

## Rise 371

### Chapter 371: A Toast

“Expressing ‘thanks’ is far too easy. Surely, as the newly crowned top scholar, you wouldn’t neglect to offer a toast to honor Lord Yan, would you?”

The moment Zhu Ping’an’s words fell, Luo Longwen, seated at the lower end of the table beneath Yan Shifan, arched an eyebrow and gave him a sly, almost poisonous smile, his voice low and mocking as he asked.

“Your words, Lord Luo, are most correct,” Zhu Ping’an replied with a nod and a gentle smile. He filled a cup of wine for himself, then rose from the table, carrying the cup in both hands as he approached Yan Shifan. Bowing slightly, he offered the wine with utmost respect. “Since my arrival in the capital, I have been the frequent recipient of your guidance and care, Lord Yan. I am truly grateful. Today, I seize this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to you.”

“You flatter me too much, young master. It was nothing but a small favor,” Yan Shifan said, smiling as he shook his head. Without warning, he reached out with his greasy, heavy hands and slapped Zhu Ping’an twice on the shoulders.

In an instant, Zhu Ping’an’s brand-new scholar’s ceremonial robe—his gleaming crown of the top scholar still perched proudly—was marred with two glaringly oily handprints that even caught the sunlight and gleamed.

Yet Zhu Ping’an appeared as though blind; he ignored the stains completely, his face radiating the same unfeigned gratitude.

“Lord Yan, your small favor has raised me to the heights of the scholar’s path. How could I ever forget it? My deepest thanks, Lord Yan,” Zhu Ping’an said, lifting his cup in both hands. His posture was respectful, almost reverent, his gratitude seemingly sincere—but inwardly, he silently offered a sly nod to Lord Yan’s female relatives.

Zhu Ping’an’s tact did not escape Yan Shifan’s notice, and the older man was visibly pleased. With another pair of greasy pats to Zhu Ping’an’s shoulders, he grabbed a cup of wine. Beside him, Luo Longwen eagerly refilled it.

Yan Shifan lifted the cup with one hand, swung it faintly toward Zhu Ping’an, and downed it in one gulp. Zhu Ping’an, holding his cup with both hands, mirrored the gesture in his direction before drinking as well.

After the toast, Zhu Ping’an returned to his seat with the four greasy handprints decorating his shoulders, wearing the same cheerful, unflappable grin as before.

Luo Longwen, observing this, muttered silently in disappointment. He had hoped to see Zhu Ping’an flinch or fume at his soiled ceremonial robe, ready to exploit that moment—but Zhu Ping’an had been utterly impervious, as if blind to the insult.

However, Luo Longwen was nothing if not adaptable. When one angle failed, he moved to another.

“Speaking of the Scholar’s Hall,” Luo Longwen said, his voice dripping venom as he slithered like a snake, tongue flicking as he spoke, “on the day of the send-off for the top scholar, I and Lord Shang were also present. I even offered some—perhaps premature—advice to the scholar. Yet now, why does the top scholar only offer a toast to Lord Yan and not to me or Lord Shang?”

Finally, Luo Longwen's true colors emerged. That overly cordial persona at the Scholar's Hall had been nothing but a facade.

Seeing the man's intent—to force Zhu Ping'an into drunken submission—Zhu Ping'an could only think wryly: In this world, every favor comes due sooner or later. He had dodged a fair share of wine at the grand banquet; it seemed he could not do the same at this minor one.

The first round of toasts was unavoidable at any table, ancient or modern. If one could not evade it, it was better to face it directly—perhaps even drink a little less than expected.

“How could it be otherwise? The cup is empty. Allow Ping'an to refill it before toasting each of you in turn,” Zhu Ping'an replied with a faint, disarming smile.

And so, with one hand holding the wine jug and the other the cup, Zhu Ping'an began offering wine to each guest, starting from the right of Yan Shifan, moving methodically.

The ritual was as formal as ever: names, greetings, pouring, holding the cup in both hands, the customary words of respect—“I humbly ask for your continued guidance”—all that ceremonial chatter which, in its essence, was not so different from today. One notable difference: in the old times, clinking cups during a toast was considered improper.

When he reached Shen Lian, Shen Lian met Zhu Ping'an's gaze and smiled.

"Zhu Ping'an, Zhu Zi-hou, at last I know your name. During the dispute over the coin purse on Renning Street, it was thanks to your forthright words that the truth came out. Otherwise, punishing that rogue would not have been so easy," Shen Lian said.

"Heh, Lord Shen, you jest. Even without my words, I am certain you would have found a way to punish that scoundrel," Zhu Ping'an replied modestly.

Hearing Shen Lian address him as "little brother," Zhu Ping'an felt a flicker of pride. This was a man renowned in history: upright, fearless in condemning evil, a challenger of Yan Song, and the author of the famous Ten Memorials of Censure. Zhu Ping'an had long admired him.

Yet recalling their first meeting in the small eatery—Shen Lian, drunk, brazenly berating Yan Song, and the events that followed—Zhu Ping'an realized that while Shen Lian's righteousness was absolute, he could be inflexible, and his hatred of evil carried a tinge of arrogance. He had admired the man but also silently worried for him.

Now, as he prepared to toast, Zhu Ping'an resolved that after the Ministry of Rites' training, he would find a chance to discreetly warn Shen Lian: the emperor was favoring Yan Song at this time. This was not yet the moment to submit the Ten Memorials of Censure. Some phrases, if misused, would not only fail to topple Yan Song but might also provoke the capricious Emperor Jiajing. Historically, Shen Lian had suffered greatly for acting too soon.

“To this day, I still find myself in agreement with the Child Prodigy Poems you composed at the eatery, Lord Shen,” Zhu Ping’an added subtly, ensuring Shen Lian felt he could trust him.

Shen Lian was momentarily taken aback, then recalled the two impromptu poems he had composed that day:

When young, do not halt your learning; wealth can establish a man;

Observe Chancellor Yan, he values only the wealthy.

The emperor treasures men of true talent; through literature, one may instruct the court;

All else is inferior, save for the service of Lord Yan.

Both verses mocked Yan Song cleverly. Zhu Ping’an’s praise implied he fully appreciated Shen Lian’s wit and subtly revealed his own distaste for Yan Song.

“Little brother, a scholar of your caliber must surely have your own fine works. If you do not mind, perhaps one day you may come to my humble study, and we may exchange ideas together,” Shen Lian said, catching Zhu Ping’an’s hint with a smile.

Chapter 372: Lord Yan, Protect Me

After Zhu Ping'an took the initiative to raise his cup in a toast, the mood at the banquet table shifted ever so subtly. The invisible currents of tension, which moments before had been pressing upon him, now swirled away to other corners of the hall—for the time being, the storm no longer centered on him.

The air was heavy with the heady fragrance of wine, the soft clatter of cups, and the hum of boisterous voices. Faces glowed crimson beneath the lantern light; laughter burst forth in full-throated waves. Among the gathered officials, Yan Shifan's arrogance had grown only more pronounced. His smugness radiated like heat from a brazier, intensified by the endless string of subordinates who, one by one, rose to offer him their toasts.

Regardless of a man's rank or his age, Yan Shifan received each gesture with the same insufferable air of superiority. His every movement—the lazy tilt of his chin, the imperious flick of his wrist—declared that he sat above them all. Even those senior members of the Yan faction, men with grey at their temples, were offered no respect from him.

The only person at the table who dared to ignore Yan Shifan's swagger was Shen Lian. Though Shen Lian's official title was but Jinyiwei jingli—a modest rank within the Imperial Secret Police—he had one thing others lacked: a powerful backer. He was favored by none other than Lu Bing, the formidable Commander of the Jinyiwei, a man whose approval could make or break careers with a word.

Yan Shifan, though arrogant, was no fool. He feared Lu Bing's shadow, and thus, by extension, he tread carefully around Shen Lian. But that wasn't all. Shen Lian's own reputation preceded him—a man of upright bearing, incorruptible, neither greedy nor indulgent, his conduct left no weakness for others to exploit. His fierce sense of justice made him a dangerous opponent, one who spoke out against wrongdoing even within his own ranks. His heart, many said, belonged more to the yan guan—the outspoken moral officials—than to the secretive world of the Jinyiwei.

Ordinarily, such a man would have found survival within the Jinyiwei impossible. The corps was a nest of serpents; meddling in court memorials and denouncing corruption only invited enemies. Yet Shen Lian not only endured—he thrived. His integrity and ability had caught Lu Bing’s discerning eye, and the Commander had taken him under his wing, shielding him from retribution and grooming him for greater responsibilities. Even this private banquet, this so-called Small Grace and Honor Feast, was part of Shen Lian’s subtle tutelage under Lu Bing’s watchful gaze.

Yan Shifan, sharp as he was conceited, understood Lu Bing’s intentions all too well. Thus, when it came to Shen Lian, he adopted a different attitude—tolerating his aloofness, overlooking his occasional defiance. Better to give Lu Bing a token of respect than make an enemy of his favorite.

But that courtesy extended to Shen Lian alone. For others—even his supposed allies—Yan Shifan’s magnanimity had its limits. And that included Zhu Ping’an.

After several more rounds of drink, Yan Shifan, feeling his pleasure dull and irritation rise, gestured impatiently for the attendants. “Bring out the great goblets,” he ordered.

A moment later, the serving girls appeared, balancing several immense vessels upon lacquered trays. Zhu Ping’an’s brows lifted slightly as his eyes fell upon them. The goblets were cast entirely from gold, each fashioned in the shape of a three-legged jue—an ancient ritual wine vessel. But these were monstrously oversized, at least twice the volume of an ordinary cup. Just one of these brimming with wine would fell any ordinary man. Even imagining himself attempting it, Zhu Ping’an felt his stomach tighten.

“Ha ha ha! Now this,” Yan Shifan bellowed, his plump face flushed and gleaming, “this is how men should drink!”

His single eye, sharp and gleaming like a predator's, swept across the table as he laughed loudly enough to rattle the porcelain. The subtle fear in the others' gazes delighted him. To a man like Yan Shifan, nothing in the world was sweeter than the sight of others trembling under his gaze.

His one eye roved, seeking a target—a victim to inaugurate this cruel little game. Wherever his gaze landed, men straightened or looked away as if scorched.

“Zi Hou,” he said at last, his lips curling into a smirk. “You took the top spot in the Imperial Examination, first among all scholars under heaven. By reason and by right, the first of these cups should be yours.”

He fixed his hawk-like stare upon Zhu Ping'an.

Before Zhu could reply, Luo Longwen leaned forward with a laugh. “Indeed, indeed! A fine horse deserves a fine saddle, and the best wine should be drunk by the top scholar himself!” His tone was oily, mocking, eyes glinting with mischief as he watched Zhu Ping'an—waiting to see how the young man would wriggle out of this.

Everyone at the table turned toward him. They, too, were curious.

Zhu Ping'an, however, felt no surprise. He had expected as much. From the very moment he'd received the invitation to this Little Grace Feast at the Yan residence, he had known that the host's goodwill would come laced with venom. Yan Shifan had schemed for months to secure the top scholar's title for his favored protégé, Ouyang Zishi. He had pulled every string—from influencing examiners to predicting the Emperor's

whims and study habits. And in the end, despite all his preparations, the laurels had fallen upon Zhu Ping'an instead.

It was not hard to guess how much that humiliation still burned.

From the chronicles and unofficial histories Zhu Ping'an had read, he knew Yan Shifan's character well—an egotistical, vainglorious man intoxicated with his own power. Moments ago, he had been bragging about how half the empire's affairs rested upon his shoulders, laughing as though the words were gospel truth.

Such a man could not abide contradiction—still less defiance.

Thus, Zhu Ping'an knew he had only two options: drink the cup in one bold swallow, or refuse with some excuse—only to be shamed and forced to drink anyway, perhaps with added punishment.

The choice was simple.

He rose slowly, taking the golden goblet from the servant girl's hands, and smiled faintly. "My capacity for wine is poor," he said lightly, "so if I drink too much and act improperly, I beg you all, esteemed seniors, to correct me. As for you, Lord Yan, I trust you'll protect me."

For a heartbeat, the table was silent. Then laughter erupted all around. His words were so disarmingly earnest, so ingenuously phrased, that even the seasoned officials chuckled. He had managed to both humble himself and flatter Yan Shifan in one breath, and that last phrase—"Lord Yan, protect me"—was the perfect touch of irony.

Yan Shifan threw back his head and laughed, pointing a thick finger toward Zhu Ping'an. "You're honest, I'll give you that! Drink without fear—if the heavens fall, I'll hold them up for you!"

"Many thanks, Lord Yan," Zhu Ping'an replied, bowing slightly. He lifted the cup to his lips—then paused, as though struck by a sudden thought.

"What now?" Luo Longwen muttered irritably.

Zhu Ping'an cleared his throat, feigning embarrassment. "Ah, might I perhaps have a share of that caviar? Ahem... I come from the countryside and have never tasted such a delicacy before."

For an instant, there was silence. Then laughter broke again, louder than before.

Ha! So the rice bucket title he'd earned during the Southern Examinations was true after all! They remembered the story of how Zhu Ping'an, despite his brilliance, was rumored to have an appetite rivaling ten men. Luo Longwen laughed so hard his eyes watered.

“Zi Hou, ever so simple and sincere,” Yan Shifan chuckled, waving a pudgy hand. “Very well—give him the caviar.”

“Many thanks for your generosity, Lord Yan.”

As the attendants stepped forward to fetch the dish, the crowd’s attention drifted momentarily toward the delicacy being brought forth. And in that fleeting moment, Zhu Ping’an moved.

He raised the heavy goblet once more, his wide sleeve draping elegantly over the cup. With a deft twist of the wrist—hidden by the flowing silk—he tilted the vessel just enough for the wine to pour silently down into the folds of his robe, trickling unseen into the depths of his sleeve.

By the time the serving girl placed the silver dish of caviar before him and the onlookers turned back, Zhu Ping’an had already lifted the empty cup to his lips, pretending to finish the last drop. With a small, contented sigh, he wiped his mouth, flipped the goblet upside down to show it empty, and sat down as though nothing at all were amiss.

Not a single drop had touched his tongue.

Chapter 373: Magnificent Indeed, Shen Lian

Zhu Ping’an had been the first— but he was by no means the last.

The air at the banquet had grown wild and reckless. The wine burned bright in every man's veins, and even the normally aloof Yan Shifan had been swept up in the fever of the moment. Flushed with wine and arrogance, he suddenly grabbed a spoon from the table with his fat, ringed fingers and grinned wickedly.

"Let's make this more interesting," he declared, twirling the spoon between his thick fingers. "Whoever the handle points to must drain a full goblet!"

Laughter and cheers rose around him as he set the spoon spinning upon the polished table. It twirled and shimmered in the candlelight, spinning faster than anyone expected, then slowing, slower still, until the handle began to waver... and finally tilted toward Zhu Ping'an.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Luo Longwen, sitting nearby, allowed a sly smile to bloom on his face—he thought fortune had finally smiled upon him.

But just as the spoon was about to stop, someone's elbow brushed the table. The spoon shuddered, wobbled once more, and spun again—half a turn this time—before finally coming to rest, this time pointing directly at Luo Longwen himself.

The smile froze on Luo Longwen's lips. His expression withered instantly, as if frost had struck a budding flower. He could only stare at the spoon in disbelief before raising his eyes toward Yan Shifan, silently pleading for mercy.

Yan Shifan only chuckled, raising his pudgy hand and pointing playfully. "Come now, Han Zhang, drink up."

There was no escape. Luo Longwen's shoulders slumped in defeat. With the resigned air of a condemned man, he lifted the great goblet and drained it in several desperate gulps.

The moment he set it down, his cheeks flushed crimson, his head spun, and yet—when he looked toward Zhu Ping'an—there was a flicker of green jealousy in his bleary eyes.

Zhu Ping'an could only return the look helplessly, as if to say, How is that my fault?

Yan Shifan, by now thoroughly enjoying himself, kept the game going. Again and again he spun the spoon, and each time its trembling handle sealed another man's fate. Laughter, shouting, and the clinking of goblets filled the hall as the candlelight wavered over flushed faces and half-spilled wine.

After several rounds, nearly everyone had been forced to drink. Everyone, that is, except one man—a thin, scholarly-looking official whose luck, it seemed, was blessed by heaven itself.

This was Ma, a minor censor known to all in the capital for his strange affliction: he could not tolerate even a single drop of alcohol. One sip, and his face would flush bright red; two, and he would collapse in a drunken stupor.

Yan Shifan's single, narrow eye gleamed with mischief as it fell upon Ma. "Lord Ma," he drawled, "your luck tonight is truly something."

Ma forced a humble smile and shook his head slightly. "I hardly dare call it luck, my lord."

“Then why don’t we put that luck to the test?” Yan Shifan laughed, giving the spoon a showy twirl in his hand before setting it spinning once more on the table.

All eyes followed its movement—until suddenly, in the midst of its spin, Yan Shifan’s fat hand slapped down upon it, halting it mid-turn. The spoon’s handle pointed unmistakably at Ma.

“Ah, seems fortune’s turned on you at last,” Yan Shifan said with a grin so smug it begged to be struck.

“Lord Yan, I...” Ma began, his voice cracking with bitter helplessness.

“What is it, Lord Ma?” Yan Shifan’s lone eye fixed on him like a predator sizing up prey.

“Your Excellency, I... I truly cannot drink,” Ma stammered. “My constitution is weak. Even a drop will make me faint. My physician has warned me countless times never to touch alcohol.”

Yan Shifan only gave a high, dismissive “hmph,” toying with his cup as he watched Ma with a cruel glimmer in his eye.

“Lord Yan, please, I beg your understanding. I have abstained for years now. Pray, have mercy,” Ma pleaded, his words halting and pained.

Yan Shifan sneered. “What’s this? Are you saying that a single cup of wine is too much respect to pay me?” He tapped his own cheek mockingly. “My face isn’t worth that much, then?”

The words hit like a slap. There was nothing more shameless than this—he was forcing humiliation upon an old man and calling it honor.

Under the oppressive gaze of that single, burning eye, Ma’s thin frame seemed to shrink. At last he sighed, picked up the goblet with trembling hands, and murmured, “Then... I shall merely wet my lips. I beg Your Excellency’s forgiveness.”

He touched the wine to his mouth, barely moistening his lips before setting it down again. Instantly his face flushed scarlet, his brows twisted in pain, and he swayed slightly where he sat. Clearly, he had spoken the truth—he truly could not drink.

But Yan Shifan only scoffed. “That’s it?”

Before anyone could stop him, the corpulent minister rose, his heavy steps shaking the floor as he strode over to Ma. He seized the goblet with one hand—an arm as thick as Ma’s entire leg—and clamped the other around the poor man’s nose.

“Hahaha! If you can’t drink yourself, allow me to assist you!”

Ma’s eyes went wide. Cut off from breath, his mouth opened in reflex—and Yan Shifan took the chance to pour the entire goblet of wine down his throat.

“Nggh... glug... glug...”

The frail censor flailed helplessly, utterly overpowered. The scene looked grotesque—like a bear forcing liquor down a chicken’s throat.

Zhu Ping’an’s fists clenched under the table. Every nerve in him screamed to intervene. Yet the power difference was too vast—it would be like an egg thrown at a boulder. If he spoke now, he would only bring ruin upon himself, and perhaps upon Ma as well. So he swallowed his anger, jaw tight, eyes cold.

A quick glance around told him all he needed to know. Except for Shen Lian, whose face was taut with restrained fury, everyone else sat in silent indifference. Even Zhang Juzheng, seated nearby, calmly picked up his chopsticks and took another bite as though nothing had happened.

Ma, meanwhile, choked and sputtered, wine spilling from his mouth and even from his nose. Most of it still went down, though, and within moments his head lolled, his limbs gave way, and he collapsed bonelessly beneath the table.

Yan Shifan dusted his hands, laughing boisterously.

At that moment, a sharp sound split the heavy silence—swish!—as Shen Lian rose to his feet, his sleeve flicking through the air. The movement drew every eye in the room, even Yan Shifan’s.

No one knew what he meant to do.

“I’ll have a turn with this little game,” Shen Lian said coolly, his voice edged with steel.

He reached for the same spoon Yan Shifan had used and set it spinning upon the table with a flick of his wrist. Then, before it had even slowed, he pressed his hand down—just as Yan Shifan had done—and stopped it cold.

The handle pointed directly at Yan Shifan himself.

For a heartbeat, the hall was dead silent.

Then Shen Lian’s lips curved. “My, my. What unfortunate luck, Lord Yan,” he said with a laugh that carried the bite of a blade.

Yan Shifan blinked in disbelief. His hand rose as if to wave it off, words of refusal on his tongue.

But Shen Lian cut him off, voice thunderous. “How laughable! Others must drink at your command, yet you, Yan Shifan, are above your own game? Others may fear you—but I, Shen Lian, do not!”

The words rang like a sword drawn from its sheath.

Before anyone could move, Shen Lian filled a goblet to the brim, strode across the floor, and seized Yan Shifan’s nose just as the man had done to Ma moments before.

“Just now, you so graciously served Lord Ma,” Shen Lian said, voice low and dangerous. “Allow me to return the courtesy on his behalf.”

And with that, he forced the wine down Yan Shifan’s throat.

Yan Shifan flailed in outrage, but his bulk was soft and untrained. Shen Lian, though a scholar, was also a man of action—a warrior among the Jinyiwei, famed for both pen and sword. Within seconds, the arrogant minister was pinned, coughing and sputtering as the wine ran down his fat cheeks.

The hall was stunned into silence. Not a soul dared to breathe.

Zhu Ping'an could only stare, dumbstruck.

“Ha ha ha! Splendid! That was splendid!” Shen Lian roared with laughter, tossing the empty goblet back onto the table with a clatter. “Now that is a drink worth having!”

Still laughing, he turned on his heel, snatched a wine flask from a stunned maid's hands, and strode out into the night—drinking as he went.

Magnificent indeed, Shen Lian!

His tall figure vanished through the doorway like a lone hero into the wind, reminiscent of Jing Ke walking toward the icy river of Yi.

The room remained frozen, the echo of his laughter lingering long after he was gone.

Chapter 374: Educating Luo Longwen

After that incident, Yan Shifan could no longer maintain his composure. His plump face flushed with humiliation and anger, and under the pretext of changing clothes in the rear courtyard, he left the banquet in a hurry.

The moment he disappeared, the hall erupted into chaos. The once-lively atmosphere now boiled over with righteous indignation, and the air was filled with denunciations of Shen Lian's behavior—as though what he had done moments ago was an unforgivable crime against heaven itself.

The irony was sharp as a blade. Not long ago, Yan Shifan had done exactly the same thing, yet these people, drunk and fickle as reeds in the wind, had conveniently forgotten it.

As applause rang out for Shen Lian's courage and sense of justice, Zhu Ping'an found himself unable to join in the jubilation. Instead, a faint unease coiled in his chest. He knew too well that this was the height of the Yan family's power. History recorded that Shen Lian would one day fall victim to the cruel machinations of Yan Song and his son. Perhaps... this was where that tragic enmity first began.

Perhaps, Zhu Ping'an thought, what I lack most... is that very courage.

But he quickly shook the notion from his mind. No—he could not act so recklessly.

When an egg strikes a stone, it is not courage but folly. There are moments when lifting one's head high is easy, yet lowering it with wisdom is far more difficult.

Before him, the feast remained abundant and dazzling—fine meats, rare seafood, exotic delicacies, the fragrance of wine and spice intermingling—but Zhu Ping'an found all appetite lost. The joy had drained from his heart.

Though he had poured most of that last great cup of wine into his sleeve earlier, a small amount had still passed his lips. Now, as the alcohol took hold in the haze of his melancholy, a soft flush crept across his face, and a gentle warmth clouded his thoughts.

Just as his vision began to blur with the pleasant fog of intoxication, a shadow loomed before him—a massive wine jar appeared on the table, its brim filled to the edge.

On the other side of it stood Luo Longwen, grinning like a cat that had cornered a mouse, his expression as oily as the gleam of the wine itself.

“Come, come, Zhuangyuan-lang,” he said, using that honorific mockingly. “Let me offer you a drink.” He raised a delicate wine cup—small enough to hold in one hand—while shoving the enormous, brimming vessel toward Zhu Ping'an. The smile at his lips was that of a weasel wishing a rooster a happy New Year—insincere, sly, and full of malice.

The entire table turned to watch.

One man held a small cup; the other, a jug fit for a giant. The imbalance was deliberate and cruel.

Laughter and whispers rippled around the hall. “Ha, here we go again. The young favorite of Little Ge Lao is bullying someone,” someone murmured. “Our Zhuangyuan-lang’s face is red already—looks like his tolerance is poor. I wonder what sort of drunk he’ll be once he’s had too much?”

Zhu Ping’an stared silently at Luo Longwen’s smug, wretched face.

What kind of smile is that? How does one’s face even look that punchable? he thought darkly.

A small cup for yourself and a great urn for me—do you take me for a fool? Or do you think Zhu Ping’an is some soft persimmon you can squeeze at will?

True, he did not possess Shen Lian’s hot-blooded valor. But that did not mean he was a coward to be trampled upon.

Water lies low to become the sea; man bows low to become a king. His humility had never meant weakness—it was a strategy, not submission.

To endure a minor insult for the sake of greater plans was wisdom. But endless tolerance, blind endurance—that was not patience, it was cowardice. Yielding without measure only invited contempt and emboldened the oppressor.

If this were Yan Shifan, he might endure it, like Goujian of Yue enduring humiliation for future revenge.

But Luo Longwen? He was nothing but a dog at Yan Shifan's feet. To tolerate him was meaningless—worse, it would only make the cur bark louder.

Besides, this man had shown open hostility from their very first meeting. There was no hope of turning an enemy like him into an ally through concession. To endure him would only feed his arrogance.

If this had merely been a playful jest, Zhu Ping'an could have laughed it off. He could have taken it as a test of temperament, a chance to show magnanimity.

But this—this was not jest. It was habit, contempt, insult. To bear it would be to declare himself weak and powerless.

He cast his eyes briefly around the hall. Every gaze fixed upon him carried amusement, curiosity, or judgment. He knew what this was—it was more than a toast. It was a test of dignity and character. If he yielded here, his reputation as the imperial Zhuangyuan would mean nothing. From this day forth, he would be seen as timid and ineffectual—unfit for the court, unfit even for local office.

He glanced again at Luo Longwen. That grin was obscene, vulgar, a reflection of the man's soul itself.

For his own dignity— and perhaps, to redeem that pitiful soul— Zhu Ping'an decided it was time to teach the man the meaning of respect.

Amid the laughter and mockery, Zhu Ping'an hiccuped softly, feigning greater drunkenness than he truly felt. He blinked lazily, his lips curving into a faint smile.

"Drink? Of course, I can drink," he said, rising to his feet, his tone faintly slurred but steady.

A smirk flickered across Luo Longwen's face, and several onlookers shook their heads, disappointed. So the famed Zhuangyuan would bend after all.

Zhang Juzheng, who had been watching keenly, sighed. The corners of his lips curled into a cold sneer as he turned away, muttering under his breath. Zhu Lu, Zhu Lu... this one is not worth your counsel. He speared a slice of venison and dropped it back onto his plate with disdain.

But before Luo Longwen could savor his triumph, before the crowd could even finish shaking their heads, Zhu Ping'an spoke again.

"Drink? Certainly," he said slowly, "but before we do, I must first ask Lord Luo a small question."

"Oh?" Luo Longwen chuckled carelessly. "Go ahead."

“May I ask,” Zhu Ping’an said with a mild smile, “does Lord Luo wish to be a gentleman—or a petty man?”

The question silenced the air for a heartbeat, then drew snickers from the bystanders. What kind of question was that? No one would ever admit to being a petty man. They thought Zhu Ping’an was only trying to buy time—delaying the inevitable humiliation.

“Of course I’d rather be a gentleman,” Luo Longwen replied mockingly. “What sort of foolish question is that?”

Zhu Ping’an’s smile deepened, calm and unhurried. “Ah, a gentleman. Then surely Lord Luo has heard the saying—‘The friendship of gentlemen is as light as water.’ Since Lord Luo aspires to be a gentleman, how could I possibly make things difficult for him? Allow me, then, to offer you a cup of tea instead of wine.”

He lifted a small porcelain teacup from the table, cradling it respectfully in both hands, and bowed slightly.

For a moment, Luo Longwen simply stared, dumbfounded.

Around them, soft laughter rippled through the hall. So that’s his trick, the crowd thought, eyes gleaming with new amusement.

Even Zhang Juzheng paused mid-bite, setting his chopsticks down again, his eyes narrowing on the youth who now held the teacup with quiet poise.

Luo Longwen forced a grin. "Hah! Well then, for the honor of drinking with the Zhuangyuan-lang, I don't mind being a petty man for once!"

He shoved the brimming wine jar forward again.

"Oh, I see," Zhu Ping'an said lightly, his tone almost gentle. "In that case... I don't drink with petty men."

With that, he smiled faintly, sat back down, and picked up his chopsticks once more. Suddenly, the dishes before him looked delicious again.

"I don't drink with petty men."

The words fell like a blade wrapped in silk, cutting deep. Luo Longwen's face turned an ugly shade of red, his breath catching in his throat.

He could do nothing. He had been the one to use the mismatched cups. He had walked himself into the trap with his own arrogance.

And then, like an echo from earlier in the night, the words Zhu Ping'an had spoken at the start of the feast returned to him—

'My tolerance is small. If I drink too much and behave improperly, I ask the elders' forgiveness—and I trust Lord Yan will protect me.'

Only now did the meaning strike him. That line... that was Zhu Ping'an's shield, laid carefully in advance, ready for moments just like this.

A quiet murmur of laughter spread through the hall, not mocking Zhu Ping'an this time—but admiring him.

For in that moment, the Zhuangyuan-lang, with a single smile and a cup of tea, had turned humiliation into victory.

Chapter 375: There Exists a Kind of Fierce Man Named Luo Longwen

As dusk fell, the world was slowly steeped in hues of twilight. The last light of the sun bled over the horizon, and the western sky seemed as though it had been washed in crimson ink—beautiful, yet ominous, like the dying breath of a wounded beast.

The Minor Grace Banquet was drawing to its close. The laughter and chatter within the grand hall were gradually softening into a languid murmur. Zhu Ping'an, feeling the pleasant haze of wine clouding his head, realized he was about three parts drunk. To clear his mind a little, he rose from his seat, deciding to find the washroom and perhaps catch a bit of the cool evening breeze.

Stepping out of the banquet hall, Zhu Ping'an was about to follow the direction of the lavatory he had used last time when a soft voice called out behind him.

"Excuse me, gongzi, are you going to change your clothes?"

The speaker was a young maid, her posture impeccable, her eyes bright and attentive.

Zhu Ping'an gave a slight nod.

"Please, this way, gongzi," the maid said respectfully, lowering herself into a neat curtsy and gesturing down a side corridor. "The manor has prepared a special dressing area for this evening's banquet—just ahead, not far."

Outside the main hall, several other maids were stationed here and there, all standing in quiet attention, but this particular girl's attire was clearly of higher quality. Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but marvel inwardly at the extravagance of the Yan family. They really do take this 'Minor Grace Banquet' seriously, he thought dryly. Even the lavatories have attendants assigned. So those tales in the histories about Yan Song and his son's excesses weren't exaggerations after all.

He folded his hands politely. "Then I must thank you."

Since someone had been assigned to guide him, Zhu Ping'an saw no reason to insist on going to the previous washroom—especially considering what had happened there the last time. The mere thought of that incident with Second Miss Yan made his scalp prickle. The girl's temper, as proven by the way she had hurled her shoe yesterday, was not something he wished to test again.

The maid led the way, her steps light as falling petals, while Zhu Ping'an followed behind her. The path wound left, then right, leading them gradually deeper into a maze of lesser courtyards and side buildings.

As they turned yet another corner, a faint suspicion began to stir in Zhu Ping'an's heart. Why does this so-called changing room feel so remote? It's not exactly reasonable for the Yan family to prepare something so hidden away. His pace slowed unconsciously.

The maid must have sensed his doubt, for she turned and said reassuringly, "Gongzi, we've arrived. It's just ahead."

Perhaps I'm overthinking this, Zhu Ping'an told himself after a pause. It's just a restroom. Who'd go to the trouble of scheming about that? Shaking his head with a faint smile, he dismissed his concerns and followed on.

Yet fate has a way of weaving threads precisely when one least expects it.

In another wing of the same compound, a young scholar—the newly appointed jinshi who had attended the morning’s Major Grace Banquet—was just waking from his drunken stupor. His name was Ouyang Zishi, and though the lingering wine still muddled his thoughts, a sharp resentment burned in his chest.

That wretch Zhu Ping’an had slipped through his grasp earlier with some underhanded trick. But not this time. Tonight, at the Minor Grace Banquet, he would have his revenge.

Grumbling under his breath, Ouyang Zishi left his room, cutting through a shortcut in the complex before nightfall. Just as he was about to emerge from a narrow path, he caught the faint sound of a girl’s voice—

“Gongzi, it’s just ahead.”

He froze. That voice—he knew it.

It was unmistakably Zi Chai, the personal maid of Second Miss Yan. He’d courted her favor many times, sending poems and small gifts through her in hopes of winning over her mistress.

But why was she here? And more importantly, who was she speaking to?

His curiosity spiked, Ouyang pressed himself against the corner wall and cautiously peeked ahead—just in time to see Zi Chai turning her head toward a young man.

Zhu Ping'an.

In that instant, the fog of alcohol vanished from Ouyang's mind like mist under sunlight. His eyes widened, his fists clenched, and an ugly, bitter heat surged in his chest.

That voice... and that man. It's him! That damned thief!

Then, her words replayed in his head: "Gongzi, it's just ahead."

Just ahead? Ahead of what? His mind raced furiously—and then, like a thunderclap, the realization struck him.

Zi Chai, Second Miss Yan's inseparable maid... leading Zhu Ping'an somewhere secluded.

Heavens above! They're meeting in secret!

His face twisted with outrage. The engagement was nearly settled, and yet she's sneaking off with another man behind my back?!

How many times has this happened before?

Rage boiled through him, turning his vision red. He could practically feel the humiliation of the green hat settling upon his head. His knuckles whitened as he prepared to burst from the shadows and give that thieving scholar a beating he'd never forget.

But just as he inhaled to shout, a strong hand clamped over his mouth and yanked him backward into a narrow alley.

"Shh! Young Master Ouyang—do not be reckless."

The one who had stopped him was none other than Lord Luo Longwen. After pulling him deeper into the alleyway, Luo released him, shaking his head gravely.

"Lord Luo! How can you tell me not to act? This—this is intolerable!" Ouyang's voice quivered with fury.

Indeed, these two men were Ouyang Zishi and Luo Longwen. Luo, having noticed earlier that Second Miss Yan's maid was leading Zhu Ping'an away, had quietly followed. He hadn't expected, however, to stumble upon this scene.

“Please, calm yourself, Young Master Ouyang,” Luo said with feigned composure. “It may be a misunderstanding.”

Misunderstanding your mother! Ouyang raged inwardly. Easy for you to say—it’s not your fiancée!

Just as Ouyang was about to lose his temper again, Zhu Ping’an suddenly came stumbling out from the building ahead. His face was pale, his steps unsteady—as though he’d seen a ghost—and he sprinted away along the path they’d come from, as if chased by wild dogs.

A moment later, a furious female voice rang out from within.

“Zhu Ping’an! You just wait!”

The words dripped with indignation.

Ouyang exhaled sharply, relief and renewed fury mingling within him. So nothing happened... but that tone! Could it be that he took advantage and then tried to deny it?!

Luo Longwen tugged Ouyang back into the shadows again before Zhu could see them. They waited until the scholar had fled far down the path.

“This humiliation...” Ouyang growled through clenched teeth, veins bulging at his temples. “I will never forgive him!”

“Calm yourself, Young Master,” Luo murmured. “Anger clouds judgment.”

“Calm myself? How can I?!” Ouyang snapped.

Luo’s lips curled into a thin, shadowy smile. “What if Zhu Ping’an were to... die?”

Ouyang blinked. “Die? Murder is against the law.”

“Who said anything about killing him with your own hands?” Luo’s voice dropped low, oily and dark.

“Then... you mean to hire assassins?” Ouyang’s eyes brightened.

“Not quite.” Luo shook his head slowly, eyes glinting with malice. “There’s a certain county in the southeast—a cursed place. Barren mountains, violent folk. Officials die there faster than the grass grows. Six magistrates have perished in the past five years—slain by bandits, rebels, or the restless Miao tribes nearby. If one were to... recommend him for such a post...” Luo let out a low, chilling chuckle. “Well, I daresay his grave would be green before half a year has passed.”

“But he’s the top scholar,” Ouyang objected, frowning. “By custom, he’ll be assigned to the Hanlin Academy.”

Luo’s smile deepened. “Do not forget the imperial inspection, my friend. Heaven itself has given you this chance.”

At that, Ouyang’s eyes gleamed with cruel understanding.

“Today’s little ‘incident’...” Ouyang said after a pause, glancing at Luo. “I trust Lord Luo will keep it between us.”

“Of course,” Luo replied gravely. “I have suffered the same kind of betrayal myself. I know that pain all too well.”

“Oh?” Ouyang looked at him in surprise. “So you too...?”

Luo sighed heavily. “It was five years ago. I was still a renowned calligraphy master then. I kept a concubine in a small villa. Next door lived a young scholar—surname Zhu, of all things. A simple, honest-looking fellow... or so I thought. One night, while I was visiting the villa, I heard flute music from the wall next door. Soft... lingering... My concubine seemed moved by it. I suspected nothing then. But later, I grew uneasy, and returned suddenly one afternoon—only to find the two of them together, in my bed!”

Luo’s eyes flashed with remembered fury, his face contorted as if reliving the humiliation.

Ouyang winced, half in pity, half in horror. Another Zhu... a scholar too... No wonder Luo Longwen bore such hatred toward Zhu Ping’an.

“You must have beaten that wretch half to death,” Ouyang muttered.

Luo’s lips curled into a grimace that was almost a grin. “Heh. I did more than that,” he whispered darkly. “I caught them together—and I took them both.”

Ouyang froze. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe.

He... took them both?!

A shiver ran down his spine. The cold night air suddenly felt sharper.

“Ahem... well, Lord Luo, I... I just remembered something urgent. I’ll be taking my leave now...”

And with that, Ouyang Zishi backed away, leaving Luo Longwen’s low, sinister laughter echoing softly through the darkened courtyard— like the whisper of the devil himself.

#### Chapter 376: The Appointment of Office

Of course, the one who was most devastated of all was none other than Miss Yan’er herself.

Zhu Ping’an, still feeling the warmth of wine in his veins, followed the young maid through winding garden paths where emerald trees swayed gently and blossoms of scarlet and gold perfumed the air. At last, they arrived before a secluded building half-hidden by flowering branches.

“This way, please, Young Master Zhu,” the little maid said softly, bowing slightly as she gestured toward the doorway.

Zhu Ping’an stepped inside—and immediately gained a whole new understanding of what luxury meant in the Yan household. This... this was supposed to be a washroom? The floor was laid with fine carpets; delicate porcelain vases brimmed with fresh flowers; lush potted plants breathed life into the air. Even the faintest trace of odor was absent, replaced instead by the subtle sweetness of some rare incense.

“Please, Young Master Zhu.” The little maid halted in the main hall and pointed with her slender hand toward a side room.

Zhu Ping'an assumed that was the men's lavatory. He nodded politely in thanks, then strode toward it.

Since there were ladies waiting outside, he didn't dare linger too long. As he reached the doorway, he lifted his hands to unfasten the smooth silver sash at his waist. After all, his back was turned to the maid—there was nothing indecent about it.

He meant to be quick—swift and discreet. The sooner this was over, the better. Pushing the door open, he lifted the hem of his robe, preparing to loosen his trousers. Ancient trousers, unlike those of modern times, were loose and tied beneath one's outer robe—some had an open crotch, some did not. His happened to be the latter sort.

Thus, when Zhu Ping'an entered, he was holding his belt in one hand and pulling at his waistband with the other, just about to relieve himself—

"KYAA! You shameless scoundrel! Lecher!"

The shriek pierced the air like a dagger. Before Zhu Ping'an could even blink, the sharp clang of steel echoed in the room—swords and cudgels clattering to the floor.

He froze. Then, looking up, his gaze locked with that of Miss Yan'er, her face flushed crimson, her teeth clenched as she glared daggers at him. Behind her stood seven or eight young maids in military attire—each one covering her face in embarrassment, their weapons scattered at their feet. Evidently, in their haste to shield their eyes from the scandalous sight of Zhu Ping'an's half-loosened robe, they had dropped everything they'd been holding.

“Uh... what the—?!”

Zhu Ping’an felt his stomach sink. Why is Miss Yan’er here?! And why in Heaven’s name do they have weapons—was this supposed to be a trap? A washroom or an ambush? Are they planning to kill me just because I accidentally saw her body that one time? Surely not!

Whatever the case, one thing was certain—he had to get out. Fast.

Cold sweat broke across his forehead; in an instant, the wine’s pleasant haze vanished. Without daring another glance, he dropped his robe, turned on his heel, and strode out, fumbling to tie his silver sash back into place as he went. In his haste, he nearly tripped over the threshold—so when Ouyang Zishi and Luo Longwen saw him emerge, he was staggering and disheveled, as though fleeing for his life.

Inside, Miss Yan’er was on the verge of collapse.

Last time, when she had been bathing, Zhu Ping’an had accidentally barged in—leaving her humiliated, furious, and flustered beyond words. Though she had tried to capture that “thieving scoundrel,” he had tricked her and escaped unscathed. She’d burned with shame ever since.

But fate, it seemed, had eyes. During the grand parade celebrating the new scholars, Miss Yan’er had recognized the new Zhuangyuan—the very same Zhu Ping’an—as the man who had sneaked into her bath.

So she had devised a plan, instructing her trusted maid to lure him in, intending to teach the rogue a painful lesson.

Who could have expected that Zhu Ping'an would so perfectly "see through" her little scheme—and then, as if to mock her, perform that utterly indecent gesture right in front of her? Once again, he had humiliated her—and once again, slipped away!

She had meant to punish the thief... yet ended up being shamed by him again!

Trembling with rage, she could only glare at his retreating back and shout through clenched teeth, "Zhu Ping'an, you just wait!"

When the Minor Grace Banquet finally ended, Zhu Ping'an let out a long sigh of relief.

Thank Heaven—it's over.

The moment the gathering concluded, he wasted no time in leaving the Yan estate, not daring to linger even a heartbeat longer.

Zhang Juzheng remained behind, bowing respectfully to Elder Yan Song and the Grand Secretary Yan before departing as well.

At dawn the following day, Zhu Ping'an once again donned his full ceremonial robes, every fold of his attire immaculate, and set off early for the Honglu Temple. For the next three days, all the newly appointed scholars would undergo training there—learning the intricate rites of court etiquette.

Honglu Temple, a fourth-rank government institution, was responsible for overseeing imperial ceremonies, banquets, and rituals. In a sense, it was akin to a “Central Party School” for the Ming court. During these three days, they would study the formalities of audiences, feasts, and sacrifices; upon completion, they would “graduate” and attend court on the fourth day to offer thanks to the Emperor Jiajing himself.

On the first day of instruction, the new jinshi were formally granted their official titles.

Unlike in the Qing Dynasty—where further examinations were required—the Ming Dynasty appointed officials immediately after the palace examination. Thus, the names were inscribed, sealed with the Ministry of Rites' great red stamp, and delivered along with ceremonial robes to Honglu Temple for announcement and distribution.

As the Zhuangyuan, Zhu Ping'an, unsurprisingly, received the traditional appointment of Hanlin Academy Editor (Xiuzhuan)—a sixth-rank position reserved for the top scholar of every examination year.

Zhang Siwei was appointed Hanlin Academy Compiler (Bianxiu).

Although the difference between “Editor” and “Compiler” was just a single character, the gulf in status was vast—the former being of the sixth rank, the latter the seventh. Yet Zhang Siwei was elated beyond measure. To him, it was as if fortune itself had struck him on the head, for the position of Bianxiu was no common reward—it was typically granted to the second or third place of the first rank, or other promising scholars from the second or third ranks.

Thus, being chosen marked him as one of the rising stars of the empire.

The truth, however, was far simpler—and no one could have guessed it.

When Emperor Jiajing personally reviewed the appointment list, his eyes fell upon the name Ouyang Zishi, and his brow furrowed.

“‘Yang’... ‘Yang’? The word means illness,” he muttered. “How could my Great Ming harbor such a name within the Hanlin Academy—my very chamber of counsel? It offends the omen of our state’s well-being! No, he shall be sent elsewhere—to the Six Ministries, perhaps. Better out of sight than vexing my heart.”

He crossed out Ouyang Zishi’s name with a stroke of the imperial brush. Then, as his gaze moved down the page, another name caught his eye—Zhang Siwei.

“If the four pillars collapse, the nation perishes,” the Emperor murmured, recalling the ancient saying. “Then if the Four Pillars stand firm, shall not the realm endure forever?”

He read the name again and again, a faint smile curving his lips.

“Zhang Siwei... the Four Pillars stand firm. An auspicious name indeed!”

And so, Zhang Siwei’s fortune was sealed by the Emperor’s whim.

Meanwhile, Wang Shizhen was assigned as an observing scholar at the Court of Judicial Review (Dali Temple)—essentially an internship position, filling vacancies as they arose.

The remaining scholars were distributed according to their rankings: the most exceptional few selected as junior Hanlin candidates (Shujishi); the middle ranks sent to observe in the Six Ministries or other key offices; and the rest dispatched to provincial posts for their apprenticeships.

Only Ouyang Zishi, despite his strong ranking and the powerful support of Yan Song and Yan Shifan, received an assignment that shocked everyone—

He was sent to the Prince Jing’s household as an observer.

Ouyang Zishi stared at the appointment list for a long, long while, unable to utter a single word.

#### Chapter 377: That Village, That Dog

In ancient times, when travel was arduous and the transmission of news slow as a crawling snail, the empire's great events often reached the far corners of the land only after many days.

It had already been several days since the results of the imperial examination were publicly proclaimed in the capital. While the grand city still lingered in the feverish excitement of the new Zhuangyuan—the top scholar parading through its streets in splendor—most of the outlying regions remained utterly ignorant of the outcome. Over a hundred imperial couriers had ridden out from the capital, their horses foaming and their whips cracking as they sped across the land, yet even so, the news of the “Palace Examination” had not yet reached the distant provinces.

Far away, in the empire's vast southwestern lands, the magnificent Woniu Mountain rose proudly from the earth, stretching for hundreds of li like a sleeping ox. Nestled at its foot lay a small, picturesque village, surrounded by tranquil streams and lush greenery. Before the houses, fences of woven branches stood neatly in rows; behind them, loquat trees bent gently beneath the weight of ripening fruit. The villagers tended melons and beans before their homes, and the air was heavy with the scent of earth and summer.

The scenery was idyllic—mountains thick with trees, streams glinting with darting fish and shrimp—but beauty did not always mean wealth. The low thatched roofs, the cracked clay walls, and the simple wooden fences spoke plainly of lives that were modest, if content.

At the heart of the village stood a colossal banyan tree. Its branches wound and twisted toward the heavens, vast enough to cast a shade that could cover half the square. Beneath its gnarled roots lay two stone steles—one weathered and moss-covered, the other freshly carved, its edges still white from the chisel.

The older stone bore the inscription:

“In the thirtieth year of Jiajing, established by the graciously appointed provincial scholar Zhu Ping’an.”

The newer one, proudly gleaming in the light, read:

“In the thirtieth year of Jiajing, established by the graciously appointed metropolitan champion Zhu Ping’an.”

Though several days had passed since the imperial results were announced in the capital, the tidings had not yet reached this remote village. The villagers still reveled in their pride that Zhu Ping’an—one of their own—had taken the title of Huiyuan, the top scholar of the provincial examination. Their joy continued to ripple through the little settlement like gentle waves in a pond.

Under the shade of the ancient banyan, a group of villagers idled about, chatting lazily while the afternoon sun shimmered between the leaves. From time to time, sleek horses pulling ornate carriages passed by—some entering, some leaving the village—raising little clouds of dust as they went.

“Mm, that makes eighteen carriages today,” an old farmer remarked as he squatted by the tree roots, tapping the ashes from his long pipe against the bark. “Tsk, tsk... fine beasts like that, wasted on pulling carts. What a pity.”

“Eighteen? That’s nothing,” boasted another man leaning against the tree trunk. “The other day, I saw two pure white stallions pulling a carriage to the Zhu household. Not a single strand of mixed hair on them, I swear by my hoe!”

“The Zhu family’s fortune has truly come,” sighed a burly blacksmith nearby, pausing in his polishing of a hoe. “Our Ping’an-lang has made us proud—Huiyuan! Only one in the whole empire! Who among us would’ve even dreamed it?”

“Dream?” chuckled the old man with the pipe. “You’re thinking too small. Remember that school-grain plan he started years ago? Even the county magistrate praised our village for it—and Ping’an-lang was only thirteen then!” He puffed proudly, the smoke curling in lazy rings toward the canopy.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“My boy started studying under old Master Sun this spring,” one villager said. “The village gave us a whole sack of grain to help out—and they promised another one come summer!”

“Same here,” added another with a grin. “Both my lads go to school now. Two sacks for me! Saves us trouble at home and maybe, if they can learn to read and count, they’ll find decent work in town one day. Can’t all be Ping’an-lang, but who says they can’t get a better life?”

As the talk continued, an old man appeared at the western end of the road, walking slowly with a fat, lazy yellow dog trailing behind him.

When the villagers saw who it was, their eyes brightened—it was Grandpa Li, who lived right next door to the Zhu family.

“Eh, Grandpa Li! What brings you here? Skipping your nap today?” a young man called out teasingly.

“Nap?” the old man grumbled good-naturedly, rubbing his forehead. “I barely lay down when another group of visitors arrived at the Zhu place. Just when I thought I could doze off, another lot came! Even after supper the past two nights, people were still showing up. Who can sleep with all that commotion?”

Despite his complaints, there was unmistakable pride gleaming in his wrinkled face, like he secretly enjoyed every minute of it.

The young man laughed. “If it’s such a bother, Grandpa Li, how about we trade houses? Mine’s quiet as a grave—you’d sleep like a log!”

“Ha! Dream on!” Grandpa Li huffed, his beard bristling. “Trade? Not for a thousand taels! Have you ever seen a juren before? A county magistrate? Or an Anqing prefect, all high and mighty?”

The young man sheepishly shook his head.

“I’ve seen them all,” the old man went on triumphantly. “Sat right on my rooftop and watched them clear as day. Those grand lords—hah! The way they carry themselves, boy, you could study a lifetime and still not learn it.”

He strutted a few steps in an exaggerated swagger, his back straight and his belly forward, earning hearty laughter from the crowd.

“Grandpa Li walks like an old turtle!” a little boy in open-crotched pants shouted gleefully.

A sharp smack or two from his father quickly silenced him.

“Ah, let him be,” someone chuckled. “When he’s old enough, we’ll send him to the school too. Every kid in this village’s lucky—we’ve got that school-grain program. The other villages can only envy us.”

Another villager grinned slyly. “Grandpa Li, I bet you’re not moving because the Zhu family keeps sending you treats, eh? Fruits, pastries—you’ve been eating well, haven’t you?”

The old man snorted. “Hmph! Don’t act like your homes are empty. Haven’t they been sending gifts all over the village?”

“That’s true, that’s true,” several nodded. “The Zhu family’s generosity is second to none.”

They chatted a while longer until a grand carriage that had gone toward the Zhu residence earlier came rolling back, its wheels crunching softly on the dirt road. The driver cracked his whip, and the horses trotted briskly toward the edge of the village.

Grandpa Li’s lazy dog pricked up its ears, suddenly alert. It stiffened, stretched its neck, and took a few eager steps forward as if preparing to bark. Its jaws opened wide—but no sound came out.

It mimed the action once, twice—silent, like thunder without rain.

Finally, it drooped its ears and flopped back down beside Grandpa Li’s feet, exhausted by the effort.

“Eh, Grandpa Li,” one of the men laughed, “what’s wrong with your mutt? Used to bark its head off at strangers. Why’s it all thunder and no lightning today?”

The old man glanced down at the dog and shrugged. “Too many visitors lately. The poor thing’s barked itself hoarse.”

And with that, the men burst out laughing again, their voices echoing warmly beneath the shade of the ancient banyan, while the sunlight filtered through the leaves like shards of gold—just another peaceful afternoon in a little village still unaware that one of their own had already risen to the very summit of the empire's scholar ranks.

#### Chapter 378: I Have a Special Way of Talking

For more than ten days, the once-bustling scene of carriages passing in and out of Xiahe Village finally began to quiet down. Only then did Madam Chen, Zhu Ping'an's mother, find the leisure to step out of her home. In the days before, the house had been constantly filled with visitors and carts—she hadn't been able to leave her doorstep even for a moment.

Madam Chen was already past forty, though at first glance she looked barely over thirty. Her complexion was smooth and radiant, her features soft and healthy-looking, made even more youthful by the recent lightness in her mood.

Among the village women of her generation, most had long been worn down by the years—faces weathered, backs slightly stooped, hands roughened by endless labor. Whenever they encountered Madam Chen, they could not help but glance her way with envy, their mouths spilling forth sincere compliments about how well she had maintained herself.

Each time, she would wave a hand and laugh it off, pretending to deny their words. Yet the delight and pride that glimmered in her eyes could not be hidden, no matter how she tried.

Life had indeed become exceptionally comfortable for the Chen family. Ever since her younger son, Zhu Ping'an, passed the provincial examination and became a juren, the family's fortunes had risen like the tide. Day by day, their circumstances grew more prosperous. Now, the Zhu household owned over a hundred mu

of fertile farmland—more than sixty of them being top-grade paddy fields—and that was not even counting the portions that others had voluntarily donated to them in gratitude or admiration. If those were added in, the number would be even greater.

Their home, too, had been entirely rebuilt—a spacious, sturdy residence that looked grander than the manor of even the wealthiest landlord in the village.

With so much land to manage, they had hired tenants and helpers, yet still needed someone trustworthy to oversee things. Zhu Father, a man who had always found contentment in working the soil, decided to give up his old job of driving the ox cart and instead took to tending the fields himself, spending his days among the ripening crops.

The task of driving the carriage to and from the nearby town now fell to Zhu Pingchuan, the eldest son. It was a good source of income, and Madam Chen refused to let anyone else handle it—such work should stay within the family.

Her eldest son had married a diligent young woman, and though the couple was often glued together like newlyweds tend to be, they were still filial and never forgot their mother's kindness.

But what filled Madam Chen's heart to overflowing was the news that had arrived only a few weeks earlier—her younger son, her beloved Ping'an, had taken first place in the metropolitan examination, becoming Hùiyuán! From the moment the message reached her, her joy had been uncontainable.

Aside from occasionally worrying about whether her son was eating well and resting enough in the capital, her days were now wrapped entirely in contentment.

“Juan’er, keep an eye on the house for me, will you? I’ll go for a little walk,” Madam Chen said, holding a half-finished shoe sole in one hand and her sewing kit in the other as she stood by the doorway, calling to her daughter-in-law.

“Yes, Mother. Take this stool with you—if you stand too long, you’ll tire yourself out.” The young woman hurried after her, offering a small bamboo stool.

“All right. And you, don’t overwork yourself either,” Madam Chen said with a kind smile. “You’ve already made two sets of clothes for me, your father-in-law, and Pingchuan. Rest your eyes a little.”

She was thoroughly pleased with her eldest daughter-in-law. The girl had a strong figure—a sign of good childbearing fortune—was quick and capable with her hands, and knew how to speak with tact. Unlike her dull, honest husband, she had wit and presence of mind.

“I’m fine, Mother, really,” the young woman replied with a soft laugh and a shake of her head.

“You silly girl,” Madam Chen chided fondly, clicking her tongue. “Don’t even know how to enjoy a bit of peace. There’ll always be work to do—no need to rush.”

“Yes, Mother,” her daughter-in-law said obediently, lowering her gaze and smiling bashfully.

With her instructions given, Madam Chen, pleased and humming lightly, tucked the small bamboo stool under her arm and stepped out into the crisp afternoon air, heading toward the spot where she and several familiar village women often gathered.

As expected, by the time she arrived, seven or eight women were already seated there. Some were stitching soles like her, others spinning thread, and a few were sorting rice in wide wicker baskets. The chatter and laughter rose and fell like the rhythm of a familiar song, blending with the sounds of village life—the occasional bark of a dog, the distant cluck of chickens, the rustle of the autumn breeze.

“Ah! Ping’an’s mother! You finally decided to show your face again!” one of the older women called out with a grin.

“Ah, the past few days have been too busy at home, I couldn’t get away,” Madam Chen replied cheerfully.

“See? Didn’t I say so?” another woman nudged the one beside her with her elbow. “Doesn’t she look younger again? Look at her—fair as ever!”

“Isn’t that the truth?” a plump aunt chimed in. “Ping’an’s mother and I are about the same age, yet look at me—I’ve turned into an old yellow-faced woman, while she looks like a bride barely past thirty!”

“Oh, stop your nonsense,” Madam Chen said, smiling so wide her dimples showed. “I’m already over forty!”

“I swear I’m not making it up,” the woman protested with mock solemnity. “Anyone who sees you would say the same!”

The rest of the group nodded in agreement, voices echoing their amusement.

Madam Chen waved her hand as though to dismiss them, but her delighted expression betrayed how much she enjoyed their words.

Settling herself down, she began stitching as the conversation flowed on. Despite the smallness of their village, gossip was never scarce. They talked about everything—the wild boar that had wandered into Wang Family Village a few days ago, how someone’s daughter-in-law had argued with her mother-in-law, or how Sister Lǐ’s dog had just birthed a litter of puppies. Each topic spun into laughter and chatter that could last an hour.

Madam Chen listened for a long while, her needle flashing in and out of the shoe sole. Yet to her faint disappointment, no one mentioned what she truly wanted to hear—her son’s triumph in the examinations.

She had, after all, prepared an entire arsenal of words, ready to tell and retell the tale of her son’s glorious success. But without anyone bringing it up, she felt like a knight who had mastered dragon-slaying techniques only to find there were no dragons left to fight.

Still, that didn’t bother her for long—because Madam Chen had her own special conversational skills.

Waiting for a pause in the gossip, she looked up and said casually, "Auntie, doesn't the weather feel especially nice today?"

"It does," came the murmured replies, heads nodding as a few women glanced at the clear blue sky.

"Mm-hmm, really pleasant," someone added.

Madam Chen smiled faintly, her tone bright and deliberate as she continued, "And look at that cloud up there."

She set aside her sewing, raised a finger, and pointed toward a small tuft of white drifting lazily across the sky. Her voice was rich, ringing with pride.

"Tell me—doesn't that cloud look just like my younger son, the one who passed as Hùi-yuán?"

The group of women fell silent for a heartbeat.

Even the cloud, if it could speak, might have blushed under such praise—it had been idly floating, shapeless and free, only to be declared the image of the famed Hùi-yuán of the Zhu family.

But her words—light as a feather yet sharp as a blade—hit their mark precisely. The topic turned instantly, as she knew it would.

“Oh yes! Speaking of which, Ping’an’s mother, when will your son be coming home?”

“I saw all those carriages coming to your place lately—people bringing gifts, weren’t they? Who were those fine-looking folks?”

“What exactly does being Huiyuán mean? Is he going to be an official now?”

“You’re truly blessed, Ping’an’s mother! Your son’s future is set!”

Surrounded by eager voices, Madam Chen’s face shone brighter than the midday sun. She answered every question with lively enthusiasm, her pride barely contained.

And from that moment on, the conversation never left the orbit of Zhu Ping’an—the brilliant Huiyuán. Whenever the talk began to drift elsewhere, Madam Chen would skillfully steer it back again, always with that same unflagging delight.

After all, for a mother whose son had risen above all others, every cloud in the sky could look just a little like him.

Chapter 379: This Humble Official Has a Memorial to Present

“Urgent dispatch! Urgent dispatch! Three hundred li in haste!”

“The Imperial Examination List! Open the gates! Those who hinder shall be guilty of great crimes—those who resist shall face severe punishment!”

The first light of dawn had just brushed the eastern sky when a cloud of dust rolled toward the gates of Anqing Prefecture. From within that swirling haze came the thunder of hooves—two riders charging like arrows loosed from a bow.

The one in the lead was a post courier clad in the official vermilion uniform, his hand clutching a scroll sealed with the great imperial stamp. Across the scroll, in bold black brushstrokes, were written four characters—“Deliver with all speed.” The courier urged his steed on mercilessly, galloping full tilt toward the city gate without slowing for even a breath.

Behind him, another rider followed close—a man in darker attire, bearing in his arms a sealed imperial decree. The scroll was black, its wooden shafts carved from rare sunflower ebony, the dark wood gleaming faintly under the dim morning light. Though slightly behind, his pace too was fierce and unrelenting as he sped toward the city gate.

These two were not companions. They had met only shortly before reaching Anqing. Both had departed from the capital, yet the second rider had actually left two full days earlier. His message, however—a commendation decree for ennoblement—was marked only two hundred li urgent, unlike the first courier’s three hundred li. Thus, despite his head start, he had been overtaken just before the gates of Anqing.

The guards stationed atop the walls of Anqing caught sight of the two riders tearing toward them, banners and scrolls raised high. Recognizing the seals and hearing the thunderous cries of “Imperial Edict Delivery!”, they dared not delay for even a heartbeat. Hastily, they opened the gates wide, waving the couriers through.

At long last, the Golden List of the Imperial Examinations and the imperial decree of ennoblement had arrived in Anqing Prefecture.

At that very moment—while the courier’s horses, drenched in sweat and dust, thundered into the prefecture far away—in the capital, Zhu Ping’an had just completed three days of ceremonial training at the Honglu Temple. Today was the day of presenting the memorial of gratitude before His Majesty.

According to the regulations set forth in the Great Ming Code, after three days of etiquette instruction at the Honglu Temple, the top scholar of the imperial examination was to lead all newly appointed jinshi to the palace to offer thanks to the Emperor. The event served not only as an expression of loyalty and humility—but also as a final test of whether the new scholars had properly mastered the intricacies of court ceremony.

This particular audience was to be held in the Western Garden (Xiyuan). It was already a small miracle that Emperor Jiajing had deigned to leave his Daoist retreat in the Western Garden for the last audience at the Forbidden City; to hold another full court assembly here so soon was, to the officials, nothing short of divine favor.

It was still early in the year, and to see the Emperor twice before spring’s end was something few dared to hope for. In the previous years, Jiajing had secluded himself so deeply in alchemy and Daoist cultivation that entire seasons passed without a single appearance. To the officials, it mattered little whether they were in

Xiyuan or the Forbidden City—so long as they could see the Emperor's face, their hearts brimmed with satisfaction.

That morning, Zhu Ping'an rose before dawn. He dressed meticulously in his newly bestowed court robes, the deep crimson silk trimmed with patterned gold threads, and fastened his scholar's crown upon his head. Standing before the mirror, he steadied his breath—his heart thumping with anticipation and solemnity.

By the time he reached the Western Garden Palace Gate, the place was already thrumming with the quiet energy of expectation. To witness His Majesty's presence was rarer than winning a grand prize, and no one—neither minister nor attendant—took the chance lightly. Before long, the front of the palace was filled with the most brilliant minds of the empire, the bureaucratic elite of Great Ming, gathered in dignified silence.

When the appointed hour arrived, the great bronze doors of Xiyuan swung open. Ministers and officials, ranked by order of precedence, filed inside in strict formation. Zhu Ping'an, leading the group of new jinshi, followed immediately behind.

The Hall of Supreme Purity (Taisu Hall) loomed ahead—a place already familiar to Zhu Ping'an, for it was there that he had faced the Emperor during the final stage of the Imperial Examination. Today, the hall had been prepared once more for the formal audience.

Officials from the Honglu Temple had already set the ceremonial arrangements. Before the eastern gate of the hall stood a small carved table—its surface engraved with coiling dragons among clouds—set precisely three paces from the main doors. Zhu Ping'an knew at once: this was the table upon which he, as the Zhuangyuan—the top scholar—was to place the Memorial of Gratitude on behalf of all new graduates.

The form and wording of such a memorial were fixed by tradition, leaving little room for personal expression. His had already been composed during the Honglu Temple training, revised word by word under the careful eyes of senior officials.

Moments later, the rhythmic clang of gongs and the steady beat of ceremonial drums announced the Emperor's approach.

A retinue of Jinyiwei guards appeared first, surrounding the Emperor's sedan in a glittering formation. Their shields gleamed like silver under the sun; banners, golden melons, and ornamental maces shimmered in the air. Behind them came palace musicians, their flutes and drums weaving solemn melodies that echoed through the garden.

Then—with a sharp crack of a whip—the imperial sedan came into view.

Emperor Jiajing had arrived.

The assembled officials, as one, thundered:

“Long live His Majesty! Long live the Emperor! Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years! Ten thousand times ten thousand years!”

Three times they knelt; nine times they bowed. The grand ceremony shook the hall like waves breaking upon a shore.

Zhu Ping'an, leading the new scholars, knelt among the ranks at the foot of the steps. From where he was, he could not see the Emperor clearly, only the golden radiance spilling from the hall. Yet each kneel, each bow, carried the full weight of his gratitude and awe.

When the ceremonial greetings concluded, the court's true business began—the presentation of the Memorial of Gratitude by the Zhuangyuan.

A Honglu Temple official descended the steps, gesturing for Zhu Ping'an to follow him upward. Together they approached the dragon-engraved table before the eastern gate.

Following the prescribed ritual, Zhu Ping'an knelt, raised the memorial in both hands, and placed it reverently upon the table. Then, as taught, he performed three kneelings and nine prostrations before retreating once more to stand with his peers.

“Present the memorial!”

The cry of the herald rang out clear and powerful.

At once, another Honglu Temple official stepped from the ranks, approached the dragon table, and lifted the memorial with both hands. Advancing into the hall, he knelt in the center of the court, holding the document high before him.

“Proclaim the memorial!”

Again the herald’s voice resounded.

Kneeling, the official began to read aloud—his voice steady and formal—reciting the preface and conclusion of the memorial, the traditional words of thanks from the new scholars to their sovereign.

When the reading concluded, the herald called once more:

“New scholars, approach and pay homage!”

Zhu Ping’an led his fellow graduates up the hall steps. Together they knelt before the Dragon Throne, the Emperor seated high above upon his gilded seat.

From that height, Emperor Jiajing surveyed the kneeling scholars. His eyes glinted faintly, and at length he spoke, his tone calm but weighty as stone:

“Some among you shall enter the Hanlin Academy, some shall serve in the Six Ministries.

You are the keepers of my words, the stewards of our peace.

Cultivate virtue and ability well, for I shall depend upon you in the days to come.

Should any grow negligent, be warned—I shall not forgive lightly.”

His voice, though unhurried, carried an authority that filled the hall.

Zhu Ping’an and the new jinshi bowed deeply once more.

“We humbly heed Your Majesty’s sacred command!”

The Emperor said no more. The herald’s cry of “Rites concluded!” echoed through the hall, and the officials rose, bowed again, and stepped back to take their places at the end of the civil ranks.

Normally, with the memorial offered and the ceremony complete, the court would have dispersed—the Emperor returning to his residence, the officials to their ministries.

But today... something was different.

Just as the herald drew breath to declare the assembly dismissed, a voice—clear, sonorous, and unwavering—rose from within the ranks.

“Your servant has a memorial to present!”

The hall fell utterly silent.

Every gaze turned toward the speaker as he stepped forward from among the sea of officials—a man of about forty, refined in bearing yet radiating stern resolve. He wore the dark-blue Feiyu robe of a high-ranking officer, the embroidery of flying fish glinting faintly as he strode into the open.

In his hand, he gripped a jade memorial tablet, and with deliberate, unflinching steps, he advanced toward the Dragon Throne.

Raising his voice, solemn and resonant, he cried once more:

“Your servant has a memorial to present!”

The words struck through the hush like a blade through still water—bold, ringing, unyielding. His face was calm, his gaze steady, as though he had already cast aside the fear of life and death.

And thus, the tranquil air of the great hall rippled with sudden tension—the spark of something momentous about to unfold.

Chapter 380: Petition to Execute the Traitor Yan Song

“Your servant has a memorial to present.”

That single sentence struck the hall like a thunderclap from a clear sky.

The words came so suddenly that everyone — from the august Emperor Jiajing seated upon the Dragon Throne, to the ranks of civil and military officials standing below — found themselves momentarily frozen. None had expected this. None were prepared.

And then, when they saw who had stepped forward, a ripple of shock swept through the court.

It was Shen Lian.

The moment Zhu Ping'an caught sight of the man, his heart sank. A sense of foreboding, sharp and cold as a blade, cut through his chest.

He knew — from history, from memory — that Shen Lian's impeachment memorial against Yan Song had indeed taken place around this very time. Yet he hadn't expected it to be today. He had even been thinking of warning Shen Lian, perhaps through an anonymous letter or some subtle word of caution. But fate had moved faster.

Shen Lian had already stepped forward.

Could it be that after that drunken night — the night he forced drink upon Yan Shifan, son of the all-powerful Grand Secretary Yan Song — Shen Lian had awakened in confusion and dread, realizing the enormity of what he'd done? And perhaps, knowing too well the vengeful nature of the Yan family, he had decided that since disaster was already inevitable, he might as well face it head-on — to strike first, even if it meant death?

As it turned out, Zhu Ping'an's guess was not far from the truth.

That drunken episode was but the final spark. In truth, Shen Lian had long intended to memorialize the Emperor and expose the crimes of Yan Song and his son. The drinking incident merely convinced him that if he didn't speak out now, he might never have another chance.

So, upon returning home, still half-drunk and his heart aflame, he set to work.

For three days and nights he shut himself away, neither eating nor sleeping properly. He wrote and rewrote, tore up drafts, refined every line with painstaking care. The ink on his desk thickened into crusted pools, and the candle wax piled high beside him. Only when dawn broke on the third day did he finally put down his brush.

Then, as though preparing for his own death, he bathed, burned incense, arranged his affairs, and even ordered a coffin for himself. Having said farewell to his wife and children, Shen Lian walked alone toward the imperial court.

Some things, he thought, must be done by someone.

Silence would not save the nation. Each day of silence was another day of complicity.

If all the other ministers chose to turn a blind eye and hold their tongues, then he — Shen Lian — would not.

“Your servant has a memorial to present!”

In a hall thick with stunned whispers, Shen Lian’s voice rang out like a clarion call. The force of his righteousness seemed almost visible — a surge of upright energy filling the court, shaking the pillars and echoing against the vaulted ceiling.

Standing among the front ranks of officials, Lu Bing — commander of the Embroidered Guards and Shen Lian's superior — was dumbstruck. His usually composed features twitched with disbelief. Shen Lian had not breathed a word of this to him beforehand. And though Lu Bing did not yet know what matter Shen Lian intended to raise, a heavy unease settled in his gut.

From his elevated throne, Emperor Jiajing narrowed his eyes. "And what," he asked coldly, "is it that you wish to report?"

"Your Majesty," Shen Lian declared, stepping forward until he knelt upon the polished jade floor, his memorial held high above his head. "The Grand Secretary Yan Song is a traitorous villain who brings calamity upon the realm and suffering upon the people. Your servant implores Your Majesty to execute Yan Song!"

The words fell like a hammer blow.

Gasps rippled through the ranks. The entire court erupted in a storm of shocked murmurs. Even Yan Song himself — standing serenely among the senior ministers — blinked in surprise. This minor official dared to brand him, Yan Song, the chief scholar of the cabinet, as a national traitor?

Emperor Jiajing's brows furrowed, his tone deadly calm. "Do you understand, Shen Lian, that a man's words may condemn him to death?"

Shen Lian lifted his head, his expression unwavering. “Your servant understands. Yet when treachery festers in the court, I cannot remain silent. The traitor Yan Song is guilty of ten capital crimes — each deserving death!”

Then, voice ringing with fury and conviction, he began to list them one by one.

“Last year, when the barbarian Altan Khan defied our borders, Your Majesty resolved to lead a northern campaign. The ministers of the realm were united in their wish to serve. But victory depends upon sound counsel, and sound counsel demands that the court first purge itself of corruption. Yet the Grand Secretary Yan — greedy to his marrow, foolish to the bone — cared only for himself and his son Shifan.

When Your Majesty worried for the realm, did he summon worthy men to advise you? No. He conspired with his son to seek his own profit. He stifled the loyal and encouraged the fawning. He sold offices and traded favors. When the court rewarded a man, he said, ‘It is by my grace’; when the court punished a man, he said, ‘It is by my decree.’ Thus all sought to please the Yan household and forgot the Emperor’s will!

Shall such wickedness be borne?

I name his crimes:

First — he accepted bribes from generals, endangering our borders.

Second — he conspired in secret with princes for illicit gain.

Third — he monopolized the Ministry of Personnel, selling even the smallest offices, corrupting the very foundation of governance.

Fourth — he extorted annual tributes from provincial inspectors, bleeding the common folk dry.

Fifth — he silenced the censors and cowed them into submission.

Sixth — he envied the virtuous and destroyed all who opposed him.

Seventh — he permitted his son to amass wealth through corruption, incurring the hatred of all under heaven.

Eighth — he sent the riches of the nation to his home, day after day, causing unrest along every post road.

Ninth — he clung to power for years, twisting state affairs to his private will.

Tenth — he failed to aid the imperial cause, bringing anxiety to his sovereign!”

Each accusation struck like a drumbeat, echoing across the hall. Shen Lian’s face burned crimson, his hand pointed straight at Yan Song, and his voice trembled with fury and righteous grief.

The court held its breath.

For all his outward calm, Yan Song knew these accusations were, for the most part, true. Yet he merely smiled faintly, serene as an old fox among startled hens.

When Shen Lian had first cried “traitor,” Yan Song had indeed felt a flicker of fear. But as the memorial went on, that fear vanished.

So that’s all you have, boy? he thought. Moral outrage and fine words?

In his heart, he even sneered: By calling me a usurper of imperial will, you insult not me but His Majesty himself. Do you take the Son of Heaven for a fool or for the feeble Emperor of Han?

And sure enough — even before Shen Lian had finished his last sentence — Emperor Jiajing’s fury erupted.

“Utter nonsense!”

His voice cracked like thunder through the hall. The imperial memorial was flung from his hand, scattering papers across the polished floor.

“Last year you were already presumptuous before my throne,” the Emperor thundered, “and I forgave you once, taking pity on your ignorance. Yet now you return with slander and defamation, seeking to destroy a loyal minister and make yourself appear righteous! If all my subjects were as reckless as you, the court would descend into chaos!”

Shen Lian fell to his knees, his voice hoarse. “Your Majesty, every word I speak comes from the depths of my heart! I beseech Your Majesty to investigate and see the truth!”

He struck his forehead against the ground. A crimson stain spread across the tiles — blood from his brow.

The Emperor’s eyes flashed coldly. From the depths of your heart? Then you accuse me of blindness, of failing to see what you see?

“Impudent!”

His shout shook the hall. “Guards! Give him twenty strokes and throw him into the dungeon! His punishment shall be decided in due time!”

The words fell. No one dared to intercede.

Only a few among the officials murmured timidly, “Your Majesty, calm yourself...” but their voices were feeble and quickly died away.

Shen Lian was seized by the imperial guards, dragged across the floor as he cried out, “Your Majesty! Hear your servant’s plea! Please—execute Yan Song! Save the realm, Your Majesty—!”

His voice faded into the distance.

Yan Shifan, standing behind his father, gave a subtle nod to one of the guards — a silent order. When the beating begins, make it count.

Yet fortune had not abandoned Shen Lian entirely. As a fellow member of the Embroidered Guards, he was under Lu Bing’s jurisdiction. Lu Bing quietly signaled the men to show mercy. Thus, after three heavy strokes, they lightened their blows. Though his back appeared torn and bloody, the worst of it was superficial.

Once Shen Lian was carried away, Emperor Jiajing departed in anger, his robes swirling behind him as the court hastily dispersed.

Outside the grand hall, a crowd of officials gathered around Yan Song and his son, loudly proclaiming their indignation on his behalf, eager to prove their loyalty to the powerful father and son.

Zhu Ping'an, however, stood rooted where he was, watching as Shen Lian's broken, bloodied form was dragged toward the prison. His mind felt hollow, his chest heavy.

Only when a young eunuch approached and whispered, "His Majesty summons you, Zhuangyuan-lang," did he stir from his daze.

None of the other officials looked surprised.

For it was custom — after the new champion scholar offered thanks to the Emperor on behalf of all successful candidates — that he would be summoned privately for an imperial audience.