. The once-bustling streets were gradually quieting down, as the crowds dispersed and people returned to their homes, still savoring the grand spectacle of the top scholar’s triumphant parade.

“Hehe... Who would have thought, brother-in-law looked quite dashing on horseback today,” the Sixth Young Miss of the Marquis’s household said airily as they made their way back toward the rear courtyard.

At her words, Li Shu pursed her delicate lips and waved a hand with a coquettish little huff. “Dashing, you say? Hmph. He looked more like a boiled toad than a handsome scholar.”

Her teasing remark drew laughter from the other young ladies walking with them toward the inner courtyard.

“Pfft... Fifth Sister, really now,” the Second Young Miss chuckled, her laughter like the tinkling of silver bells. “How can you make such jokes? Calling your future husband a boiled toad—oh heavens! He’s the zhuangyuan lang, the top scholar in all the land! Do you know how many women envy you? Didn’t you see the crowd today? Even the well-bred young ladies forgot their decorum when they saw him pass. You must cherish your good fortune.”

As she spoke, the Second Young Miss gently clasped Li Shu’s hand, her tone full of sisterly affection and gentle advice.

“Hmph! A smelly toad—what’s there to cherish? Whoever wants him can have him!” Li Shu turned her head away in mock defiance, her rosy lips pouting adorably. The white-swan earrings dangling from her soft pink earlobes swayed lightly with her movements, catching the sunlight in a dazzling shimmer.

A girl calling him a toad while wearing swans upon her ears—what an amusing contradiction...

“Now, now, Sister,” another young lady said with a teasing smile, her slender brows arched like willow leaves, “you shouldn’t talk that way. We women must still rely on our menfolk for our livelihood. Remember, there are no eternal Diao Chans, nor immortal Xi Shis in this world.”

The sisters glided along the path in their flowing silk gowns, sleeves fluttering, laughter mingling with the sound of rustling fabric. The air was filled with warmth and intimacy, the easy closeness of family. Behind them trailed the maids and older attendants, walking a respectful distance away as the lively group made its way toward the rear court.

Meanwhile, Zhu Ping’an had just returned to his guest quarters when several visitors arrived one after another, leaving him no chance to rest. Even the Marquis of Linhuai himself deigned to come, offering a few words of advice about official conduct.

In short, he told Zhu Ping’an to observe more and speak less, for the more one says, the more mistakes one makes; the less one says, the fewer errors there will be; and if one says nothing at all, one cannot be wrong. Before departing, the Marquis added that Zhu Ping’an should seize any opportunity to become closer to the Yan family.

After the Marquis left, gifts began to arrive in steady succession. The Old Madam, the First Madam, and the Second Madam each sent their congratulations—fine inkstones, gilded brushes made from wolf hair... and of course, the customary red envelopes.

Zhu Ping’an expressed his gratitude to each sender in turn, rewarding the messengers modestly. Though the amounts were not large, the servants went away smiling, pleased to have been remembered.

When the stream of visitors finally ebbed, quiet returned to the guest room. Zhu Ping'an changed out of his ceremonial robes into plain clothes, intending at last to rest. But before long, more footsteps sounded outside.

"Hehe... I caught Gong'er sneaking away to avoid his lessons, so I've brought him here to Brother-in-law."

The Sixth Young Miss entered with a cheerful smile. Her round, rosy face framed a pair of mischievous dimples, and when she laughed, two small tiger teeth peeked out adorably. In one slender jade-like hand, she held the pudgy hand of a little boy—her younger brother, the mischievous heir—looking every bit the image of a caring elder sister.

She had changed into a new gown, similar in style to the one Li Shu had worn earlier that morning, though tailored a touch more closely to her figure. A tassel hung from her waist, swaying with each graceful step, accentuating the gentle curve of her body—a perfect blend of ladylike grace and youthful allure.

"I just wanted to take a nap before coming..." the boy muttered his protest, puffing up his cheeks. Sixth Sister could really be unreasonable—dragging him out of bed in the middle of his nap!

"Hush now, you naughty thing," she scolded softly, crouching down to stroke his chubby cheek with a hand as fair as snow. "Be good and study with Brother-in-law. He's the top scholar, you know."

Because she had crouched down directly in front of Zhu Ping'an, her neckline dipped slightly, revealing a glimpse of pale skin—a graceful neck and the delicate curve of her collarbone glowing faintly in the afternoon light.

“Brother-in-law, you’ll be checking Gong’er’s lessons today, won’t you?”

When she lifted her head to speak, more of that soft, white skin was visible. With a natural motion, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, revealing a red “carp-leaping-the-dragon-gate” earring that sparkled like a tiny flame.

Her long lashes fluttered as she looked up, her round face glowing with youth, a touch of rouge upon her lips. Her large, limpid eyes shimmered with girlish playfulness, and the faintest hint of perfume lingered between her soft breaths.

Pure, innocent... yet irresistibly charming.

For a man unfamiliar with women, such a scene would have been utterly disarming. Even a seasoned libertine from the pleasure quarters might have found his composure shaken.

But Zhu Ping’an—he had seen countless such faces before, though only through the sterile glow of a computer screen. Teachers, flight attendants, next-door girls... In the modern world of short skirts and bare shoulders, the Sixth Young Miss’s modest display was almost quaint. A glimpse of the neck—hardly scandalous at all.

Thus, to him, her unconscious allure was nothing remarkable. His expression didn't so much as flicker, as if he were merely watching the sunrise—an everyday occurrence.

“Yes,” Zhu Ping'an said simply, nodding before lowering his gaze to search through the stack of papers containing the boy's assignments.

He didn't even blink!

The Sixth Young Miss bit her lower lip faintly. Not enough, is it? she thought. Lowering her gaze, she began to scheme. She already had several plans in mind—ways to make her rustic brother-in-law remember her.

Then let's see how proud that Fifth Sister remains! A country bumpkin like her—how could she ever be fit to become the wife of the imperial top scholar?

“Broth—”

She had barely begun to speak when her voice faltered abruptly. For standing before her was none other than that “country bumpkin” herself—Fifth Sister, Li Shu.

A flush of guilt rushed to her cheeks. Her breath quickened; even her slender frame trembled slightly.

Li Shu stood there with a pleasant smile, her jet-black eyes glinting with amusement as they swept up and down her younger sister. Her gaze paused briefly at the Sixth Miss's collar, and the corners of her lips curved upward.

"Why... Sister, what's wrong? Your face is so red. Are you feeling unwell?" Li Shu's voice was soft, teasingly sweet, yet her eyes gleamed with playful mischief.

"Ahem... perhaps I caught a chill while accompanying you earlier," the Sixth Miss replied, covering her lips with an embroidered handkerchief as she gave two dainty coughs.

"Oh my, you caught a chill? You should be resting in your chamber, dear Sister," Li Shu said with mock concern, her eyes flickering slyly. "You must take better care of yourself. What brings you here in such a state?"

"Thank you for your concern, Elder Sister. It's nothing serious," the Sixth Miss answered with a gentle smile. "I merely found Gong'er being naughty outside, and since Father has often said he should study under Brother-in-law, I brought him here myself. Also, I thought it rude to come empty-handed, so I had the maid prepare some sweet soup for them—something to soothe the throat after studying."

Her voice was soft and honeyed, her smile serene—like a portrait of gentle sisterly virtue.

“Is that so? How thoughtful of you,” Li Shu replied sweetly, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly. “You know, I have quite the weakness for sweets myself. Perhaps, dear Sister, you might ask your maid to send a bowl to my courtyard as well, so that I may taste this lovely dessert?”

“Why, of course, Sister,” the Sixth Miss said with a demure smile, half-hiding her lips behind her handkerchief. “I had already planned to send a portion to each of you—only, I thought it better to wait until you had rested from your outing.”

“Then I must thank you, Sister,” Li Shu said, smiling gracefully. But within her dark eyes, a fleeting spark of cold light flashed and was gone.

Chapter 365: An Unexpected Change

“Fufu... don’t laugh at your elder sister, little one. The moment I laid eyes on these sweets, I simply had to try them. You wouldn’t mind, would you?”

Li Shu’s eyes, dark as ink and glimmering with playful mischief, swept slowly over the Sixth Miss of the Marquis’ household. Her rosy lips curved into a teasing smile, and a light, musical laugh spilled from between them—sweet and deliberate, like the sound of jade chimes brushing in the wind.

Before the Sixth Miss could even respond, Li Shu moved gracefully past her, stopping before the little maidservant who had been carrying the dessert tray. With a casual flick of her slender fingers—those pale, delicate hands like carved white jade—she lifted the porcelain bowl of sweet soup and held it in her own hands. Then she turned her gaze back to the Sixth Miss, eyes glistening with innocent curiosity.

“Since my dear sister is so generous, how could I possibly refuse? I’m ever so grateful,” the Sixth Miss replied, her voice soft but taut with restrained irritation. Her fair face flushed pale and red by turns, and she quickly lifted her embroidered handkerchief to hide the tension in her lips.

Of course, that was only what she said. What she truly felt was another matter entirely. But Li Shu, her face blooming like a spring flower, didn’t seem to care in the slightest. Whatever resentment might have flickered in the Sixth Miss’s heart mattered little—appearances were all that Li Shu desired.

Hearing the polite response, Li Shu’s smile deepened. With practiced grace, she lifted the spoon, parting her lips slightly. The curve of her mouth was soft, alluring, almost intimate. She took a spoonful of the sweet soup, savoring it slowly before closing her eyes in quiet satisfaction, the faintest hum of pleasure slipping past her lips.

“My dear sister truly has such thoughtful taste,” Li Shu murmured with a smile. “This sweet soup is quite divine—your elder sister can hardly put it down. But since it was prepared especially for someone else, I shouldn’t rob another of their share.”

Her eyes gleamed as she turned. With poised elegance, she carried the bowl toward Zhu Ping’an, setting it gently before him.

“Someone is quite lucky today,” she said softly, her tone laced with subtle meaning. “Its flavor reminds me of that bai honey drink I once let you try when we were children... don’t waste it now.”

The bowl made a faint, deliberate clink as it touched the table—a sound that carried weight.

At the mention of “bai,” Zhu Ping’an’s gaze dropped instinctively to the bowl. Memories stirred within him: back in his school days, Li Shu had once bribed him with that same drink so he would tell her stories. It wasn’t ordinary honey—it was a rare, specially brewed nectar, the ancient world’s answer to cola or lemonade. The taste had burned itself into his memory ever since.

So when she mentioned that this sweet soup tasted like “bai,” his tongue couldn’t help but tingle in anticipation.

Though he hadn’t intended to eat it before, temptation won. He picked up the spoon and took a sip.

But the moment the flavor hit his tongue, disappointment followed. This was nothing like that childhood drink—worlds apart, in fact. It was pleasant enough, yes, but utterly different.

He sighed quietly, setting the spoon back into the bowl with a faint clatter, deciding to leave the rest for later.

Li Shu, however, noticed. As Zhu Ping’an lifted the spoon she had used moments ago, a faint blush colored her cheeks. Her dark eyes sparkled with something bright and unspoken—triumph, perhaps. When her gaze drifted toward the Sixth Miss, the light in her eyes became dazzling.

Yifu... no, that woman...!

The Sixth Miss's thoughts roiled with indignation. A shameless country hussy! From her tone, she was clearly flirting with her brother-in-law since childhood! And now—right before my eyes—she lets him use the same spoon she just touched? That's practically... a kiss! The audacity! The indecency!

Her grip on the embroidered handkerchief tightened until her knuckles whitened, the silk nearly tearing in her grasp.

In her mind, Li Shu—standing there radiant, smiling like a fox-spirit who'd stolen the moonlight—was no longer a guest of the house but a brazen, scheming seductress. The Sixth Miss conveniently forgot her own earlier posturing, of course.

Zhu Ping'an, oblivious to the silent storm brewing between the two women, was simply following an old habit. Back when they were younger, he often ate whatever Li Shu brought him, even using her utensils. In the countryside, such small details had never mattered, and over the years, it had become second nature.

But to the Sixth Miss, the sight was scandalous—as shocking as if she were witnessing something indecent in broad daylight.

After a brief, strained while, both women exchanged a few more polite, hollow words before finally taking their leave. Yet, before departing, Li Shu smiled once more and gently reminded the Sixth Miss to send a bowl of the sweet soup to her courtyard later—“so that she might savor its flavor properly.”

And indeed, not long after Li Shu returned to her quarters, the Sixth Miss sent her maid—the same little attendant from before—to deliver a bowl of the dessert.

“Fifth Miss,” the maid said stiffly, “my mistress asked me to bring this over. You won’t find such sweets in the countryside. If you like it, she said you may have as much as you please.”

Her tone dripped with false courtesy, her smile sharp with disdain. She and her mistress shared one heart—and one grudge. Every word carried the faintest sting, mocking Li Shu’s rural origins and contrasting them with the refinement of a noblewoman from the capital.

“Oh? Is that so? Then please, do thank your Sixth Miss for me,” Li Shu replied sweetly, as though she hadn’t heard the hidden barb at all. Her smile was as calm as moonlight.

“Hua’er, bring it here. I’d like to try it right away.”

The little maid Baozi hurried forward, taking the bowl from the visitor’s hands and placing it before her mistress. Li Shu seemed quite taken with the dessert—her eyes gleamed with genuine curiosity as she reached out to lift the spoon.

But just then, something unexpected happened.

Perhaps her eagerness betrayed her; perhaps her hands trembled ever so slightly. The porcelain spoon slipped from her fingers, striking the floor with a sharp, brittle crack.

The maid who had brought it gasped softly, instinctively looking down. The delicate spoon had broken cleanly in two.

As she lowered her gaze, Li Shu smiled faintly. Her expression remained composed, even gentle, though a subtle flicker of cunning passed through her dark eyes. With an almost imperceptible movement of her fingers, she brushed the air lightly—then lifted her chin and spoke with unbothered poise.

“It’s quite all right. My hand slipped, that’s all. No need to worry. We’ll simply fetch another spoon.”

She turned to her own maid. “Hua’er, bring me the silver spoon.”

A few moments later, the little maid returned with a gleaming, finely engraved spoon of pure silver. Li Shu accepted it with a soft laugh.

“No wonder the first one broke. It must have been heaven’s will,” she said with a teasing smile. “After all, only silver is worthy of my dear sister’s exquisite craftsmanship.”

The visiting maid nearly rolled her eyes. Silver spoons? Is that supposed to impress me? In the Marquis’ household, even golden spoons were commonplace. What a country bumpkin, she thought bitterly. So proud over a bit of silver.

But her disdain froze on her lips the next instant.

As she watched, Li Shu dipped the silver spoon into the bowl, stirring it slowly, gracefully. The surface of the sweet soup rippled, catching the light. Then, when Li Shu lifted the spoon again—

—the shining silver had turned black.

It darkened swiftly, spreading like ink through water, until the entire spoon was stained a deep, ominous shade—black as night.

The maid's eyes widened in horror. The transformation was unmistakable.

And Li Shu, still smiling faintly, gazed down at the spoon in her hand, her dark lashes lowering slightly over eyes that gleamed with cold knowing. The sweetness of her expression remained, but beneath it, something sharper, more dangerous, flickered to life.

Chapter 366: Questioning

The polished silver spoon, once gleaming like freshly fallen snow, suddenly turned pitch black—so unmistakably dark that it could not be ignored.

“Miss! Don’t drink it... it’s poisoned!” the little maid Baozi cried out, her voice trembling with terror. She had just watched her young mistress scoop up the sweet porridge, only to see the silver spoon darken in her hand.

Li Shu seemed entirely oblivious to the change. She rolled her eyes at the panicked maid and, with a teasing pout, said, “Nonsense! This is the sweet porridge my dear Sixth Sister carefully prepared for me.”

With that, she lifted the spoon toward her cherry-red lips, ready to taste the sweet concoction.

“Really! Look! The silver spoon has turned black! Poisoned things turn black!”

Baozi’s little hands shot out, grabbing her mistress’s delicate fingers, her round face drained of color as panic gripped her. She could not bear to see Miss Li Shu drink the porridge.

Finally, following Baozi’s frantic warning, Li Shu’s gaze drifted downward, resting on the spoon in her hand. Her eyes widened as if she had just witnessed the most unbelievable sight. The water-bright pupils shimmered like rippling pools, and her rose-colored lips parted slightly in an astonished “Ah!”

With a heavy clink, she set the sweet porridge down on the table, her gaze now shifting to the maid who had brought it.

From that moment, the entire world seemed to shift in the eyes of the little maid.

The Fifth Miss, usually as radiant as a spring peach and soft with gentle smiles, now looked at her as if a winter frost had descended, her gaze cold enough to bite.

“Hehe... don’t be afraid. Come, tell me—what exactly is going on here?” Li Shu toyed with the blackened silver spoon in her slender fingers, smiling sweetly, though her tone carried a chilling undertone. “Why, my dear sister, would you send me a bowl of poisoned porridge?”

Her smile, which might have seemed kind at another time, only made the chill more severe.

“It wasn’t Miss,” the maid who had delivered the porridge said repeatedly, shaking her head, her voice quivering.

“Oh? Hehe... so the sweet porridge grew legs and ran to me on its own?” Li Shu’s eyes glinted with a cold, mocking amusement.

“No, no, that’s not what I mean!” the maid protested again, her words tumbling out in panic.

“Oh? Then what exactly do you mean?” Li Shu’s red lips curved lightly, smiling as if coaxing a secret.

“I mean... my lady did not poison it,” the maid explained, shaking her head.

“Oh? Your lady did not poison it, huh,” Li Shu repeated, nodding slowly.

The maid’s head nodded frantically in relief, only to feel her heart seize the next moment.

“The sweet porridge was brought by you. Your lady did not poison it. But the porridge itself is poisoned... so that means you did it?” Li Shu suddenly stood, a cold laugh escaping her lips as she fixed her gaze on the trembling maid.

“Ah! So it was you who poisoned it! Why would you dare harm my lady?” Baozi shrieked, her round eyes blazing with indignation, itching to jump at the maid and tear her apart.

“No... no... I didn’t!” the maid stammered, her face as pale as paper, vehemently denying the accusation.

“Ridiculous. You brought the sweet porridge. Your lady didn’t poison it. You didn’t either. So... does that mean I poisoned it myself?” Li Shu’s cold laugh cut through the air.

The poor maid’s head bobbed and shook in a dizzying, panicked dance, until she herself seemed utterly confused.

“Ah, so you little minx are stubborn, huh? Fine, if you refuse to drink willingly, let’s try some punishment wine. If I allow someone to harm me and do nothing, who knows how much worse it could get!” Li Shu’s expression hardened, and her voice dropped to a chilling command: “Bring this treacherous little wretch who tried to harm her mistress here and bind her.”

“Send a message to my dear Sixth Sister. I want to ask her myself, see if there’s been some misunderstanding.”

“And fetch my Great Aunt to arbitrate. I traveled all the way from the South, and thanks to the protection of the elders, I’ve avoided a lonely, helpless life. My heart is grateful... but today, I merely wished to enjoy a bowl of sweet porridge, yet I was nearly poisoned. If Great Aunt cannot stand for me, I dare not stay in this residence any longer.”

“Bring Second Sister, Third Sister, and Fourth Sister here, quickly! I’ve heard that Liu wanted to give each of us a portion of sweet porridge. I was lucky... but if anything happens to my three sisters, I could not bear to live.”

The maids and housekeepers in Li Shu’s courtyard were poised and ready, eager to act. As soon as Li Shu finished her instructions, each set about executing her orders in perfect, disciplined coordination, eager to prove themselves before their mistress.

The maid who had delivered the sweet porridge was seized by two housekeepers, her arms twisted behind her back, and dragged into the courtyard, tied firmly to a tree.

Soon, the Lady of the Linhuai Marquis arrived, accompanied by several maids and housekeepers, entering Li Shu's courtyard. Shortly after, Second, Third, and Fourth Misses arrived as well, each escorted by their own attendants.

"Great Aunt, you must stand for me! Just now, I nearly—nearly wouldn't have seen you again... I only asked Sixth Sister for a bowl of sweet porridge, and yet... yet someone poisoned it..."

Li Shu, seeing the Lady of Linhuai arrive, hurried over with timid, skittish steps, wrapping her arms around the elder lady's arm in a display of helpless fragility. Her watery eyes were blurred with unshed tears, as if any moment she might break down completely.

At that very moment, Sixth Miss of the Marquis' household arrived, escorted by her maids. Her presence immediately cut off Li Shu's lamentation, her expression full of righteous indignation.

"Fifth Sister! I was only trying to give you sweet porridge! Why accuse me of poisoning you?"

The onlookers' gazes shifted instantly to Li Shu, eager to see how she would respond.

"Why would you say that, little sister? When did I ever claim the poison came from you?" Li Shu looked at Sixth Miss, her expression full of bewilderment, as if she could not fathom why the younger girl would speak so. Then, with moist eyes, she turned to the Lady of Linhuai and the other sisters:

“I never said the poison came from her, Great Aunt. Second Sister, did you hear me say otherwise?”

Under Li Shu’s watchful gaze, the Lady of Linhuai and the others shook their heads. Indeed, Li Shu had only recounted the facts: she asked Sixth Sister for a bowl of sweet porridge and it had been poisoned, without ever naming the culprit.

Seeing their denial, Li Shu’s lips curved ever so slightly. She bowed gracefully to the Lady of Linhuai before gliding over to Sixth Miss, her dark eyes fixed unblinkingly on her.

“You’ve seen it too, little sister. Great Aunt and the elder sisters have testified on my behalf. Earlier it was nothing, but now... thinking carefully about what you said, I want to ask—why claim I accused you of poisoning me? Could it be that you know something...”

“Sis... sister, why say such things? I feel so wronged...” Sixth Miss’s soft, round face looked injured and pitiful, her big eyes glimmering with hurt.

“What did I say? I only asked! If your elder sister nearly had her life taken by poison, is it forbidden to ask a single question?” Li Shu’s eyes glistened further with misty emotion.

“You...” Sixth Miss faltered, speechless.

“Shu’er, Zhu’er, stop arguing. One at a time, calmly. Shu’er, you first,” the Lady of Linhuai intervened.

Li Shu had Baozi fetch the sweet porridge and the spoon from her room, placing them in view of all. Then, standing before the bound maid, she asked four questions:

Did you bring this sweet porridge?

After you delivered it, did it ever leave your sight?

Did I, in front of you, notice the spoon turning black when I scooped it?

Did you poison it?

For the first three questions, the maid nodded vigorously. For the fourth, she shook her head with equal force.

“Great Aunt, I have no more questions. Please stand for me,” Li Shu said, her gaze settling silently on the Lady of Linhuai.

Chapter 367: The Fiery One

Li Shu's four simple questions hadn't directly accused anyone of poisoning her sweet soup—but when one connected those questions together, then combined them with the servant girl's earlier answers, the implication became glaringly clear. No matter how one looked at it, this bowl of poisoned dessert was inseparable from the Sixth Young Miss.

At that moment, silence spoke louder than words.

The reasoning was straightforward—trivial even—certainly not enough to stump the Sixth Miss.

And so, the Sixth Miss's indignation swelled all the more. Her heart burned with both grievance and fury. Do they think I'm a fool? she fumed inwardly. How could I possibly poison the very dessert that I sent over myself? If I truly wanted to poison someone, I'd never choose a time when the trail could so easily lead back to me!

"Fifth Sister, you're wronging me!" she protested, her round face full of wounded innocence. "I went with our elder sisters to watch Brother-in-law's ceremonial parade today. Thinking of how tired everyone must be, I simply had the servants make several bowls of sweet soup—one for each of you."

Her soft voice trembled, and her eyes darted toward the other sisters for support. "Elder Sisters, please, tell me—did any of your bowls taste of poison?"

Second Miss and the others all shook their heads, murmuring that their portions had been perfectly fine.

That was all the proof Sixth Miss needed. Her confidence returned, puffing up her delicate chest. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glistening with tears that brimmed just enough to make her look heartbreakingly wronged. “Fifth Sister, you see? Everyone else’s sweet soup was just fine. So why—why was yours the only one poisoned? Why is it that others are unharmed, yet trouble only finds you?”

Indeed—why only her? Why was she so special?

Her words, honeyed yet sharp, turned every gaze in the room toward Li Shu.

Li Shu tilted her head slightly, her long lashes fluttering. “Yes,” she said softly, her voice laced with quiet wonder. “I find it strange too. Why would my dear sister’s dessert be perfectly fine for everyone else, yet only mine turns out to be poisoned?”

She had clearly anticipated this line of defense. Her tone was light, even innocent, but her eyes gleamed with sharp intelligence. Following Sixth Miss’s reasoning, she sighed softly, a note of sorrow in her voice.

Then, as though a sudden thought struck her, she turned her dark, expressive eyes upon Sixth Miss and asked with feigned hesitation, “Sister, have I ever done something to displease you? If I’ve offended you somehow, please tell me. I’ll change—truly, I will.”

The shift was subtle but devastating. What had begun as Sixth Miss’s attempt to clear her name had been turned against her, her own words wielded as a weapon.

“You—who said I poisoned you?” Sixth Miss sputtered, panic rising in her throat.

“Oh? So the soup isn’t poisoned after all?” Li Shu widened her eyes, her lips curving into a bright smile. “Then it must be that I, a country bumpkin, mistook something harmless for poison. Why don’t you try it, dear Sister? If it tastes fine, I’ll kneel and beg your pardon.”

Her black eyes gleamed with sly amusement as she lifted the bowl. The silver spoon inside had already blackened from contact with the poison, but her tone was as sweet as spring blossoms as she offered it to Sixth Miss’s lips.

The younger girl’s eyes widened in horror. The spoon—its darkened surface glinting ominously under the lantern light—was proof enough. She stumbled backward, shaking her head furiously.

Even the other young ladies grew tense, their faces pale.

“Why shy away, Sister?” Li Shu’s laughter chimed like a silver bell. “Didn’t you say it was harmless? Come now, have a taste.”

“Shu’er, stop this nonsense!” cried the Marchioness of Linhuai, her voice edged with worry.

But Li Shu acted as though she hadn't heard. The bowl in her hand edged ever closer to Sixth Miss's trembling lips—so close that the scent of the sweet soup mingled with the girl's terrified breath.

Sixth Miss went completely white. Death was suddenly so near she could almost taste it. Reflex overtook reason—she screamed and slapped the bowl away.

It crashed to the floor. Porcelain shattered. The poisoned soup splattered across the polished wood—and before everyone's eyes, the floorboards began to sizzle and corrode, leaving dark, ugly marks.

A collective gasp filled the air.

If it could eat through the floor like that—what would it have done to someone's insides?

The young ladies shrank back, their painted faces drained of color. Sixth Miss, sheltered and pampered all her life, was struck dumb by horror. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stared at the ruined floor, trembling from head to toe.

"No wonder you refused to drink," Li Shu said coldly, her lips curling into a mocking smile. "You already knew the soup was poisoned, didn't you, Sister?"

"I—I didn't know! It wasn't me!" Sixth Miss sobbed, her tears tracing silver lines down her flushed cheeks.

“Oh? Not you?” Li Shu’s gaze flicked toward the trembling maid tied to the tree. “Then it must’ve been her, hmm?”

“Shu’er, don’t be rash.” The Marchioness stepped forward, trying to calm the storm. “Let your aunt investigate properly. I’m sure the sweet soup passed through many hands before reaching you. We’ll find the truth, I promise.”

“Dear Aunt,” Li Shu replied evenly, bowing respectfully, “when it’s a matter of life and death, how can I not be anxious? Today it was a poisoned dessert—tomorrow it could be the food or even the water. I can’t gamble the life my parents gave me on someone’s mercy.”

She straightened gracefully after her bow, her expression composed but her eyes gleaming with quiet fury. Then she turned toward her small maid. “Hua’er, bring me my riding whip.”

The onlookers exchanged puzzled glances—until realization dawned.

The young maid quickly fetched the whip. Li Shu took it in hand, the leather coiling and snapping as she flicked her wrist. The crisp crack of it striking the ground sliced through the tense silence. Then, step by deliberate step, she walked toward the bound servant girl.

“Tell me,” she said softly, lifting the girl’s chin with the handle of the whip. “Who poisoned the soup?”

Sixth Miss tensed immediately, her heart pounding. If that girl names me...

"I don't know! No one poisoned it!" the servant stammered, shaking her head violently.

Sixth Miss exhaled shakily, relief washing through her. It was the same instinctive fear that an innocent person feels when the police enter a bus after a theft—terrified that guilt might somehow land on them regardless of the truth.

But before her relief could settle, the whip cracked again.

A scream tore through the courtyard.

And there stood Li Shu—smiling, calm, her riding boots gleaming under the sun as she wielded the whip with easy grace.

In that moment, every young lady present would forever remember her not as the gentle, lovely Fifth Miss, but as a figure both fierce and unforgettable.

They had all punished servants before—slaps, pinches, the prick of a hairpin—but this... this was something else entirely. Li Shu's whip drew blood and fear alike.

"Another chance," Li Shu said, voice smooth as silk. "Who poisoned the soup?"

Her tone was soft, but her eyes were cold. She even used the handle of her whip to tuck a loose strand of hair behind the servant's ear, a gesture of such false tenderness that it made everyone's blood run cold.

The girl whimpered, shrinking back as far as the ropes allowed, shaking her head and sobbing. "I—I really don't know... please..."

Li Shu smiled faintly. "So stubborn. Very well, let's ask a different question—was it you who poisoned it?"

The girl's eyes widened in terror, then she cried out, "No! It wasn't me!"

"Oh? Not you?" Li Shu nodded thoughtfully, her smile never wavering. Then she turned to Sixth Miss. "Sister, she says it wasn't her."

The meaning in her words was unmistakable.

If it wasn't the servant... then who else could it be?

Sixth Miss froze. Her body trembled as Li Shu advanced, the whip trailing behind her, its tip tracing a thin black line along the ground. The memory of the crack of that whip, the scream that followed—it all came rushing back, suffocating her.

How can someone from the countryside be this terrifying? she thought wildly. When Brother-in-law once joked that he could 'whip poetry out of her,' I thought it was just a jest—but now... now I'm not so sure.

No, no more. I can't take this—she's too violent, too frightening. Forget the status, forget the scholar—just give me a gentle man like Young Master Wei...

The Sixth Miss broke down completely, her delicate face pale as snow, tears streaming down like petals in the rain—fragile, beautiful, and utterly pitiful.

Chapter 368: Little Sister, Don't Cry

"Don't cry, little sister. Elder Sister won't hit you."

Through the glimmering veil of Sixth Miss's tear-streaked face, Li Shu stepped forward, her movements calm and graceful, her voice soft as silk. She reached out her slender jade-like hand to wipe away the tears that clung to the corners of the young girl's eyes.

But the moment her hand moved closer, Sixth Miss's tears fell even harder, streaming down her cheeks like broken pearls.

"It's all right now, little sister, don't cry. See? Elder Sister has thrown the whip away." Li Shu spoke in the gentle tone of an older sister soothing a frightened child, and with a flick of her wrist, she let the riding whip fall to the floor with a dull thud.

Seeing this, Sixth Miss finally began to quiet down. Yet the sobs that escaped her lips came in hiccupping waves, her shoulders trembling—she had cried too much to stop all at once.

"There, there, no more tears," Li Shu murmured as she reached out and drew Sixth Miss into her embrace, her voice as tender as the wind that brushes against early spring petals.

To the onlookers, Li Shu was the very image of a gentle and magnanimous elder sister—soft-hearted, compassionate, willing to forgive the younger girl's mistake after witnessing her pitiful tears.

The Marchioness of Linhuai, who had been wringing her hands moments earlier, fretting over how to end the scene without offense, finally relaxed. Her worries eased as she watched Li Shu comfort the crying girl. After all, Li Shu's betrothed, Zhu Ping'an, had just earned the title of zhuangyuan—the top scholar of the imperial examinations. If Li Shu had chosen to make a scene, things could have become politically delicate, and the Marchioness herself would not have been able to openly defend her own daughter, Zhu'er.

Fortunately, Li Shu had known when to stop.

In everyone's eyes, her tenderness continued to shine.

After murmuring a few more soothing words, Li Shu slowly lowered her head, her expression soft and full of warmth as she leaned close to Sixth Miss's ear. Her red lips curved faintly, brushing against the younger girl's cheek as she whispered, her voice gentle enough to be mistaken for comfort.

Li Shu's tone was so tender that no one else could hear what she said—only Sixth Miss could catch those quiet words meant just for her.

"Don't cry anymore, little sister," Li Shu cooed, her breath warm against the trembling girl's ear. "If one cries too much... sometimes, it can lead to death. Tell me, have you ever heard a story from the Three Kingdoms period? There was a warlord named Yuan Shu—does that name sound familiar, little sister? Yuan Shu had a concubine, a young woman surnamed Feng. She was beautiful beyond words—her face round and luminous, her eyes large and bright, fufu fufu—why, she looked almost exactly like you. A true beauty, a fragrance to rival the flowers of the nation. And, what a coincidence... she too was from the North, just like you."

"The girl surnamed Feng had fled south to Yangzhou, escaping chaos in the North. Yuan Shu's family hailed from the South—oh, just like Zhu Ping'an's, you see? A southern man. Feng was so breathtakingly lovely that when Yuan Shu caught sight of her, he spent a thousand gold coins to buy her and brought her into his household as his concubine. She was so radiant, so exquisitely fair, that all the women in Yuan Shu's rear courtyard paled in comparison. Naturally, Yuan Shu doted on her day and night, unable to tear himself away."

"Such indulgence, of course, bred jealousy. The other women of the household festered with envy, though they hid it behind smiles. They devised a plan. They smothered their bitterness and began treating Concubine Feng with feigned affection. They laughed with her, shared their food and trinkets, and whenever Yuan Shu bestowed them with some rare treasure, they eagerly handed it over to her without complaint—treating her

even better than Yuan Shu himself did. Anyone's heart would melt under such warmth. And so, Concubine Feng's guard fell, and she came to see them as her dear sisters. The courtyard appeared harmonious, a tranquil paradise where Yuan Shu enjoyed the blessings of many wives without discord."

"And as good sisters do, they talked about everything—nothing was too secret to share. The other women constantly praised Concubine Feng's beauty, but in the same breath, they whispered their worries about the future. They would sigh and say, 'Beauty fades, dear sister. No woman's face can stay forever young. Today you hold the master's heart, tomorrow you may still dazzle him... but what about five years later? Ten years later? Our lord seeks to rule all under heaven. New beauties will come to his side one after another. Can you still be sure that your face will outshine them all then?'"

"Concubine Feng, poor thing, began to worry. Those women—oh, so helpful, so kind—started giving her advice."

"They told her, 'To hold a man's body, you must first hold his heart. To hold his heart, you must understand his mind. Our lord dreams of conquering the world, so naturally he admires women who share his ambitions. We cannot ride into battle like generals, nor devise strategy like advisors—but we can share his worries for the nation and the people.'"

"So, they said, 'When you are with him, dear sister, you should show concern for the realm. Let your brows crease in worry, let tears fall for the suffering of the people. Our lord will see you as his confidante, his soulmate. Even if new beauties arrive, you will remain the jewel of his heart.'"

"Feng believed them. After all, her sisters had always treated her so well. So each time she was with Yuan Shu, she would sigh, tears glistening in her eyes. 'Nanyang is in drought—the people have no food... how my heart aches!' She would weep. When floods struck Shouchun, she cried again—'Oh, the poor crops, the starving people!' And when plagues spread in Huainan or bandits rose in Fengqiu... every time she heard such

news, she cried and cried, just like you, little sister—sniffling, trembling, your tears like a rain-soaked pear blossom.”

Li Shu’s smile deepened, her voice turning silky and chilling all at once, like a lullaby whispered in the dark. It carried that same eerie cadence Zhu Ping’an once used when telling ghost stories.

“Then, one day, when Yuan Shu was away, the other women took a rope and strangled Concubine Feng to death. They hung her body from the beam of her chamber with a strip of white silk.”

At that, Sixth Miss’s face turned pale as snow. She stiffened in Li Shu’s arms, her body trembling violently. She tried to pull away, but Li Shu’s hold tightened—soft, yet unyielding. Her lips still brushed against the girl’s ear as she continued.

“When Yuan Shu returned and found her hanging there, he was devastated. The women of the rear courtyard told him she had taken her own life—that she had heard of the people’s suffering and could not bear the sorrow, so she hanged herself. Yuan Shu believed it. After all, he had always known her to be a woman of tender heart and constant tears. ‘Feng wept often, her soul weighed by sorrow,’ he said, and so he mourned for several days... and then forgot her.”

Li Shu’s tone softened again, deceptively sweet. “Tell me, little sister... you cry so much. If you cry so hard today, and cry so hard tomorrow... if one day, by some cruel twist of fate, someone jealous of you were to hang you from a beam like Concubine Feng—what would people think then?”

Her words came with a smile, a whisper laced with venom.

“Ah—!”

Sixth Miss could bear it no longer. With a strangled scream, she pushed Li Shu away and stumbled back, her face drained of color as if she had glimpsed a ghost. Then, sobbing and gasping, she turned and fled.

Too terrifying... Elder Sister is too terrifying! I want to go home!

She ran all the way back to her courtyard, wailing like a frightened child, never daring to look behind her—as though some beast were chasing her heels.

The gathered ladies were left stunned, watching the Sixth Miss disappear into the distance.

To them, it looked as though she had simply been overcome with shame, her guilt melting into tears under Li Shu's gentle persuasion.

“Well, I think we can all see what happened here,” someone murmured. “It was just a misunderstanding. Perhaps Shu'er mistook her sister's intentions. I'll visit and apologize to Zhu'er another day. My dear aunt, shall we let the matter rest?”

Li Shu spoke softly to the Marchioness of Linhuai, lowering her gaze in apparent humility.

A family scandal must not be spread. Seeing Li Shu willing to swallow her pride to keep the peace, how could the Marchioness refuse?

And so, under the Marchioness's resolution, the matter was quietly settled. The supposed poisoned porridge incident was declared a misunderstanding, unrelated to Sixth Miss. No one was to mention it again.

To soothe Li Shu, the Marchioness ordered a small kitchen built beside her courtyard so her own servants could prepare her meals, with the expenses paid from the household accounts. As for the maid who had been tied to a tree earlier, she too was handed over to Li Shu's service, her contract retrieved from Sixth Miss's household and delivered to her new mistress.

When all was done, the crowd dispersed, and Li Shu's courtyard fell silent once more.

Later, within her quiet boudoir, only Li Shu and her little maid Baozi remained. Sitting at her desk, Li Shu took up her brush and wrote a letter, the strokes deliberate and precise, before folding it and handing it to Baozi.

"Deliver this to Wang Xiao'er," she instructed softly.

The letter read:

Settle her properly in the Lingnan estate. Find her a simple, honest local man to marry. Her dowry shall be that of a first-rank maid. Keep strict watch—she is not to take even one step northward.

Chapter 369: The Grand Banquet of Honor and Grace

“Spring lingers late, the grasses and trees grow lush and thick; the oriole sings sweetly, gathering mugwort in merriment.” — The Book of Songs

On the first morning after the imperial examination results had been posted, Zhu Ping’an finished his breakfast and mounted his matte-black “Shamate” horse, riding off toward the Ministry of Rites.

This day, the Jiajing Emperor was hosting a banquet at the Ministry—what the legends called the Qionglin Banquet, though a more fitting title might be the Banquet of Imperial Favor and Honor. An emperor’s banquet was, by definition, a bestowal of grace and distinction. For someone like Zhu Ping’an, who had an insatiable appetite and a love for fine dining, this was naturally an event he approached with great enthusiasm.

He had also heard rumors about what had happened in the backyard of the Linhuai Marquis’ residence the previous night. When news reached him that Li Shu had whipped one of the maids, he was hardly surprised. After all, Li Shu’s willful and imperious behavior as a child—yelling at and even striking servants—was hardly uncommon. Everyone had witnessed it firsthand, though she had certainly grown more restrained with age. In this rigidly hierarchical feudal society, one could hardly expect notions of democracy or equality; such concepts simply did not exist here.

Because the Marquise of Linhuai had issued a strict prohibition against gossip, Zhu Ping'an didn't know the full details of the incident—only vaguely that there had been some poisoning, and that Li Shu had struck the sixth lady's maid. Still, he could make a reasonable guess: yesterday, when the officers returned from the Imperial Street inspections, Li Shu had demanded that the sixth lady deliver a bowl of sweet soup to her. Apparently, something about that bowl had gone wrong, prompting Li Shu to lash out at the maid.

Knowing Li Shu as he did, Zhu Ping'an suspected that this was intentional—a calculated lesson meant for the sixth lady. From the moment Li Shu had requested the sweet soup, he had already anticipated such a result.

Before leaving for the morning, when his little maid brought him breakfast, she also hurriedly handed over a slip of paper, reportedly meant for Wang Xiao'er. Zhu Ping'an had given it a passing glance—but with his near-perfect memory, he had immediately understood its contents.

It detailed, roughly, how the maid who had been struck was to be dealt with.

Although the news of Li Shu striking someone hadn't surprised him, seeing the instructions on the paper did catch him off guard. Li Shu's plan for the "involved" maid was somewhat unexpected: she was to be married off to a simple, honest local man. For a maid, such a husband was hardly a bad match. According to the standards of the Li household, even a first-rank maid's dowry would be substantial. With some effort, the couple would have little to worry about for the rest of their lives.

This side of the cunning and capricious Li Shu was something Zhu Ping'an hadn't anticipated—her capacity for practicality and thoughtfulness, even in such small matters, was surprising.

In recent days, the Shamate black horse seemed to have taken a fancy to a certain mare from the Linhuai Marquis' stables. As Zhu Ping'an led it out the door that morning, the horse was in no mood to cooperate. On the road, it strutted with all the arrogance of a horse owed a dozen mares, stretching its long face upward in indignation.

Spring, it seemed, was truly a season for romance. Even this ornery horse had found itself entangled in matters of the heart.

Because of the horse's obstinate and sluggish behavior, Zhu Ping'an nearly arrived at the Ministry of Rites late. Were it not for the fact that he technically hadn't missed the appointed hour, he might have seriously considered castrating the creature.

Eating and drinking—this, Zhu Ping'an thought, was perhaps the universal method for celebration, whether in China or anywhere else in the world.

For the newly minted jinshi gathered at the Ministry, this Banquet of Imperial Favor and Honor was surely the highlight of relaxation after yesterday's nerve-wracking posting of the imperial examination results. Yesterday had been tense beyond measure; today, there was no need for tension. They could eat, drink, and unwind as they pleased. Despite the banquet's vast scale and the multitude of attendees, the focus today was squarely on the four hundred newly appointed jinshi.

It was no small feat that the Jiajing Emperor had managed to attend the Western Garden yesterday, so it was unsurprising that he could not be present at the Qionglin Banquet. In fact, his absence made everyone more at ease.

This grand banquet was presided over by Minister of Rites Xu Jie, who, after conveying the Emperor's edict to hold the feast, extended his congratulations to the new jinshi. The seating arrangements were then set, and the banquet officially commenced.

The top three jinshi—the champion Zhu Ping’an, the second-rank Han Yupeng, and the third-rank Tanghua Lang—shared a single table. All others were arranged five to a table.

The banquet spanned over a hundred tables, with dishes prepared by imperial chefs summoned directly from the palace kitchens. These chefs, serving the Emperor himself, represented the pinnacle of culinary expertise in all of Ming China.

Zhu Ping’an was far from disappointed. Thirty dishes were laid out, featuring beef, lamb, pork, venison, pheasant, chicken, duck, fish, seafood, and vegetables—thirty dishes, a symbolic homage to the Emperor’s thirty years on the throne.

The chefs did not disappoint either. From presentation to flavor and texture, each dish was executed flawlessly, leaving Zhu Ping’an completely satisfied.

As the banquet was in honor of the new jinshi, indulgence in food and drink was the main attraction. Aside from a brief ceremony in which Zhu Ping’an and the other new jinshi offered three respectful cups to senior officials, there was little protocol.

Still, as the champion jinshi, Zhu Ping’an received special attention, with many more toasts dedicated to him.

Among them, Ouyang Zishi took the lead, gathering a small group of newly appointed jinshi with the clear intent to press Zhu Ping'an into drinking, inching toward him with predatory precision.

Zhu Ping'an, of course, could read Ouyang Zishi's intentions at a glance.

Before Ouyang Zishi reached his table, Zhu Ping'an quietly slipped away, carrying his cup to the tables of Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, using the pretext of toasting them to evade the onslaught.

Having heard of Ouyang Zishi's scheming, Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen immediately recognized the challenge: Ouyang Zishi was blaming Zhu Ping'an for his own failure to attain the champion rank. They cooperated silently, helping Zhu Ping'an keep watch on Ouyang Zishi's movements.

Thus, a recurring scene unfolded at the banquet: whenever Ouyang Zishi attempted to corner Zhu Ping'an under the guise of a toast, Zhu Ping'an would slip away to another table, cup in hand, without fail.

Each time, Ouyang Zishi arrived with confidence only to leave frustrated, his resentment growing: "He stole my championship... and even my woman..."

Seeing the crowd's admiration for Zhu Ping'an, Ouyang Zishi's jealousy only deepened. Resigned, he turned to the only solace left: alcohol.

One cup, two cups, three... soon, Ouyang Zishi was thoroughly intoxicated.

He was far from alone. At a celebration marking the pinnacle of their lives, many of the new jinshi had grown red-faced and drunk; at least a dozen had reached the point of inebriation.

Intoxicated, human behavior became a kaleidoscope of the absurd and amusing. But the Ministry's officials had prepared carefully: nearly a hundred attendants were on hand to escort any drunk jinshi or official to nearby lodgings to sober up.

Wang Shizhen was promptly "escorted" away, having collapsed after only three cups; Zhang Siwei was slightly tipsy but still able to maintain composure.

Zhu Ping'an, thanks to his self-invented method of dodging drink, emerged unscathed.

Before he could fully relish his luck, he received an invitation—an unmistakable familiar style: a card from the Yan family. Only a few at the banquet had received one alongside him.

Many of the jinshi glanced enviously at Zhu Ping'an's invitation.

It was customary for the last several banquets: the current grand banquet was the Emperor's own, a great banquet of imperial favor. After this, a smaller banquet of imperial favor would follow, hosted by the Grand Secretary Yan Song himself.

While the great banquet offered only the prestige of imperial attention, the smaller banquet promised tangible benefits. Should one gain the favor of Grand Secretary Yan, the path of one's official career could truly become smooth and unimpeded.

Chapter 370: The Minor Banquet of Imperial Favor

The invitation that others would have envied endlessly felt in Zhu Ping'an's hands like a blazing-hot coal. If he could, he would have handed it off to someone else in an instant.

It wasn't even about Ouyang Zishi. Just thinking about the scene at the Imperial Street—when Miss Yan Er had hurled her shoe from the second-floor balcony—was enough to make him sweat bullets. That alone could ruin him if things went awry.

And if Miss Yan Er were to somehow tell Yan Song or Yan Shifan that she had been accidentally glimpsed in the bath... well, Zhu Ping'an shivered at the thought. In this feudal society, a young lady's honor was paramount. Surely, she wouldn't speak of it.

But then again... what if she did?

The mere thought made his stomach churn in a way he dared not fully imagine.

As for trying to “get drunk” now to avoid the gathering... it was far too late. The invitation had already been accepted. And judging by Yan Shifan—the corpulent heir who had previously summoned him to a feast at the Zhuangyuan Tower—even if Zhu Ping’an did get truly drunk, someone would simply carry him to the Yan residence anyway.

What is fated as fortune cannot be turned into misfortune, and what is misfortune cannot be escaped. With a heavy sigh, Zhu Ping’an bid farewell to Zhang Siwei, entrusting him to care for Wang Shizhen, and then followed the attendants to the Yan residence.

This “minor grace feast” at the Yan household was smaller than the grand imperial banquet, limited to perhaps thirty or so guests. Alongside Zhu Ping’an, nine other newly minted jinshi had been invited, while the rest of the attendees were officials.

Among them were people Zhu Ping’an already knew—more than one, in fact. There was Zhang Juzheng, whom he had met at Xu Jie’s house, and there was the Flying Fish—clad Jinyiwei officer he had encountered not long after arriving in the capital, the one who had handled the dispute over the money pouch. If memory served, his companion called him Shen Jingli.

Now, this Shen Jingli had once shown no small contempt for Yan Song, even calling him “the foremost doomed man” and mocking him with, “Behold Prime Minister Yan, surely he only favors the wealthy.” So why on earth was he now attending a feast at the Yan household?

And then there was the middle-aged man seated in front of Shen Jingli, clad in a striking Dou Niu outfit. Zhu Ping’an could not help but stare—he was impossibly conspicuous: tall, broad-shouldered, skin a deep ruddy hue, as if a hidden fire burned beneath it. His dark red complexion reminded one vaguely of Guan Yu from the Three Kingdoms, only more imposing.

Although the feast was nominally hosted by Yan Song, it was really Yan Shifan in charge. Yan Song had appeared briefly at the start, offering a few congratulatory words to Zhu Ping'an and the others, then addressing the officials with some polite remarks before excusing himself due to ill health. The hosting duties were then fully handed over to his son.

"Lord Lu, I wish to consult you on a matter. Might I trouble you to step aside for a moment?" Yan Song said as he approached the Dou Niu-clad man before leaving.

"You are too courteous, Lord Yan. Whatever matters you wish to discuss, I will naturally listen. You need not use the word 'consult'," the man replied with a slight smile, rising to bow slightly.

After a few hushed words between them, the man in the Dou Niu outfit followed Yan Song away from the banquet.

Hearing Yan Song address him as "Lord Lu," Zhu Ping'an's mind began to piece things together. Dou Niu attire, surname Lu, seated among Jinyiwei—it was obvious he was connected to the Jinyiwei, and far above Shen Jingli in rank. Yan Song's earlier deference made that unmistakable.

During the Jiajing era, the only high-ranking Lu connected with the Jinyiwei was Commander Lu Bing. A historical powerhouse indeed. Rumor had it that Lu Bing had grown close to the Yan father and son while dealing with Xia Yan, maintaining a cordial relationship ever since—and the respect was mutual, as Zhu Ping'an could now clearly see.

“Chunfu, after the feast you may return on your own. No need to wait for me,” Lu Bing said to the Flying Fish-clad Jinyiwei beneath him, seemingly unsurprised by Yan Song’s invitation.

Chunfu? Shen Chunfu?

Zhu Ping’an froze mid-step. Shen Chunfu... wasn’t that Shen Lian himself?! Apart from Yang Jisheng, Shen Lian had been the most famous among those who had impeached Yan Song in the Ming court.

Historical records confirmed Shen Lian’s jinshi background. He had served as a magistrate, as a Jinyiwei officer, and was known for his integrity and fierce hatred of injustice—qualities that had earned him Lu Bing’s admiration. It made perfect sense that he would be invited to a feast at the Yan residence.

Indeed, thinking further, it was entirely understandable. As a jinshi within the Jinyiwei, Shen Lian was exceptional. Who could match him in drafting documents or handling cases? In the system of the Jinyiwei, he stood out like a crane among chickens. Lu Bing’s appreciation of scholars further explained his invitation.

Once Yan Song and Lu Bing departed, Yan Shifan took full command of the feast. Zhu Ping’an, as the Zhuangyuan, was seated at the front table alongside Yan Shifan and his close associates.

Initially, the gathering proceeded smoothly. But after the third round of wine, the situation began to spiral—thanks entirely to Yan Shifan.

After a few rounds, Yan Shifan grew uninhibited, shouting commands and insisting that everyone drink. His lack of restraint and consideration for etiquette became painfully apparent.

The first target, naturally, was Zhu Ping'an.

"Come, let us toast our Zhuangyuan!" Yan Shifan exclaimed, plopping his porky hand onto the table and pointing directly at Zhu Ping'an. "What say you all?"

"Well said!" the table chorused.

There was no escape. Under the gaze of all present, Zhu Ping'an had to drink. Once the wine touched his lips, he relaxed slightly. From what he could tell, it seemed Miss Yan Er had not reported his accidental glimpse—good news indeed.

"Zihou, to achieve the title of Zhuangyuan at such a young age is most auspicious. Looking back, our farewell at the Zhuangyuan Tower appears to have been a fortuitous omen, would you not agree?" Yan Shifan asked, chewing a piece of venison, eyes fixed on Zhu Ping'an.

"Indeed, my thanks to Lord Yan," Zhu Ping'an replied with a slight bow and a polite smile. Inside, however, he was seething: Shameless... you call that a farewell? From morning until night, not to mention the fireworks at the Wei Guogong Mansion all night, I didn't even have a moment to sleep. Had it not been for Li Shu's little maid delivering ginseng for the imperial exam, I wouldn't even have had a place to cry.

Yet in the end, Ouyang Zishi had not even placed in the top division, while Zhu Ping'an had become Zhuangyuan—a twist that Yan Shifan had surely not foreseen. Too much scheming often backfires. Zhu Ping'an allowed a small, almost imperceptible smile to curl his lips at the irony of it all.