

Rise 381

Chapter 381: A Curved Path to Save Shen

The morning sky brightened into a soft gold, and the first rays of sunlight spilled over the rippling jade waters of Taiye Pond. A small boat drifted slowly across its tranquil surface, bearing Zhu Ping'an toward the shore. The water glimmered gently beneath the oars, like sheets of polished glass catching firelight.

When the boat reached land, Zhu Ping'an stepped lightly onto the stone embankment. He turned back toward the palace maids and eunuchs who had rowed him across, cupped his hands respectfully, and offered them a polite bow of thanks.

That morning, after court had been dismissed, Emperor Jiajing had withdrawn to the Guanghan Hall—a secluded palace built upon the small island in the middle of Taiye Pond. It was there that the Emperor had summoned Zhu Ping'an for an audience. Since the island could only be reached by boat, Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to make the serene yet tense journey across the lake to meet the Son of Heaven.

At the landing, a young eunuch was already waiting. Zhu recognized him immediately—Eunuch Feng Bao, a familiar face within the inner court. Feng Bao's expression bloomed with a practiced smile as he greeted Zhu Ping'an with formal courtesies. While leading him along the path toward Guanghan Hall, the eunuch leaned closer and murmured,

“Master Zhu, His Majesty's temper is not well today. When you face him, please tread with care.”

Zhu Ping'an gave a faint smile. He didn't need the reminder—he had witnessed the Emperor's anger firsthand that very morning. Still, the warning was a gesture of goodwill, and Zhu Ping'an was not a man to let goodwill go unrewarded.

“My thanks, Eunuch Feng, for your kind warning.”

He bowed once more and, with deft discretion, slipped a small silver note into Feng Bao's sleeve. The eunuch demurred softly, only to accept it moments later with a subtle nod and another smile.

Guided by Feng Bao, Zhu Ping'an crossed the marble bridge and entered the cool shade of Guanghan Hall. Feng Bao halted at the threshold and motioned to another attendant, who led Zhu further inside to the Emperor's chamber.

Within, the air was heavy with the scent of incense and sandalwood. Emperor Jiajing sat cross-legged upon the dragon bed, still dressed in his broad, golden dragon robe. His expression was dark and stormy, brows furrowed in lingering anger as he leafed through a memorial from Shen Lian. The silken hem of his robe cascaded from the bed and pooled upon the floor like a stream of molten sunlight.

Zhu Ping'an knelt the moment he entered the hall.

“Your servant humbly greets Your Majesty. Long live the Emperor, may Your Majesty reign for ten thousand years!”

“Rise, my loyal subject.”

The Emperor's voice was calm yet distant. He inclined his head slightly, granting permission for Zhu to stand and approach. The vastness of the hall, however, left a long distance between them, and the echo of Zhu Ping'an's footsteps on the marble floor sounded almost too loud in the silence.

"My thanks, Your Majesty."

Zhu Ping'an stood but did not move closer just yet.

Emperor Jiajing's anger had not yet cooled. The memorial Shen Lian had submitted still festered in his mind. Every time he recalled its contents, his temper surged anew.

He had ascended the throne in his youth—barely twenty when Heaven had granted him the crown. He had once been merely the heir of a distant vassal king, yet after Emperor Zhengde's sudden death, the ministers had called him to the capital to inherit the Dragon Throne. Under the guise of the principle of "succession from brother to brother," they had tried to control him at every turn. Led by Yang Tinghe, the ministers had sought to bind him with rules and rituals, but in the end, he had outmaneuvered them all, seized command of the court, and ruled the empire with unyielding authority.

Because of that victory, Emperor Jiajing had long seen himself as a sovereign unmatched in both civil virtue and martial prowess—perhaps even blessed by Heaven itself.

Yet now, Shen Lian's memorial compared him to Emperor Xian of the Han—a weak monarch controlled by others! In Jiajing's eyes, such words were not merely an impeachment of Yan Song, but an affront to the Emperor himself. How could he forgive that?

And so, his fury had erupted.

But the punishment he decreed—court caning followed by imprisonment and, finally, public execution—shocked Zhu Ping'an to the core.

Execution?

Those four words—to be judged and punished by law—were usually reserved for capital crimes, the kind announced in official decrees before a criminal's death. Was the Emperor truly going to have Shen Lian executed?

This was not what history should have been. Zhu Ping'an clearly remembered that Emperor Jiajing had only ordered Shen Lian to be caned and then exiled to the frontier—not killed.

Shen Lian might have been impulsive, even reckless, but his heart was righteous and his intentions pure. To watch such a man perish unjustly... Zhu Ping'an's conscience could not abide it.

He clenched his fists silently. This audience... it may be the only chance to save him. I must find a way.

“Why do you linger there, my subject?”

The Emperor’s sharp voice cut through Zhu Ping’an’s thoughts.

He blinked, startled, realizing that he had indeed failed to approach after being summoned forward. Lost in thought about Shen Lian’s fate, he had momentarily forgotten himself—a dangerous mistake before a ruler as temperamental as Jiajing.

Zhu Ping’an’s mind raced. The Emperor was already in a foul mood. Any hint of hesitation could be misread as disrespect. What could he say to soothe him?

Then, from the corner of his eye, Zhu Ping’an caught sight of the Emperor’s dragon robe trailing upon the ground. A memory surfaced—an old anecdote from later years, one in which an imperial physician had once pleased Jiajing greatly with a single clever remark about that very detail. The story had not yet occurred in this timeline, but perhaps... it could still serve him now.

Zhu’s heart steadied. He bowed deeply and said with solemn humility,

“Your Majesty’s dragon robe touches the ground. Your servant dares not draw near.”

A simple sentence, yet it struck directly at the Emperor's heart.

The dragon robe—the embodiment of imperial majesty—lying upon the ground, and a loyal subject showing reverence for it—it was precisely the kind of omen-laden respect Emperor Jiajing relished.

On the ground, not beneath the ground. That single word made all the difference. On the ground implied the Emperor was of the living world—majestic, divine, human. Beneath would have implied death.

The Emperor's anger softened by a few degrees. He reached down and lifted the trailing hem of his robe onto the bed, his expression easing.

“Come closer.”

Zhu Ping'an advanced with measured steps, stopped before the dragon bed, and bowed again.

The Emperor regarded him for a moment, then tossed the memorial toward him.

“Take a look. Tell me—what do you think of this?”

Zhu Ping'an caught the folded paper with both hands, bowed, and began reading. Outwardly, his face remained composed, but inside his mind churned like a storm.

If he spoke in Shen Lian's defense now, he would only feed the Emperor's rage. He needed another way—a way to redirect the Emperor's thoughts without appearing to contradict him.

Minutes passed.

"Well?" The Emperor's voice was sharp once more, his eyes fixed on Zhu Ping'an.

"If Your Majesty will permit my candor," Zhu began calmly, "this memorial is but form without substance."

"Oh?" The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"Ten grave accusations," Zhu continued, "and yet not a single one supported by evidence—no witnesses, no proof, no corroboration. Thus, I say, Your Majesty, that it is a memorial of empty show."

The Emperor's brows furrowed. Then, slowly, a grim smile appeared.

“Indeed. Such petty men, thinking not of service to the realm but of playing tricks and false accusations—deserve death!”

Zhu Ping’an bowed again, then spoke quietly, almost as if to himself,

“I have heard, Your Majesty, that before submitting this memorial, Shen Lian purchased a coffin and placed it in his home.”

The Emperor froze for a heartbeat.

A coffin? So, the man had prepared to die even before he spoke?

The fury that had once burned within Jiajing’s chest flickered, uncertain.

So... he wished to die for fame? To die a martyr’s death, earning a name for righteousness?

His lips curved into a cold smile.

“So that is it. He would seek glory through death... Then I shall deny him even that.”

And thus, with one measured phrase, Zhu Ping’an had turned the storm.

Chapter 382: A Moment of Bewildered Shock

Beneath one’s own couch, how could one allow another to sleep soundly?

Since ancient times, emperors have all had this same kind of suspicion. In order to sleep peacefully, the Ming dynasty’s founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, established a secret organization—the Jinyiwei—to monitor officials and the common people alike. They controlled the prisons, were granted the right to investigate and arrest, and oversaw the Zhenfu Division beneath them, which handled surveillance, capture, interrogation, and other such activities. Successive emperors of the Ming, while inheriting the mantle of the Great Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, also inherited this special agency, allowing it to become a department that stood above and outside the normal judicial system.

The Jinyiwei was a name that made the entire world tremble. The Jinyiwei prison—most of all—was something that turned faces pale at the mere mention of it, a place whose darkness could silence even a crying infant in the night.

At this moment, Shen Lian was within that very Jinyiwei death prison. Because of a single line from the Jiajing Emperor—“Select an auspicious day to carry out the execution”—Shen Lian had already been judged a condemned criminal. Even the protection of Lu Bing, one of the highest-ranking leaders in the Jinyiwei, could not spare him from being thrown into the death cells.

The Jinyiwei death cells were separated from all other prisons, fortified layer after layer. On the outermost perimeter was a net woven of thick iron wire—so dense that even small birds could not pass through. Bells hung from the mesh, so that the slightest movement would set them ringing in warning.

The entrance to the death cells consisted of two gates. The outer gate was cast entirely from bronze and iron, and upon its surface was carved the image of an ancient beast—Bi'an—blue-faced, with fanged jaws, fierce and terrifying. At first glance it looked somewhat like a tiger, and so people often referred to the Jinyiwei death cells as the “Tiger Cage.”

The second gate of this Tiger Cage stood three meters behind the first. Which meant, almost certainly, that the walls of the Tiger Cage were nearly three meters thick. The craftsmanship behind these walls was formidable: the interior of the three-meter wall was hollow, filled with sand. Had the protagonist of *The Shawshank Redemption* been confined to this Tiger Cage instead, he could forget any hope of escape.

Dig through the walls?

Heh—within the walls of the Tiger Cage, the flowing sand would bury you alive.

Inside the Tiger Cage, the light was dim, its location clearly below ground. Thanks to Lu Bing's special instructions, Shen Lian had been placed in the least dreadful of the death cells—but even so, only two faint shafts of sunlight slanted into the room.

A death cell was called a death cell for a reason: one entered alive and left as a corpse. The prisoners within the Jinyiwei's death cells were all the same—ashen-faced, hollow-eyed, their spirits already extinguished.

Only one was different: the newly arrived Shen Lian.

In the weak light, Shen Lian lay face-down upon a bed of moldy straw. Even though the flesh on his hips was split and torn, he was still smiling.

“Chunfu... why do this...” Lu Bing murmured. He sat on a filthy wooden stool inside the cell, looking at the battered and pitiful Shen Lian, sighing in helpless sorrow.

“Since ancient times,” Shen Lian said, “evil has never been eradicated without bloodshed. Today the traitorous Yan Song holds power, clouding the Emperor’s judgment, leaving the people unable to live in peace. Yet no one has yet shed blood in the act of removing this villain. This is precisely why the traitor remains. Since ancient times, to kill a traitor one must spill blood. If blood must be spilled—let it begin with me, Shen Lian.”

His forehead was split and bleeding, his temples messy with disheveled hair, flesh torn across his lower body—yet his face shone with righteous, unyielding resolve.

“As long as the green hills remain, one need not fear a lack of firewood. Chunfu, why can’t you understand this?” Lu Bing shook his head heavily. “Yan Song and his son control the court. Their roots run deep. What you’re doing is meaningless sacrifice.”

“What is meaningless? My blood will wake those who still have conscience. Compared to the villain Yan Song, I am but an ant. But even the thousand-mile dyke collapses from an ant’s nest. No matter how deep the roots of the traitor’s power, they cannot withstand countless ants.”

“Today, I, Shen Lian, shall be the first ant to break the dyke!”

Shen Lian’s expression did not waver. He faced death as though it were nothing. Even knowing he had been condemned, when he spoke these words, his eyebrows danced with passion, his saliva flew with intensity—nothing like a man approaching execution.

“Dying is easy. But Chunfu—have you thought about this? If you die, what of your wife, your children, your parents?” Lu Bing pressed. He shook his head, pointing to the weak spot Shen Lian had overlooked.

Shen Lian was a man Lu Bing valued deeply. In both character and ability, he was someone Lu Bing admired—superior and subordinate, yet also confidant and friend. Seeing Shen Lian like this, Lu Bing’s heart twisted painfully. He could not bear to watch the man march willingly into hell. Even a single straw—Lu Bing wished he could throw it to pull him back.

Yet despite his position as Commander of the Jinyiwei, even he hesitated before the Emperor’s favorite, Yan Song. His power had limits.

He wanted to persuade Shen Lian. If Shen Lian were willing to bow his head, there might still be a sliver of life left.

After decades in the Jinyiwei, Lu Bing understood human nature. Even the strongest hearts had weaknesses—most of them lay in family: parents, wives, children.

This time, invoking family was not for intimidation—but for salvation.

It was the only exception in Lu Bing's entire career.

The steadfast, death-defying Shen Lian faltered as soon as he heard the question. His expression cracked—just a hairline fracture, but a fracture nonetheless.

“Ahh... I owe them far too much.” Shen Lian sighed, shaking his head. In those iron-solid eyes of his, a thin layer of moisture shimmered.

Seeing hope, Lu Bing prepared to press further—only for Shen Lian to continue:

“Family or nation, which weighs more heavily? I am no stone or wood. Yet I must still harden my heart and fail those I love.”

“Chunfu...” Lu Bing could not help calling out again.

“My lord, please do not try to persuade me. My resolve is set. I only ask... for the sake of our bond... that you protect my wife and children.” Shen Lian struggled to bow, paying his respects.

“Very well. Chunfu, rest easy. As long as I, Lu Bing, draw breath, no one will harm them.” Lu Bing nodded deeply, making his solemn vow.

“Then I have no regrets,” Shen Lian said softly, a faint smile easing his heart.

“Chunfu, think again. As long as you live, there will be future chances.” Lu Bing tried one last time.

“I can wait. But the Ming cannot wait. The people cannot wait.” Shen Lian shook his head firmly.

“You—” Lu Bing let out a bitter sigh.

“It’s only a pity that I will not live to see the day the traitor Yan falls. Ah... after my death, my lord, I beg you— please have my severed head face the Golden Throne. If I cannot see it in life, then in death I shall watch the traitor fall!”

Shen Lian sighed, then voiced his final wish.

Lu Bing's heart twisted painfully. This was a man he admired, a rare confidant—yet he was helpless.

Utterly helpless.

Seeing Shen Lian's calm acceptance of death, Lu Bing felt as if knives were carving into his chest.

At that moment, footsteps echoed outside the death cell. Someone was approaching.

"Presumptuous! Did I not say no one is to disturb us without my order?" Already unsettled, Lu Bing's anger burst forth. All his pent-up frustration was about to pour onto the fool who dared intrude.

"Please forgive me, my lord..." A Jinyiwei officer in flying-fish robes knelt, bowing deeply.

"A message from the palace. His Majesty has ordered the officials to draft a decree..." the officer reported from the ground.

A decree?

Had not the Emperor said the execution date would be selected later? Why was a decree being drafted so soon? Lu Bing was stunned.

“My lord, worry not. The sooner my blood is shed, the sooner the realm will awaken! Excellent—excellent!” Shen Lian exclaimed, as composed as ever.

“His Majesty has ordered a decree to be drafted—Shen-daren is to be exiled, sent to labor in Bao’an.” The officer spoke the news in one breath.

What?

Lu Bing was stunned.

Even the death-embracing Shen Lian showed shock for the first time.

“Repeat that!” Lu Bing demanded, unable to believe it.

“His Majesty has ordered a decree—Shen-daren is to be exiled, sent to labor in Bao’an!” the officer repeated.

Shock—then joy! Lu Bing burst into laughter, looking at Shen Lian with unrestrained relief.

And the stunned were not only Lu Bing. Over at the Yan residence, where the Yan faction had just begun celebrating, the moment they heard the news, they were just as dumbfounded.

They had expected Shen Lian's execution—how had it turned into exile?

A faint worry crept into Yan Song's heart. He immediately ordered Yan Shifan to find out why the Emperor had changed his mind.

Chapter 383: Descending to the River in March

In March, the skies over Xiahe Village were impossibly clear, washed clean as if someone had taken a giant brush to the heavens. A few wisps of white clouds drifted lazily across the expanse, casting fleeting shadows over a sprawling apricot grove. Beneath those clouds, the trees were just beginning to stir with new life, tiny green shoots unfurling among the old branches. A gentle breeze swept through the grove, and petals rained down like delicate apricot blossoms, carpeting the ground in pale pink.

This apricot grove had stood for over a century, a silent witness to countless seasons. At its heart lay an ancient apricot tree, leaning slightly to one side, its bark cracked and weathered like the deep wrinkles of a venerable old man. The tree's gnarled branches twisted and turned in all directions, forming natural playgrounds for the village children.

Several mischievous little rascals, clad in split-crotch trousers typical of village boys, were currently engaged in a lively game atop the serpentine branches. One of the boys, blindfolded with a scrap of cloth, crawled daringly along the twisted limbs, groping left and right, shouting and flailing his arms like a tiny tiger. The other children clung silently to the branches, holding their breath, barely daring to move as they watched him pass.

Just as the blindfolded boy inched near one of his companions, another child deliberately shook a nearby branch, causing him to veer off at the last second. The boy who had been nearly caught responded with a grateful nod toward the one who had subtly saved him.

Yet the relief was short-lived. In a swift reversal, the blindfolded boy swung back with surprising speed and grabbed the other child before he could react.

“Hahaha! Got you!” the blindfolded boy laughed, pulling the cloth away from his eyes and baring his teeth in triumph.

“You little trickster! You peeked under the blindfold, didn’t you?” the captured boy protested indignantly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the boy named Xiaoxiaozi, shrugging and wrinkling his nose. “You haven’t bathed in months; you stink to high heaven. I didn’t need to look—just one sniff and I knew exactly where you were!”

“Quick, it’s your turn to catch me now!” Xiaoxiaozi tossed the blindfold to the other boy, urging him impatiently.

But the boy hesitated. Pointing behind Xiaoxiaozi, he whispered urgently, “Run, Xiaoxiaozi! Quick! Your sister’s here!”

“Nonsense. It’s my turn, and even if my sister is here—” Xiaoxiaozi waved his chubby hands dramatically, unconcerned.

“Even if what?” a girl’s voice rang from below the tree.

Startled, Xiaoxiaozi lost his footing and tumbled downward. The girl beneath the tree caught him just in time, nearly being knocked over herself. She rolled her eyes and gave him two sharp pats on the bottom, pressing him firmly to the ground.

“Ouch! Sister Yu! If you hit me again, I’ll tell Mother, and see if she doesn’t give you a good scolding!” the boy yelped, his voice a mixture of indignation and fear.

“You dare threaten me? Don’t think I won’t spank you! Mother gave you that nickname so you’d learn from An-gege, but look at you—you’re just sully Zhi-gege’s reputation!” The girl delivered another pair of firm pats, her tone teasing yet strict.

“I’m not sully him! Second Aunt said Zhi-gege loved playing ‘tree monkey’ even when he was little!” the boy wailed.

“You still won’t admit you’re wrong? Fine, then I won’t take you to Second Uncle’s house this time!” The girl’s words threatened to crush his little heart.

“Second Uncle’s house? Really?!” The boy sprang up instantly, excitement lighting up his chubby face.

“Yes, yes! Sister Yu, I was wrong!” he squealed, abandoning all pretense of stubbornness, scampering after the girl like a devoted puppy.

“Xiaoxiaozi! Where are you going? Come play with us!” called one of the other children from the branches above.

“I’m going to my Second Uncle’s house! That’s where Zhi-gege lives! Do you know who Zhi-gege is? He’s none other than Zhu Ping’an, the top scholar of the Ming imperial exams!” Xiaoxiaozi puffed out his chest with pride, his pudgy hands squeezing his round waist, beaming as though he could almost touch the heavens.

The children in the trees gazed down at him with wide-eyed admiration. Even though everyone knew Zhi-gege was indeed Zhu Ping’an, Xiaoxiaozi’s exuberant boasting made the legend of his brother feel tangible and dazzling to them.

“Sister Yu! When Zhi-gege was little, did he always give you the best treats?” the boy asked eagerly, clutching her skirts as he looked up with his round, expectant face.

“Of course! Zhi-gege was always the sweetest to me. When Grandmother made scrambled eggs, he would always let me have the first bite,” the girl said, holding his small hand, pouting slightly like a pampered little sister.

Hearing this, the boy’s mouth watered uncontrollably. Scrambled eggs from Zhi-gege? They must be the best scrambled eggs in the world!

As they walked step by step toward the old family estate, the boy’s sharp eyes noticed that outside, everyone was preparing to leave—his grandparents, his eldest uncle’s family, and Fourth Uncle’s household were all there too.

He wrinkled his nose in distaste, whispering to the girl, “Sister Yu... why is Eldest Uncle’s family going too?”

Though they all lived in the old estate, he disliked Eldest Uncle’s household thoroughly. Eldest Uncle was hypocritical, his wife always acted superior, and his daughter-in-law, Jun-ge’s new bride, was even worse—always stirring trouble with that single, sharp eye of hers.

“It was Eldest Uncle’s decision. Who knows what he’s thinking,” the girl whispered back, frowning. “When we get to Second Uncle’s, don’t just eat—make sure you keep an eye out for Second Aunt too.”

“Don’t worry, Sister Yu! I’ve got this,” the boy said, thumping his chest like a tiny man.

“Ugh, what a stench! Fourth brother, where have you been rolling around this time? Third Aunt, why aren’t you controlling him? If he keeps this up, he’ll never amount to anything! In our household, children this age already have tutors,” a young, heavily made-up woman standing at the old estate’s entrance sniffed disdainfully.

Third Aunt shot the woman a look but said nothing. The boy, however, wasn’t about to stay quiet.

“Too many words!” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

“You...!” the painted woman fumed.

“What you? Fourth brother didn’t say anything wrong, why are you nagging so much?” Zhu Pingjun strolled out from the crowd, casually glancing at his one-eyed wife, clearly annoyed.

“What nonsense! That’s your wife!” Eldest Aunt interjected, lightly smacking Zhu Pingjun’s shoulder. She had her eye on this daughter-in-law’s wealth and influence, hoping to benefit a little herself.

“Hehe... Jun-ge’s wife has a sharp eye...” Fourth Aunt whispered to herself, giggling while observing Eldest Uncle’s family.

“Of course I have a sharp eye! I can tell Fourth Aunt is blessed. This little one runs all over the place, making such a fuss, but Fourth Aunt doesn’t have to worry. He’s a little rascal for sure,” Jun-ge’s wife said, glancing slyly at Fourth Aunt while laughing, patting her not-yet-pregnant belly teasingly.

“You...” Fourth Aunt scowled, furious that someone would use a child as a pretext.

“Enough! Stop squabbling. Nitpicking over small matters diminishes our dignity. Zhi-er has passed the imperial exams; this is a joyous occasion for the whole family. Forget these trivialities. It’s time to visit Second Uncle’s house to celebrate properly. Right, Father?” Eldest Uncle Zhu Shouren, dressed in a brand-new deep blue silk jacket with a square cap, looked every bit the dignified patriarch.

“Mm,” Father Zhu replied, holding a new tobacco pouch gifted by his son at the market just a few days ago. Without another word, the plan was set. The entire household of the old estate marched in a grand procession to Zhu Ping’an’s home.

Chapter 384: When Eldest Aunt Met Madam Chen

“My second brother’s house is truly magnificent...”

When he arrived at the entrance of Zhu Ping’an’s home, First Uncle Zhu Shouren couldn’t help letting out a sigh of admiration. His gaze swept across the wide-spreading courtyard walls—red brick shimmering warmly under the sun and green-tiled eaves gleaming like polished jade. It had been some days since he last visited. In that time, the Zhu family had renovated the entire residence once again; it now looked even grander than the manor owned by the village’s wealthiest landlord. The sudden sight of it struck him so strongly that awe spilled out of him before he could stop it.

“Second Brother, Father and Mother are here to see you!”

He didn't even bother knocking. Calling out loudly from outside, Zhu Shouren pushed the gate open and strode in as if he owned the place. Behind him, the old patriarch and matriarch of the Zhu clan followed with slow but steady steps. Then came the elder aunt and the others from the old house, all filing in one by one like a small procession. Last to enter was Third Uncle's entire family.

At that moment, Madam Chen was in the courtyard with her daughter-in-law, Juan'er, working at the long wooden table set beneath the shade of an old tree. The two women were carefully cutting through bolts of silk, their movements precise and practiced. They were taking advantage of this quiet farming season to hurriedly sew two new sets of clothing for Zhu Ping'an. All this silk had been left behind by the many visitors who had come calling in recent days. Madam Chen had sifted through the bundles, selecting a few pieces that felt especially smooth and comfortable to make clothes for her son.

Not far away, Zhu Father was crouched beside the courtyard well, sharpening a hoe against a whetstone. With more land came more work, and the farm tools had to be kept in good order—a slow, time-consuming task that he nevertheless enjoyed.

As for the eldest son, Zhu Pingchuan, he had taken over his father's usual job for the day and was on the road between the town and the village, driving the ox cart back and forth, so he wasn't home.

Hearing First Uncle Zhu Shouren's booming voice, the three busy people in the courtyard lifted their heads, startled. They hadn't expected the entire Zhu family from the old household to appear all at once.

“Father, Mother, Big Brother—you’re here.” Zhu Father put down the hoe and hurried over to greet them.

“Father, Mother.” Madam Chen paused mid-cut and called out as well.

“Grandfather, Grandmother, please sit. I’ll go pour tea for you.” Juan’er, the wife of Zhu Pingjun, quickly set aside her things, scurried into the house to fetch stools and chairs, then returned with tea and water, serving the elders with practiced warmth.

“Mm... cough, cough.” First Uncle cleared his throat, nodding with the lofty demeanor of a senior who felt the weight of his authority.

“Ah! Second Sister-in-law, this is fine silk, isn’t it? Oh my, just look at this color—it’s so beautiful!” Fourth Aunt, her eyes widening so much they almost glowed green, practically shrieked when she saw the shimmering silk spread across the courtyard table. With a single dramatic step, she bounded toward Madam Chen. Before she even finished speaking, her hands were already caressing the smooth material.

“Oh my, look how bright the color is—so vivid! And why is it so light and thin? The touch is so soft—ah, what a delight. Our family has raised silkworms for years, but I’ve never once touched actual silk fabric like this. Second Sister-in-law, you really are blessed.”

She kept stroking the silk as though it were a rare treasure, unable to pry her fingers away.

Zhu Pingjun’s wife narrowed one eye, her expression filled with open disdain as she watched Fourth Aunt make a spectacle of herself. Her lips curled in a barely concealed sneer.

“This fabric is too plain. It’s for Zhi’er,” Madam Chen explained gently. “I still have half a bolt in the house. If you like the color, take it. And of course, Father, Mother, Eldest Sister-in-law, and Second Sister-in-law should each take some too.”

Hearing the compliments about her good fortune had put a soft smile on Madam Chen’s face. She already planned to gift some cloth to the old household, and this created the perfect opening to show generosity.

But the elder aunt had always been competitive, especially with Madam Chen. Seeing Madam Chen receiving praise and attention, she simply couldn’t stand being overshadowed.

Straightening her posture, projecting as much dignity as she could muster, she swept over to Madam Chen. She pretended to examine the fabric, but her movements were intentional—the way she lifted the strands of hair near her ear revealed the gold earrings hanging there. She even tilted her head slightly, ensuring the sunlight would catch the ornaments and make them sway conspicuously.

“Ah, the weather’s getting hot. My head feels stuffy—my ears feel so uncomfortable,” she said meaningfully, continuing to flick her hair and jingle her gold earrings directly under Madam Chen’s gaze.

Madam Chen glanced at the earrings, her expression briefly odd.

Mistaking the look for envy, Elder Aunt only raised her chin higher, swaying the earrings more boldly, practically vibrating with pride.

“Yes, yes, the heat is really getting intense,” Madam Chen replied mildly. “I’ve only been working for a short while, and my hands are already warm.”

As she spoke, she casually rolled up her sleeve.

A brilliantly gleaming gold bracelet flashed into view—so bright that Elder Aunt nearly had her eyes blinded on the spot.

“Oh, this? Ah—this was insistence on Shouyi’s part. I couldn’t argue him out of it...” Madam Chen let out a little surprised cry, as if only just noticing that Elder Aunt had seen it, and quickly pulled her sleeve down again.

Zhu Father, hearing his own name dragged in, lifted his head sharply. Madam Chen shot him a murderous glare, and he immediately lowered his gaze again.

What do you mean I insisted on buying it? You’re the one who wanted it! If this were the modern day, Zhu Father would probably be wearing the expression of a meme character silently crying, “My heart suffers, but I cannot speak.”

He had only taken Madam Chen to town to look at properties. But the moment she spotted that bracelet, she couldn’t tear her eyes away. It was actually silver coated with a thin layer of gold, and cost more than three

taels of silver—too much, in his opinion—but under the fierce pressure of a wife’s enthusiastic “persuasion,” he had no choice but to buy it.

With Elder Aunt momentarily defeated, Zhu Pingjun’s wife seized the chance to boast. She began talking loudly about how her maiden family owned so much silk that insects practically chewed through what they couldn’t use, and how their family’s shop dealt in silk goods as well.

Hearing this, Elder Aunt revived immediately. Her pride swelled again as she held up two fingers and proclaimed, brightly:

“That’s right! You don’t know—her family’s shop makes this much profit in a year!”

She meant two hundred taels. With that declaration, she once again felt she had regained the upper hand.

But then, another group entered the courtyard. They heard the rumble of a carriage outside, and then a dignified-looking gentleman stepped in, followed by a steward and several servants.

After exchanging formal greetings, the man explained his purpose—he was a local gentry official from a neighboring town, here specifically to pay respects to Zhu Ping’an. He knew Ping’an wasn’t home but had come anyway. After a bit of polite conversation, he handed over a gift list, then instructed the servants to begin unloading the gifts from the carriage.

Even without considering the boxes and crates being carried in, the very first item on the gift list—one hundred taels of silver—left First Uncle Zhu Shouren completely stunned as he read it aloud.

One hundred taels? And this was just a single visit?

Upon hearing it, Elder Aunt's eyes instantly reddened like those of a rabbit. Her envy burned so hot it nearly steamed off her face.

Just this one visit came with a hundred taels—yet in the past weeks, carriages had been arriving every single day, sometimes twenty in one afternoon. How much money had passed through here? No wonder people said to study books. No wonder Father always said books held golden mansions within their pages. So it was true—literally true.

The more she thought about it, the redder her eyes grew. Compared to this, the annual profit of two hundred taels she had boasted about moments ago felt like nothing—less than a drop of water in a vast ocean.

Realizing how much she had shown off just earlier, Elder Aunt felt her face heat up with embarrassment. Her eyes were now even redder than her cheeks.

As for Fourth Aunt—if Fourth Uncle hadn't grabbed her in time, she would have launched herself toward the pile of gifts like a wild animal, shrieking as she transformed into a one-woman airport security scanner.

While Elder Aunt was consumed with jealousy, Madam Chen's heart was suffering even more.

"No. No—we cannot accept these gifts. Not the silver, not anything valuable. We can't take any of it. Not for any amount of money."

Her expression twisted as if someone were carving flesh off her body. She deliberately turned her head away, refusing to even look at the luxurious items being carried down from the carriage. One hand waved firmly at the visitors in rejection; the other was clamped with merciless strength onto Zhu Father's arm, pinching it like a vice.

Heaven knew how painful this was for her. Rejecting the gifts felt harder than enduring physical injury.

And Zhu Father definitely knew—because his arm was almost bruised purple from her grip.

But Madam Chen's reasoning was simple: her son had said that accepting gifts would harm his future, and so—no matter how painful her heart felt—she absolutely would not accept them.

"What?" First Uncle Zhu Shouren nearly tore the gift list in disbelief. Elder Aunt and Fourth Aunt looked even more shocked—like they had seen a ghost appear in broad daylight.

In the end, under the firm insistence of Madam Chen and Zhu Father, all of the expensive gifts listed were returned. Only some food items and a single bolt of cloth were kept—and even that was because the visitor had pleaded to leave at least something behind.

Had Madam Chen not been pressured, she would have kept nothing but a single box of pastries, just for courtesy.

Chapter 386: All Thanks to Zhi'er's Hard-Won Success

The fox has finally shown its tail—its true intentions laid bare.

Madam Chen didn't say a word. She merely looked at the elder uncle and elder aunt with a faint smile, one that curled at the edges of her brows with the sharpness of a woman unafraid to speak her mind, yet tinged with unmistakable disdain.

Hmph. "Let my man gain some experience"? What a pretty excuse. Wasn't it obvious? They wanted to use her son—use her Ping'an—to pull strings for their own benefit. And they even had the face to say it out loud?

Back then, when her son had wanted to study in the village school, they claimed they had no money and refused. When her son wished to learn basic literacy from them, they said they had no time. Every door had been shut in her child's face.

But now—now that her son had finally achieved something, now that he had earned the title of huiyuan through his own effort—they suddenly wanted to "borrow his name"? Where were they before?

Backdoor favors? At their age, did they still have the nerve to ask for such things? Even if one were willing to crawl through backdoors and connections, it was useless if one had no ability of their own. And it wasn't as if they hadn't tried before—hadn't they bragged that a friend's teacher was a county school instructor involved in writing exam questions? Yet even with that, he hadn't managed to pass the exam for xiucai.

Look at her son. Had her son relied on connections? Had he walked any backdoor path? No—every step he took, he carved out with his own hands.

Thinking this, Madam Chen felt a fierce, unstoppable surge of pride. The more pride swelled in her chest, the more determined she became to protect her son's good name. He had just become huiyuan—if the family immediately used his status to hand out gifts and seek favors, how would others look at him?

And besides, accepting gifts and pulling strings was never good for a young scholar's future. It could ruin him before he even set foot in officialdom.

Thus, Madam Chen's refusal was absolute.

"Second Brother," Uncle Zhu Shouren said, seeing that he couldn't sway Madam Chen and aiming instead at Zhu Father. "A tiger is hunted by brothers; father and son go into battle together. We share the same blood. My Jun-er and I are both kin to your Ping, of the same roots and same branches. How could we not help him in officialdom later? Ah, Second Brother... the official world is perilous."

"Shouyi, listen to your elder brother," Old Master Zhu added after his eldest son's prodding.

“You child, how can you be so thoughtless? Would we ever harm you?” Old Madam Zhu rose to her feet as she spoke, her tone heavy with reprimand.

With both parents pressuring him, Zhu Father began to waver. His resolve faltered under the barrage from the old house, and he seemed on the verge of giving in.

At that very moment, a rapid barrage of knocks—pi-li-pa-la—sounded urgently at the gate.

Just when Uncle Shouren’s goal was within reach, his face twisted with irritation as he turned toward the door. A heartbeat later, the door burst open.

“Shouyi—!”

A crowd of villagers rushed inside as if floodwaters had burst through the gate, breathless and shouting Zhu Father’s name.

“What’s going on?” Madam Chen released the pinch she had locked onto her husband’s thigh, stood up, and asked.

“What else? Hurry, hurry! Tidy up! Another group of messengers bringing good news is coming!” the elderly man in the lead panted, slapping his thigh, his face flushed with excitement.

“Yes, hurry, Shouyi’s family. They’ve already reached the east end of the village—we ran over as soon as we saw them!” another villager added breathlessly.

Before they had even finished speaking, Madam Chen heard the distant crackle of firecrackers from the village entrance. Her expression brightened instantly.

“Quick, quick—Juan’er, boil water, make tea!” Madam Chen ordered her daughter-in-law, joy radiating from her face.

“Second Sister-in-law, what’s Juan’er boiling water for? I’ll do it! That’s why I came! My left eyelid has been twitching all morning—I knew something good was coming! Turns out it was for Ping!”

Before Madam Chen could respond, the fourth aunt dashed toward the kitchen with the determination of someone who’d fight anyone who tried to stop her.

The third uncle and third aunt also started helping clean up. Even Zhu Pingjun rolled up his sleeves to fetch water. The villagers who had come to deliver the news joined in without hesitation.

In an instant, the ones standing idly in the courtyard—Old Master Zhu, Old Madam Zhu, and the elder uncle and aunt—looked embarrassingly conspicuous.

Cleaning the yard in preparation for a celebration—this was something the people of Xiahe Village were very practiced at. After all, this wasn't the first time good news had come from the Zhu family.

Soon, the courtyard was spotless. And not long after, the celebratory procession arrived.

But this time—this time was different from all the rest.

The procession was enormous—nearly a hundred people strong. A dragon dance, lion dance, drums and gongs thundering through the air. Red flowers hung everywhere along the path, bathing the entire village in a sea of jubilant color.

Villagers gaped, awestruck, crowding in layer upon layer around the Zhu household.

And it wasn't just Xiahe villagers. People had followed the procession from town... even from Anqing Prefecture. Some had come from as far as Fengyang and Ying Tianfu.

"Look! Look there—that's the County Magistrate! Even the Prefect is here! This is the first time in history!" cried a well-traveled onlooker perched on a tree outside.

A stir rippled through the crowd like a wave. The Prefect himself had come! The second son of the Zhu family had truly soared to the heavens.

Then—

“By Heaven’s Mandate, the Emperor decrees:

On the fifteenth day of the third month, in the thirtieth year of Jiajing’s reign, during the xin-hai grace examination—

Zhu Ping’an has been awarded First Place in the First Rank of the Palace Examination, granted the title of jinshi, and appointed Zhuangyuan.

Thus this edict is proclaimed.”

“Congratulations to the honored Zhu household! Zhu Ping’an, young master of this home, has achieved the title of Zhuangyuan, his name shining atop the Golden Roll!”

The announcer's voice boomed across the courtyard, carrying clearly all the way to the villagers gathered outside.

A moment of stunned silence fell. Then the crowd erupted like a detonated powder keg—shouts, gasps, cheers tumbling together.

Zhuangyuan?! He actually became Zhuangyuan?!

In a shadowed corner, Uncle Shouren swallowed hard, his eyes glued to the imperial announcement as if he might snatch it and carve his own name onto it. If only it were me... if only...

Madam Chen, listening intently from nearby, heard the words "Zhu Ping'an" and "Zhuangyuan." Her mind blanked. My son... my son became Zhuangyuan?! Her eyes rolled upward, and she nearly fainted from joy.

Fortunately, Zhu Father reacted swiftly. Before anyone else noticed, he caught her as she fell and pinched the flesh between her thumb and index finger.

"Ow!" Madam Chen gasped back to awareness. Seeing her husband pinching her, she glared at him fiercely. Oh, Zhu Shouyi, you're bold now, huh? You dare lay hands on me?!

“Congratulations to the honored Zhu household—Zhu Ping’an has achieved Zhuangyuan...” the announcer repeated.

Madam Chen froze mid-glare. The words washed over her again—Zhuangyuan! A wave of joy crashed through her like molten lava, and her eyelids fluttered upward again—she was about to faint again.

Before she could, Zhu Father pinched her once more, bringing her back to consciousness. After two rounds of this, her heart finally adjusted; she could now withstand the tidal wave of happiness without fainting.

But then a cry rang out: “Ah! Someone fainted—fetch a doctor!”

It wasn’t Madam Chen—it was the fourth aunt.

She had just set down the freshly brewed tea, taken one breath, heard the news... and promptly collapsed.

Why is she even more excited than I am? Madam Chen wondered with exasperation as she hurried over.

Thankfully, a village doctor from a neighboring village happened to be among the crowd outside. The villagers shoved him through the door.

He knelt, pinched the fourth aunt's philtrum, waking her, then checked her pulse. When he opened his eyes again, he wore a smile.

"Congratulations, congratulations," he said warmly. "She's with child. It's nothing serious—just needs rest."

With... child?

The fourth aunt blinked in disbelief, grabbed the doctor's sleeve, and made him repeat it. When he confirmed it again and again, tears spilled from her eyes.

Ping became Zhuangyuan... and now I'm pregnant? Doesn't that mean this child is blessed because of Ping? All these years without movement—and now, the moment Ping reaches the heavens, I become with child? This must be Ping's fortune shining on us!

Ancient people believed in such things. And the fourth aunt believed it wholeheartedly.

"All thanks to Ping's success," she whispered, stroking her belly as tears streamed down.

Her husband, the fourth uncle, placed a trembling hand over hers and nodded vigorously. He had arrived at the exact same conclusion.

To outsiders, of course, this sounded ridiculous—but everyone simply laughed. They all understood.

“In the future,” the fourth aunt declared solemnly, patting her stomach, “this child shall be named Zhu Dazhuang—the Great Zhuangyuan.”

Chapter 387: Seabirds in the Hunt

Zhu Ping’an had achieved the top scholar rank, and Fourth Aunt was pregnant again. This was truly double joy arriving at the same door, and the Zhu household was now brimming with happiness, every corner steeped in a festive atmosphere.

It took three rounds of the news-bearer’s announcements before the Zhu family, still lost in delight, fully realized the magnitude of the news. Madam Chen, already unable to contain the pride shining across her face, began distributing the prepared red envelopes and reward money to each person who had come to deliver the good tidings.

“Take it... everyone...” she called cheerfully.

The rural folks were not very particular about formalities. With so many people arriving to announce the news, Father Zhu, along with Third and Fourth Uncles, were too busy to manage all at once. Madam Chen stepped forward, handing out red envelopes herself. When she reached a man dressed in particularly fine clothing, he initially refused the money. Without a hint of hesitation, Madam Chen pressed the envelope firmly into his hands, insisting he accept it. Only once he had taken it did she move on to the next person.

From the corner of the courtyard, First Uncle Zhu Shouren's face turned a pale shade of green with astonishment. "That's the magistrate's honored guest from the second household!" he thought. "Why would you even bother giving him a few coins? That man doesn't need your petty money at all!"

Once all the reward money had been handed out, Madam Chen noticed Zhu Shouren still cowering in the corner. She rolled her eyes in exasperation. Just moments ago, he had been so eager to visit the county magistrate, and now—even as Second and Third Brothers had come out to help distribute red envelopes—he shrank back like a frightened quail. No courage at all!

The bearer of the good news handed the official announcement to Father Zhu. Before he could even examine it, Madam Chen snatched it up.

The notice was made from the finest fabric, with clear clerical script beautifully written. At the top center were three official seals. The background depicted a carp leaping over the dragon gate, its golden tail slicing through turbulent waves below, while a dragon spiraled faintly above the misty peaks of Wushan, symbolizing that achieving the rank of top scholar was like the carp's triumphant leap—one's future limitless.

Madam Chen's heart swelled with joy as she looked at the announcement in her hands. A top scholar's notice was truly different; the material alone was hundreds of times better than any previous ones, and the illustrations radiated celebration. The old announcements hadn't even bothered with drawings. This one was magnificent.

After receiving the notice, Madam Chen called over Master Lihei, a carpenter from the village who had been watching the commotion in the courtyard, instructing him to quickly craft a beautiful frame.

Why a frame?

The reason was simple: Madam Chen wanted to display Zhu Ping'an's scholar-rank notice in the most prominent spot in the house. On one hand, it was a glorious event that would honor the family; on the other, any visitor to the Zhu household would immediately see the announcement of Zhu Ping'an's achievement.

And so...

"Don't leave yet! I invite all respected villagers to lend a hand in setting up the cooking stove and stay for a simple meal. We'll have a little wine," Father Zhu said after handing out all the red envelopes, inviting everyone gathered both inside and outside the courtyard.

Free food and wine were a temptation no one could resist. The villagers cheered in delight, the festive atmosphere swelling even further.

Somewhere in the corner, Zhu Shouren kept glancing at Father Zhu's orchestrations. He wanted to sneak off to the county magistrate's residence, to make his presence known. But glancing at the throng of people packed inside the courtyard and spilling onto rooftops and trees outside, he froze. His purpose was a private one, not for public display.

Zhu Ping'an's top scholar achievement sent the entire Xiahe Village into a frenzy. This was the pinnacle of scholarly recognition—the Star of Literature himself.

Nearby, in Shanghe Village, word of the news had spread. Elder Sun sat in his courtyard, sipping tea and squinting his eyes as he listened to the ceaseless crackle of firecrackers from Xiahe Village. Sweetness filled his chest, as though he had swallowed honey.

Across from him, Master Sun's wife, busy mending clothes, glanced at her husband's wrinkled, chrysanthemum-like face, rolling her eyes repeatedly—though her corners lifted with a faint, amused smile.

Not far from Elder Sun's house, the Li family estate also echoed with the sound of endless firecrackers. Servants inside the mansion chattered excitedly, faces glowing with the joy of hearing that their young master had achieved the top scholar rank.

Inside Master Li's bedroom, the door was tightly shut, with two stern guards stationed at either side, hands resting on their waists as they vigilantly scanned the surroundings.

Within, the plump and rotund Master Li sat at a desk, fingers adorned with heavy golden rings tapping lightly. His eyes, narrowed slightly, gazed toward Xiahe Village, his round face a mixture of surprise and satisfaction. He hadn't expected the boy to become a top scholar, yet now he understood why Shu'er had thrown herself into tears and tantrums, declaring she would marry no one else.

"My lord, the seabird hunt has failed. Lu Shenming, the commander of the Funing Guard, cannot escape responsibility. Subordinates have obtained intelligence: during the hunt, maritime merchants entered Lu Shenming's residence under the cover of night, only leaving at dawn via a secret passage."

Kneeling before Master Li was a lean man, a scar etched across his face, exuding an aura as cold and dangerous as a concealed dagger. At this moment, he knelt on one knee, presenting a sealed report marked with a symbol of a blood-red flying fish, bowing his head and letting a strand of black hair fall across half his face.

“Who said it failed?”

Master Li lifted his gaze from Xiahe Village and turned it to the kneeling man, a sly smile spreading across his plump, fox-like face.

The kneeling man froze, confused. But... it had failed, hadn't it?

“This is only the seabird,” Master Li said, a merchant's glimmer of excitement in his eyes. “Though this seabird is slight... believe me, this is just the beginning. With this bird, more will follow.” He reached out, took the report from the man's hands, rubbing a ring across a mark before opening it.

“My lord is wise.”

The kneeling man's respect deepened, awe in his gaze. Everything, it seemed, had been orchestrated by Master Li. The apparent failure had been nothing more than a decoy.

“The bird is in the net; collect it,” Master Li said casually, tossing a blood-red flying fish badge.

The man on the floor caught it without moving his gaze.

The badge, metallic yet stained blood-red, bore the flying fish emblem and three black characters reading “Jinyiwei” with a small, easily overlooked crimson character “An” at the corner, as if painted in fresh blood.

“Should we notify the Southern Town Patrol?” the kneeling man asked cautiously, scarred face tense.

“Do you think so?” Master Li’s plump face tilted down, a faint smile playing on his lips.

“Your subordinate deserves death! Please forgive me, my lord!” The lean man trembled, prostrating himself further, head bowed, unable to look at Master Li, as if facing something terrifying.

Chapter 388: Zhi'er Would No Longer Stand Alone and Weak

At the eastern edge of Xiahe Village, the crowd surged like a restless river. The news that Zhu Ping'an had achieved the top rank in the imperial exams spread like a spark in dry grass, setting the entire village ablaze with excitement.

Old neighbor Li Daye once again climbed onto the roof of his own home, from where he could take in the full spectacle unfolding in the Zhu family courtyard. Peering out at the scene below, he saw people climbing trees

and standing on tiptoe outside the gate, desperate for a glimpse. Pride washed over his face—who else could enjoy such a clear view without even trying?

Yet, Li Daye's big fat dog was another story. Just a few days ago, its throat had finally healed enough to bark. Now, with a flood of strangers passing by the gate, the dog had barked itself hoarse. And with so many unfamiliar faces coming and going, it had tired itself out mid-bark and now could barely manage a whimper.

"Everyone's worked hard—have some water and rest a bit," Madam Chen said, addressing carpenter Li Dahei after finishing her reminders. She then warmly invited the bearers of the good news to sit down for tea. By now, Madam Chen was familiar with the routine: when Zhu Ping'an had passed the lower-level and provincial exams, the news-bearers would finish delivering their messages, receive their reward, rest a bit, enjoy some celebratory wine, and then depart.

"Madam, please wait a moment," one of the messengers said.

Madam Chen was taken aback. The messengers showed no sign of sitting; instead, they moved as if tasked with something else entirely.

"Oh, don't be shy—please, sit!" Madam Chen urged again, thinking them simply polite. Her heart was light with joy; her son had become the top scholar, and her smile refused to hide itself.

But what happened next exceeded her expectations. No sooner had she finished her invitation than a scene unfolded that left her mouth wide open in astonishment.

Plop! Plop!

All the messengers before her sank to their knees, one after another, in a seamless wave of submission. Madam Chen had not been prepared for this at all.

“What... what are you doing? Stand up!” Madam Chen exclaimed, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“The imperial edict has arrived...”

A clear, commanding voice rang from behind her, cutting through her shock.

Madam Chen turned, and there stood the finely dressed man to whom she had just handed a red envelope. In his hands, he unfurled a scroll of bright yellow silk with deliberate slowness.

In truth, he had stepped forward the moment Madam Chen had called the messengers to sit. Seeing him with the scroll, the messengers immediately understood the significance. Without hesitation, they all dropped to their knees.

Even the county magistrate knelt swiftly. Onlookers at the courtyard’s edge dared not remain standing; they, too, sank into a black sea of kneeling bodies. Li Daye, on his roof, let out a clatter as he knelt without hesitation. The men perched in trees balanced precariously on branches to do the same. Even Li Daye’s fat dog—pressed down by someone’s hand—lowered itself to a kneeling position, its paws planted firmly on the ground.

At this moment, only two remained standing: the high official reading the edict, and Madam Chen herself.

“Imperial edict has arrived! Kneel at once!” Zhu Ping’an’s father tugged at Madam Chen’s sleeve. Only then did she, belatedly realizing the moment’s gravity, sink to her knees.

An imperial edict?

The villagers of Xiahe were stunned beyond words. An imperial edict? By their ancestors’ spirits, this was the first imperial decree ever witnessed in Xiahe Village. From now on, they would have an endless story to boast about.

But hadn’t Zhu Ping’an’s achievement already been announced? Why would there still be an edict? What could it possibly mean?

Curiosity in the crowd reached its peak.

“By the Mandate of Heaven, the Emperor decrees...” the official announced, holding the scroll high.

“In the name of the Mandate of Heaven, the Emperor decrees?” Zhu Pingjun, kneeling in a corner, nudged his equally kneeling father, Li Shouren, in confusion. “Father, isn’t it usually ‘the Emperor issues an edict’?”

“What Emperor issues an edict? It’s always ‘the Emperor decrees’! Stop reading all those frivolous books!” his eldest uncle, Zhu Shouren, scolded, believing Zhu Pingjun’s words were just the product of too many storybooks.

Envy and frustration bubbled inside Zhu Shouren. He had been searching for a target for his irritation, and now here was Zhu Pingjun giving him perfect reason to scold—though, of course, he had to wait until the edict was fully read.

Once the official finished the opening line, he continued:

“Zhu Ping’an’s mother, Madam Chen, has long cultivated virtue in herself, possessing grace, wisdom, and the ability to guide her children. It is hereby decreed that Madam Chen, mother of Zhu Ping’an, be honored as an Anren.”

Buzz... buzz...

A wave of astonishment rippled through the courtyard. The edict was for Madam Chen? The Emperor himself acknowledged her? And her son, young Zhu Ping’an, had achieved such merit—how formidable! The villagers, both inside and outside the courtyard, were left speechless.

In the corner, Uncle Zhu Shouren's jaw nearly dropped. Impossible! Little Zhu Ping'an had secured an imperial title for his mother—an official honorific bestowed by the Emperor himself!

"Please accept the edict, Madam Zhu Chen..." the official said, bowing slightly as he handed her the scroll.

"Anren... what is that?" Madam Chen asked, taking the scroll, her face filled with bewilderment.

"Anren is an imperial title, a reward for your son's achievement in attaining the top scholar position," the official explained. Seeing her confusion linger, he smiled faintly. "Simply put, it's what people commonly call a titled lady by imperial decree. Anren is of the sixth rank."

"A titled lady... sixth rank..." Madam Chen's eyebrows shot up as her heart swelled with pride. When Zhu Ping'an had left, he had promised to earn her an imperial honor. She had thought it a playful boast—but now, the promise had been fulfilled in full.

Her pride was palpable. Watching Madam Chen beam with delight, Zhu Laotai and her aunt-in-law felt their teeth grind with envy.

"My son is incredible! He promised me an imperial title—and he delivered!" Madam Chen lifted her head, sweeping a victorious gaze over Zhu Laoye, Zhu Laotai, and the rest of the family, her triumph nearly lifting her off the ground.

“Carpenter, make a finer frame for this scroll—engrave it with flowers...” Madam Chen called out to Li Dahei, waving the imperial edict like a banner of victory.

“Congratulations, Anren! My blessings to Anren!” the county magistrate approached, bowing his hands respectfully.

“Your Excellency...” Though Madam Chen was riding high on joy, her ingrained respect for rank made her instinctively bow.

“Do not, do not! Anren, please do not embarrass me. You are sixth rank; I am only seventh. Only I have seen you—how could you bow to me?” the magistrate hurriedly said, assisting her as if steadying a delicate flower, wiping away imagined sweat from his brow.

His gesture only made Madam Chen feel lighter than air.

He then introduced Madam Chen and Zhu Ping’an’s father to the high-ranking official who had read the edict. Zhu Ping’an’s father and Madam Chen bowed in respect, and the official lavished praise upon Zhu Ping’an, sending Madam Chen into a state of near euphoria.

The officials, bound by heavy duties, could not linger and soon departed, though a dozen messengers remained.

Soon, rustic wine and delicacies from nearby mountains were carried in by the neighboring village's steward, placed in orderly fashion on dozens of tables outside the Zhu residence. Villagers, messengers, and guests all took their seats, feasting amidst laughter and merriment.

"This Anren... truly sixth rank. Even the county magistrate bowed to me..." Madam Chen boasted, her voice brimming with pride.

"From now on, I won't lift a finger, and I'll receive ten shi of stipend every month..." she continued, trying to lower her voice, though Zhu Ping'an's father, just two tables away, could hear every word. He could even picture her triumphant expression, and a rare smile spread across his usually somber face.

"I'm sixth rank too—my little Zhu'er is no longer alone or powerless..."

After the feast wound down and guests began departing, Madam Chen turned to the eldest uncle, Zhu Shouren, her words deliberate and pointed—a quiet, gleeful reminder of his earlier criticism before the good news arrived.

Uncle Zhu Shouren...

Chapter 389: My Obedient Disciple

In the blink of an eye, Shen Lian's fate had shifted—from the looming threat of execution as a condemned official to a mere demotion to an agricultural post. As onlookers racked their brains trying to understand why

the Jiajing Emperor had reversed his decision so swiftly, the true instigator, Zhu Ping'an, had already sauntered leisurely back to the Linhuai Marquis's residence.

With Zhu Ping'an crowned as the top scholar of the imperial examinations, his status in the Linhuai Marquis's mansion shot up like a soaring arrow. The maids inside the residence could hardly contain themselves when they saw him; they practically turned into star-struck fans. Had it not been for the recent memory of Li Shu wielding her riding whip, etched deeply in their minds, their bashful greetings of "Good day, Master!" might have come with far more flustered stammering. Even so, their little hearts still pounded wildly, faces blooming with a rosy flush that made them look like startled fawns.

No sooner had Zhu Ping'an returned to his guest room than Li Shu arrived, bringing along the maid Hua'er, carrying a food box filled with a meticulously prepared meal.

Zhu Ping'an had gone to court early to offer his thanks to the emperor and had barely managed to grab a light breakfast. Now, seeing Hua'er set out steaming bowls of plain congee, pickled vegetables, and glistening slices of marinated beef, his appetite immediately surged beyond restraint.

Winter made marinated beef taste like a gift from the heavens, and this particular dish was no exception. The slices, thin and delicate, gleamed with a rich, inviting glaze, piled like flower petals, and were complemented perfectly by fresh coriander and crisp radish sticks. Paired with the steaming, aromatic congee, the meal was sheer perfection.

"Thank you," Zhu Ping'an said with a bow, a grin of pure gourmand delight spreading across his face.

“I wouldn’t want anyone to starve and bring bad luck to my reputation,” Li Shu retorted, rolling her eyes with a coquettish pout, her lips like soft cherry blossoms.

Truly, the brat was just as exasperating as ever—but, fortunately, he had never had high expectations of her anyway.

Zhu Ping’an shook his head, smiling faintly, then sat down to tackle the feast before him. The familiar flavors of the Li family’s masterful cooking flooded his senses: rich soy-marinated aroma, tender yet slightly chewy meat, flavors so exquisite they seemed almost magical.

For a time, he was completely lost in this ocean of food, utterly absorbed, unable to pull himself away.

Across the room, Li Shu sat at the desk, delicate hands holding a scroll. Yet her eyes were fixed on Zhu Ping’an, watching him eat with such gusto. The sight made her own eyes, wide and glistening, squint into crescent moons, and a small, satisfied smile tugged at her lips.

When Zhu Ping’an rolled the last slice of beef with coriander into his mouth, he happened to catch sight of Li Shu’s moon-shaped eyes from across the table.

“Uh... what’s with that look?” he asked, hiccupping slightly, curiosity flickering across his face.

For a fleeting moment, Li Shu’s eyes betrayed a hint of panic at his question, but she quickly returned to her usual proud and defiant expression.

“Ha... ha... you look like a toad who’s just tasted swan meat,” she teased, pointing at him while covering her mouth with her other hand. Her laugh was light and tinkling, and the small swan pendant dangling from her pink earlobe danced with the motion, catching the sunlight and sparkling vividly.

Girl, did you forget your medicine again?

Zhu Ping’an rolled his eyes at her remark, then bent down to continue sipping his congee and sampling the side dishes.

Seeing this, Li Shu exhaled in relief, then shot him a disdainful glare, though her lips betrayed a smile.

Not long after breakfast, the mischievous little bear of a child—sent by a junior attendant, under the direction of the Linhuai Marquis—arrived, wearing a grim, pitiful expression. The Marquis, seizing the opportunity before Zhu Ping’an formally assumed his post, hoped to let the boy be influenced by Zhu Ping’an’s presence: near Zhu, one might turn bright; near ink, one might grow dark.

Seeing the child’s small eyes, clouded with faux grievance, Zhu Ping’an knew that over the next few days, he would undoubtedly be compared to a neighbor’s child tasked with “educating” the little one.

The attendant bowed politely to Zhu Ping’an and Li Shu, then withdrew, leaving the boy standing awkwardly.

“You two handle yourselves. Don’t bother me. The Sixth Miss keeps making my life difficult, so I’ll just hide here and enjoy some peace,” Li Shu announced, boldly taking over Zhu Ping’an’s desk. She waved her hand as if claiming a throne, settling in with complete confidence.

In modern classrooms, seats were plentiful, and girls often wandered freely. Zhu Ping’an paid no mind to Li Shu occupying his desk; he simply continued guiding the little bear through his studies while occasionally glancing at his own books.

Soon enough, the young, rosy-cheeked Niuniu arrived, her small neck adorned with a tiny cloth pouch filled with her favorite treats.

“Greetings, Fifth Sister! Niuniu brought you some candy!” The little girl scanned the room, then darted excitedly toward Li Shu, producing a piece of candy from her pouch like a precious treasure.

“Thank you, little sister Niuniu,” Li Shu said, smiling as she patted the child’s head. In return, she handed Niuniu a small golden bean as a gift.

“Candy for brother-in-law...”

After gifting Li Shu, Niuniu skipped toward Zhu Ping’an, offering him a piece of candy with her chubby little face tilted upward, beaming with innocence.

Unprepared for such cuteness, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but be charmed. He gave her a silver bean in return, then regaled her with a short fairy tale.

The little bear had never been interested in learning, and Niuniu's arrival only made him more distracted. He scratched, looked around, wiggled left and right, anything but studying. Zhu Ping'an intervened promptly, determined to curb the misbehavior.

But the boy was stubborn, clearly used to getting his way.

"Why should I listen to you?" the little bear demanded, lifting his chubby face defiantly.

"Because I'm your teacher. You must listen to me," Zhu Ping'an said, smiling gently.

"You're my teacher?" the boy snorted. "You say so, but I don't accept it."

"Oh? Then what do you propose?" Zhu Ping'an's smile deepened, clearly enjoying the game of teasing him.

"What do I propose?" the boy muttered to himself, thinking hard. After a moment, his eyes lit up, sparkling with newfound resolve.

“We’ll play a game. Whoever wins becomes the teacher.” Confidence radiated from his plump little face.

“Fine,” Zhu Ping’an agreed, nodding.

This ancient game had even warranted a doctoral thesis in the modern era, which Zhu Ping’an had read and studied with great interest. Now, faced with the boy’s self-assured smile, he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I’ll play paper first,” Zhu Ping’an said, deadpan, before the game began.

“Are you kidding me?” the boy rolled his eyes. “You say you’ll play paper, so I’ll try scissors to beat you, but you’ll probably pick rock! Hah, I won’t fall for it. I’ll choose rock!”

The boy chose rock. Zhu Ping’an chose... paper.

“I said I’d play paper. You didn’t believe me. Now, call me Teacher!” Zhu Ping’an said, smiling at him.

“Good... teacher!” the boy growled through gritted teeth.

“See? You admit I’m a good teacher now. Alright, my good apprentice, go focus on your studies,” Zhu Ping’an said, pinching the boy’s chubby cheeks playfully.

“I refuse! Let’s play again!” the boy shouted.

“Fine, but this time I’ll play rock,” Zhu Ping’an replied, serious as ever.

After much deliberation, the boy chose paper, expecting to beat Zhu Ping’an’s rock, only to find Zhu Ping’an had picked scissors.

“Cheater...” the boy accused, eyes narrowing.

“Oops, I miscalculated... but I still won. Call me Teacher again,” Zhu Ping’an shrugged.

The boy, frustrated yet obedient, called him once more. From then on, Zhu Ping’an had the upper hand in every round, each time prompting the boy to shout “Good Teacher,” and each time responding with a playful “Good apprentice,” which drove the little bear nearly mad with both irritation and amusement.

Eventually, in a dizzying flurry, the boy accidentally won a round without even knowing what he'd chosen. Overjoyed, he raised his chubby face, triumphant, and shouted, "Quick! Call me Good Apprentice!"

Pfft... cough...

Niuniu, mid-snack, sprayed food across the room—and all over the boy's face.

Li Shu shot Zhu Ping'an a fierce glare, but even she couldn't suppress her laughter.

Hua'er paused for a moment before clutching her stomach, bursting into giggles as well.

Chapter 390: The Clever Young Lad

"Smile? What smile? I won?!"

The mischievous little rascal froze for two whole seconds. Only then did it dawn on him what he had just said. Instantly, his chubby little face seemed as if someone had splashed a bucket of red ink all over it—flushing, burning, impossible to ignore.

"Since you insist, then I'll indulge you." Zhu Ping'an reached out, gently ruffling the tuft of hair atop the rascal's head, and gave a firm, deliberate nod.

“Good~ boy~ my~ disciple~.”

Zhu Ping’an elongated each syllable, calling it out with exaggerated flourish.

From those three words, the little rascal could hear every ounce of mischief, every tiny thread of malicious glee. And seeing Zhu Ping’an’s face, trying to restrain laughter yet radiating seriousness, he truly wished at that moment he could burrow into the ground and vanish.

“Y-yes...”

He replied with a heavy heart, turning his plump face away as though it could hide him from the world.

Zhu Ping’an watched, amused yet satisfied. This little troublemaker, for all his mischief, had one remarkable quality: he took responsibility. He didn’t dodge or run away. That alone made him far superior to most adults.

After such an experience, the little rascal wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and bury himself, too embarrassed to ever play rock-paper-scissors again. He sat obediently at the table, flushed, and quietly opened his book to read.

“Brother Gong, so silly...” The little girl pouted her tiny lips, giggling softly.

At her words, the little rascal's cheeks burned even redder. Narrow, grumbling eyes shifted toward Zhu Ping'an.

"Why do you act like that chubby brat? Whoever hits you, you hit back!" Zhu Ping'an glanced at him in mild exasperation.

Li Shu sat at the desk, tracing Zhu Ping'an's old ink marks, while the plump little maid rested her head on her hands, dozing and swaying gently. Even the little rascal was reading seriously, though the grim, almost tragic expression on his plump face didn't waver.

The little girl, meanwhile, sat on Zhu Ping'an's lap, chewing on a candy piece as he told her a story.

"Once upon a time, a group of children were playing in the garden. One of them climbed the rockery and accidentally fell into a water jar hidden below. The jar was deep and filled with water; the child was at risk of drowning. Everyone panicked, unsure what to do. But then, one child stepped forward, brimming with confidence, and shouted, 'Don't worry, I am Sima Guang!' Calmly, in the chaos, he lifted a large stone and smashed the jar. Water gushed out, and the child trapped inside was saved."

Zhu Ping'an held the little girl on his lap and narrated the story of Sima Guang breaking the jar in a gentle voice. Meanwhile, the little rascal, who had been studying for nearly an hour, couldn't help but lift his head, listening intently.

After hearing the story, he seemed inspired. His plump face shone with determination, eyes flickering with eagerness. Grabbing his brush, he wrote five large, uneven characters in his notebook.

Having seen the little rascal focus for nearly an hour, Zhu Ping'an, following the modern balance of study and rest, allowed him a half-hour of free play.

The moment Zhu Ping'an finished speaking, the little rascal let out a triumphant yell, dropped his brush and book, and sprinted off so fast it was as if his hair had disappeared in the wind. The little girl tried to follow, but by the time she slid off Zhu Ping'an's lap, he was already gone.

"Sima Guang breaks the jar."

Zhu Ping'an picked up the paper the little rascal had just scribbled. The uneven, comical strokes stared back at him. Jar? Ah, the kid couldn't write the character for "jar." Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but laugh silently at his antics.

Meanwhile, the little rascal was racing full tilt across the yard.

I must show Niuer that I'm smart. I can't let her think I'm foolish because of that bumbling brother-in-law!

He nodded vigorously, taking his self-appointed mission to heart. With little plump legs pumping, he hurtled toward his imagined goal.

From Sima Guang breaking the jar, he had learned a lesson: he wanted to do something even smarter. That trickster brother-in-law had left him looking like a fool in Niuer's eyes. He had to erase that impression. He had to prove he was clever—smarter than the brother-in-law by far.

Thump, thump, thump!

He arrived at the front yard and spotted the family's large water jar. His little eyes lit up.

Sima Guang only acted after his friend fell in. I, Li Yan'gong, will break it before anyone falls! I'll prevent the accident before it happens! That makes me smarter than Sima Guang!

I'm brilliant!

Thinking of the brother-in-law's shocked expression and Niuer's impressed one, his heart surged like it had been injected with adrenaline.

With resolute eyes and little arms braced, he lifted a large stone—though it didn't budge. No matter. Undeterred, he switched to a smaller rock and slammed it onto the fireproof jar in the yard with all his might.

Bang, bang, bang!

The rhythm built. On the third hit, the jar cracked and water gushed out. The little rascal didn't dodge in time and got soaked—but he didn't care. His face glowed with pure triumph.

Revolution isn't finished; comrades must continue striving!

He wasn't satisfied with just one jar. Energized by his success, he dashed toward the second jar with renewed vigor.

Bang, bang, bang!

Throughout the day, the rhythmic crashes echoed across the Linhuai Marquis' estate, accompanied by the little rascal's busy, determined figure.

In that limited time, he exercised boundless creativity, smashing eighteen jars across the front and back yards.

When he wiped the sweat from his face and admired the last broken jar, word reached the Linhuai Marquis. He arrived immediately, wearing a Spartan-like expression.

“Father, I broke them all... Just like Sima Guang, but I did it before anyone fell in...” The little rascal lifted his chubby face, clapping his muddy little hands together, chest puffed with pride.

Well, aren't you one clever child!

The Linhuai Marquis nodded, pleased, then immediately scooped up the little rascal, giving him a thorough spanking. Clever, huh? Let's see how clever you are now!

The yard echoed with the little rascal's rhythmic, wailing cries.

Only when the matriarch arrived to intervene did the little rascal limp back to Zhu Ping'an's yard, tear-streaked and aggrieved, recounting the whole episode to the little girl.

“Niuer... Daddy doesn't understand me...”

He gazed skyward at a forty-five-degree angle, sighing, his chubby face filled with the lonely grandeur of someone who had braved great heights.

The jar-smashing boy—truly, you are brilliant!

Zhu Ping'an could only shake his head at the rascal's audacity. That he had survived at all proved he was truly the Linhuai Marquis' blood.

By the time things settled, the carriages at the Linhuai Marquis' gates were arriving non-stop. More and more people learned that the newly crowned top scholar was the estate's future son-in-law. Officials, nobles, and acquaintances all sent their representatives or formal letters to pay respects.

Zhu Ping'an disliked such social obligations and planned to sneak out for some quiet. Li Shu insisted on joining, claiming she hadn't yet explored the capital. The little girl, hearing about going out to play, wanted to come along, and the little rascal, puffing his chubby cheeks, demanded to follow too.

It wasn't a problem for Li Shu and the plump little maid, but taking two little children out wasn't so simple. Zhu Ping'an requested permission from the Linhuai Marquis and, once granted, led the group—two adults, two children—out the back gate of the estate.