

## Rise 391

### Chapter 391: The Phoenix Hairpin

Experience has proven, both in ancient times and the modern era, that girls always take forever to get ready.

Before heading out, Li Shu had said she would go to the backyard to tidy up and would be ready soon. Yet, Zhu Ping'an and the two younger children ended up waiting for nearly half an hour before Li Shu, accompanied by her little maid Hua'er, nicknamed Baozi, finally sauntered over, fashionably late.

Makeup, dressing up, changing clothes—it seemed the routine for girls back then was not much different from modern times.

Li Shu likely wore a light, delicate makeup that made her already fair and tender skin appear even more radiant. Her brows were long and graceful, like strokes of ink on a scroll. Perhaps ancient women had a way of painting eyeliner too, for after outlining her eyes in soft black, Li Shu's gaze seemed larger and brighter than before, like a clear, tranquil pool reflecting the sky. Her cherry-red lips curled slightly in a playful, enticing smile, adding a subtle hint of charm to her already captivating demeanor.

Her black hair had been styled into a princess bun, adorned with a meticulously carved purple crystal hairpin in the shape of a celestial swan. Dangling from it was a string of agate tassels that sparkled with every movement, making Li Shu's presence shine all the more brilliantly.

And, of course, she had changed into another new outfit: a pale green cross-collared top paired with a light red ruqun, her waist cinched with a cream-colored silk ribbon. The flowing fabric seemed to dance around her as she moved. It was almost as if this girl had never worn the same clothes twice.

Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but wrinkle his nose. "Who could possibly afford a girl like this?" he muttered to himself.

"Looking at me, hmm?"

Li Shu approached from a distance, catching Zhu Ping'an staring, and inwardly she felt a small thrill of joy. Yet her face maintained a proud, coquettish tilt, her delicate nose emitting a faint, dignified sniff.

In contrast, the little maid Baozi was far more modest. Though she had been cleaned and dressed, Li Shu's brilliance made her look plain by comparison.

"Fifth Sister is so pretty! When I grow up, I want to be just like Fifth Sister..."

The little girl's sweet words made Li Shu's face light up with a smile. She pinched the girl's chubby cheeks and planted a soft kiss on them.

Meanwhile, the mischievous little boy had no such charm at his disposal.

"Fifth Sister, you're really slow. You didn't even wet yourself—why did you need to change clothes?" Li Yan'gong, the little rascal, folded his hands behind his back and frowned, his chubby cheeks puffing in protest at losing half an hour of his day.

“Hehe... Next time, I’ll be quicker,” Li Shu said with a gentle laugh, nodding reassuringly at him. But then the boy suddenly felt a chill on his back. He turned around, but there was nothing behind him. Strange.

Contrary to modern assumptions, girls in the Ming Dynasty were not confined to their homes. Streets were not only for men. From Zhu Ping’an’s experience, ordinary families—especially modest ones—did not forbid girls from going out. They simply observed stricter rules of propriety than today, and outings were less frequent. Girls still had to help with household chores, which required stepping outside occasionally.

Daughters of wealthy families went out less often, but they were not entirely restricted. They usually traveled in carriages or palanquins to shield themselves from the public gaze, complying with social etiquette. Some married women even wore veils or hats for extra privacy, though this was optional.

The Marquis of Linhuai had prepared a covered carriage for Zhu Ping’an and the others, complete with curtains and window screens to block prying eyes.

The streets near the emperor’s palace were bustling. Just past the Marquis of Linhuai’s mansion, the scene came alive with vibrant shops, shouting street vendors, monkey performers, martial arts demonstrations, and feats like chest-cracking stone-splitting acts, all clamoring for attention.

As usual, when girls went shopping, clothes and jewelry were the main focus.

Shuntian City had ready-made clothing shops that far surpassed those in other counties, both in style and quality. Jewelry shops were even more abundant, seemingly endless.

By the fifth clothing shop, Li Shu could no longer resist. She jumped out of the carriage with Baozi, and despite the little girl's tiny legs, she ran straight into the store, eyes sparkling. Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to follow with the little boy.

They visited several shops. Li Shu bought three sets of clothes for herself, sizes irrelevant, for she wouldn't wear them herself—they were merely references for the seamstress. She also bought one set for Baozi and two for the sweet little girl.

The sight of the little girl clutching her two new outfits with joy made Li Yan'gong green with envy.

"Fifth Sister, why did you buy two sets for the little girl but not a single one for me?" he whined, his round face puffed out in protest, eyes flashing.

"Handsome boys don't need dressing up," Li Shu said, crouching down to pat his chubby cheeks with a tender hand.

Zhu Ping'an coughed back a laugh. That was classic Li Shu—clever and mischievous.

Who was he to argue? The little boy had complained earlier about her being slow and changing clothes for no reason... now he looked utterly bewildered.

Clothing shops were merely a warm-up; the real excitement lay in the jewelry stores.

After only two jewelry shops, Zhu Ping'an was already carrying numerous boxes—all Li Shu's purchases. And the reasons she gave for buying each piece were enough to make him dizzy.

"Oh, this hairpin is beautiful... buy it."

"Oh, these earrings are so cheap... buy it."

"Hmm, this hairpin isn't pretty, but it's unique... buy it."

"Look, the color of this one is different from the last... buy it."

"See, the stamen on this hairpin is smaller than the one at home... buy it."

“Although this dangling ornament isn’t very pretty, it feels right... buy it.”

Once, even when examining a pair of earrings, she murmured, “I don’t really like these earrings, but somehow a voice inside me says... buy them.”

Inevitably, all this buying exhausted her funds. When they returned to the carriage, she saw a simple street stall selling peachwood jewelry, but she had no money left.

The stall was run by a local woman, a simple wooden structure mounted on a one-wheeled cart. Hanging from it were various wooden trinkets. Li Shu’s eye caught a finely carved peachwood hairpin shaped like a cicada-head phoenix. It was exquisite but paled compared to the treasures she had already purchased.

“You just bought so much already,” Zhu Ping’an commented casually, a man of modest means somewhat shocked at her extravagant habits. He suspected most of her purchases would never even be used.

“Here, lend me twenty wen. I’ll pay you back later,” Li Shu said, rolling her eyes at him, frustrated with his slow-wittedness, then held out her delicate hand.

“What for? Consider it a gift,” Zhu Ping’an said, shaking his head. He drew the money from his pouch, bought the peachwood hairpin, and handed it to Li Shu.

He didn't stop there—he also bought two small carved peachwood rabbits, giving one to the little girl and the other to the almost-drooling little boy.

But when Li Shu received the hairpin, her heart raced as if a tiny, lost deer was leaping inside her chest.

“Who even cares~~” she said, rolling her eyes disdainfully, yet her delicate fingers clutched the hairpin tightly, unwilling to let go.

Chapter 392: Cabbage and Pigs

The enthusiasm of girls for shopping seemed boundless. Even without the intention to buy anything, they could wander from one street to the next with unflagging energy, completely oblivious to fatigue.

“Ice sugar hawthorns...”

On the edge of the street, a vendor carried a straw-and-wood frame strapped together with twine. Stuck into the frame with bamboo skewers were glistening strings of candied hawthorns, their crimson fruits coated in translucent, glossy syrup that caught the sunlight and gleamed invitingly.

Around the vendor, a group of children clustered, each taking a stick, licking the syrup, smearing it on their fingers without a care. Their chubby little faces were sticky with sweetness, yet they munched happily, utterly absorbed in the simple joy.

Gulp...

Seeing this, the mischievous little boy couldn't help swallowing hard. His plump face leaned forward, eyes fixed so intently on the candy that they refused to dart away.

"Brother-in-law! Brother-in-law! Are the sugar hawthorns made from chicken legs?" The little girl's tongue darted over her lips, and she lifted her adorable face to look at Zhu Ping'an, her eyes wide and innocent, her voice sweet and tentative.

"No." Zhu Ping'an shook his head.

"Oh, then they must be made from pork, right?" She nodded confidently, then asked again in her irresistibly cute way.

"No." Zhu Ping'an shook his head once more.

"It's been so long since I've had sugar hawthorns. Niuniu has even forgotten what they're made of..." The little girl patted her round belly, pouting slightly.

Hehe, this girl really reminded him of Li Shu when she was a child, Zhu Ping'an thought with a small smile. He scooped her up in one arm and, leaning down to the drooling little boy, said, "Come on, let's see how these hawthorns taste."

Taking a step forward, he glanced back at Li Shu and the little maid Baozi and asked, “Do you two want to try some too?”

Immediately, he regretted asking. With Li Shu’s spoiled young lady habits, she would likely wrinkle her nose at street food, deeming it unclean.

Baozi, however, nodded vigorously, clearly having been eyeing the hawthorns herself.

“No way, it looks dirty...” Sure enough, Li Shu cast a disdainful glance at the vendor’s wrinkled, oil-stained clothes, rolling her eyes in subtle disgust.

“But... seeing how sincere you are, I suppose I’ll give you a chance. Hmm... give me the one with the orange.”

Just as Zhu Ping’an was about to turn to buy it, he heard Li Shu’s voice again—proud, coquettish, and tinged with generosity.

What an infuriating little girl, he thought inwardly.

Each of them got a stick of sugar hawthorn and strolled down the street, nibbling as they walked. The little boy ate with such focus that syrup smeared across his cheeks.

Seeing everyone enjoying themselves, Li Shu hesitated, holding the hawthorn in her delicate hand. She glanced at the boy leading the little girl ahead, then, with a small sigh of resolve, lifted the candy to her lips and licked it gingerly. To her surprise, it wasn't as bad as she had imagined.

A tiny bite—tart yet sweet, the flavor lingering pleasantly. It wasn't half bad.

Cough cough...

Zhu Ping'an, turning around at that moment, caught sight of Li Shu puffing her rosy cheeks as she chewed. She looked like a little groundhog eating, utterly adorable. Their eyes met, and her face instantly flushed crimson. She hurriedly tried to swallow the candy, only to choke a little...

Zhu Ping'an's lips curved into a smile; he couldn't help it.

"What are you smiling at..."

Li Shu's cheeks burned hotter as she glared at his retreating back. Darn sugar hawthorns... making me look ridiculous! She wanted to toss the candy, but thinking of the little rascal who had given it to her, she hesitated. Carefully, she wrapped it in a pink, clean handkerchief, handing it to Baozi to keep with the other candy.

In the Ming Dynasty, men and women didn't mingle as freely as today. Even a married couple had to maintain a certain distance, lest people whisper about impropriety—though, of course, there were exceptions.

Zhu Ping'an saw a perfect example: a short, stout, rather unremarkable man dressed like a wealthy commoner, holding a tall, graceful, beautiful woman. They emerged from a jewelry shop and stepped into a sedan chair.

Beauty and the beast were always so striking...

"Good cabbage all gets eaten by pigs..."

For a moment, Zhu Ping'an felt transported back to the modern day, recalling wandering the streets with his single roommates, watching some scrappy man flaunting gold chains drag a beautiful woman into a tiny inn. Habitively, he muttered, shaking his head.

"Good cabbage all gets eaten by pigs?" Baozi tilted her head, puzzled. She didn't understand his metaphorical musings about cabbages and pigs.

Zhu Ping'an explained lightly, choosing his words carefully.

Baozi's eyes lit up with sudden comprehension. She looked at the sedan chair in the distance and covered her mouth, giggling quietly.

"Some pigs are so foolish, they won't even eat cabbage when it's offered..."

Just then, Li Shu, pouting, added meaningfully, "Yet there are some... who won't even eat it when it's right in front of them."

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an froze mid-step, turning to look at her as if he'd just seen a mouse acting as a bridesmaid for a cat.

"Ahem... why are you looking at me like that? Don't read too much into it," Li Shu hurriedly added, her cheeks flaming. "Don't think you're some toad trying to eat swan meat! I heard that in front of the He Nian Hall pharmacy, you threw twenty taels at a girl, and when she offered herself to you, you refused..."

Ah, so that was what she meant. For a moment, he'd thought she was scheming something more devious.

"I'm not a scoundrel taking advantage of someone..."

Hearing her explanation, Zhu Ping'an relaxed, shrugging lightly.

Li Shu's racing heart finally slowed. She exhaled, but still rolled her eyes at his retreating back. What a big, clumsy blockhead! A dumb blockhead! Not even willing to eat the cabbage offered! Not even a crisp, fresh cabbage! Starve already!

"Miss, what's wrong?" Baozi asked, watching her mistress roll her eyes at Zhu Ping'an's back repeatedly.

"Oh, it's nothing. A careless speck of sand got in my eye..." Li Shu replied awkwardly, rubbing her delicate fingers over her eyes before sneaking another glare at his back.

"Oh! Then I'll blow it out for you, Miss," Baozi said anxiously, as if it were her own eye.

"No need... it's fine now, ahem, all gone," Li Shu said, waving her hands impatiently, coughing lightly.

Baozi's worried expression finally eased, though she cast a few more cautious glances at her mistress to make sure her eyes were truly unharmed before relaxing completely.

Chapter 393: Heroes of the World

There is no wall in the world that truly keeps the wind out. While Zhu Ping'an led a gaggle of beauties and unruly children through the bustling streets, the mystery surrounding Shen Lian's sudden twist of fate had already been unraveled by many keen observers.

It all began with a single remark: "I heard that before this man submitted his memorial, he had already purchased a coffin and placed it in his home."

Just because of this one sentence, Shen Lian's destiny shifted from death to exile. As for Zhu Ping'an, the one who spoke it, he left a deep impression on countless people.

Of course, those with a sharp eye had also picked up on Zhu Ping'an's earlier, merciless critique of Shen Lian's memorial as being all show and no substance.

For a while, Zhu Ping'an's stance left many guessing.

He had admirers among both the Reformists and the Strict Faction, yet he also had detractors in both camps. Some Reformists lumped him in with the Strict Faction, secretly scorning him; some Strict Faction members placed him with the Reformists, eager to eliminate him.

This ambiguity was on full display during a banquet at the Yan residence. After word spread about Zhu Ping'an's conversation in the Western Gardens with Emperor Jiajing, some were pleased by his ruthless critique of Shen Lian's empty memorial, seeing him as someone who could be courted—worth the effort—after all, he was the youngest top scholar of the Ming Dynasty, with a future full of limitless potential.

Yet more voices at the banquet branded Zhu Ping'an as a petty trickster. His earlier remarks, they argued, were merely a setup for that final line about Shen Lian's coffin, which was why he deserved a lesson.

"This boy looks as simple-minded as a pig, but his mind is as cunning as a demon's. He is no gentle soul. I am certain that today's actions were solely to save that lunatic Shen. Mark my words, this child will become a great calamity one day. He cannot be left alive," Luo Longwen said, sneering as he looked at those at the banquet who believed Zhu Ping'an was savvy, his tone full of certainty.

"Heh, you might say he just happened to save Shen by chance, but calling him 'demonic in intellect' or claiming he will become a great threat is giving him far too much credit. Top scholar or not, so what? For centuries, top scholars have come and gone. One every three years, countless in number. And yet? All of them paraded as brilliant, producing formulaic official documents, writing a poem here, painting a picture there. How many truly govern the nation or achieve great deeds?"

Beside Luo Longwen, Yan Maoqing shook his head with disdain. On one hand, he thought Luo Longwen was overreacting; Zhu Ping'an was just an inexperienced boy who barely understood the ways of the world—what great achievement could he possibly have? On the other hand, as Zhu Ping'an's teacher, even though he often disapproved of the boy, when Luo Longwen said he must be eliminated, Yan Maoqing instinctively felt compelled to defend him. A disobedient student could be scolded or punished, but "cannot be left alive"? That was too much!

"Jingqing, do not underestimate this child. A single word from him changed the Emperor's mind. How could he be just a superficial figure?" Yan Song said calmly, closing his eyes as he enjoyed the ministrations of a servant behind him.

"You speak truly, Elder. Maoqing has indeed underestimated the heroes of the realm," Yan Song added. Yan Maoqing dared not respond further.

“Heroes? He does not yet qualify. At best, he is a talented individual. If we are to speak of heroes in this world today, there are only three...”

Yan Shifan leaned back in his chair, belly prominent, picking a fishbone with satisfaction. He spat it out calmly, then extended three pudgy fingers and drew out his words with confidence.

“Oh...” Everyone’s attention shifted to him immediately.

“The first hero is Yang Bo, Right Assistant Censor of the Censorate,” Yan Shifan said, adjusting his posture to better display his belly, pointing with a single finger as if surveying the realm. “Censor Yang possesses a photographic memory. Courageous as iron, spirit unyielding; even amidst floods, he walks with ease. Skilled in both letters and martial arts, he can stabilize the state and secure the nation. If this man is not a hero, who dares claim the title?”

At the mention of Yang Bo, everyone nodded. They knew his history well. Despite poor results in the imperial exams—placing in the third tier at the palace examination—he had been assigned to a remote county called Ao Fei, practically politically exiled. Even if his ancestors blessed him, his career would have peaked at the level of a local fifth-rank official. Yet this man, seemingly doomed to obscurity, proved his exceptional talent upon arriving at Ao Fei. Not only did he govern efficiently, but he also demonstrated extraordinary martial skill, soon earning recognition from the higher-ups. Through rapid promotion, he rose to Right Assistant Censor of the Censorate.

“The second hero is Lu Bing, Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard,” Yan Shifan continued, raising his second finger.

No one objected. As Commander, Lu Bing had commanded fear and respect for over a decade. He was connected to the Emperor, courageous enough to rush into burning buildings to save the Emperor, skilled without relying on connections, and a true martial champion. Deep, calculating, and formidable—such a combination made him a hero indeed.

Pausing for effect, Yan Shifan raised his fat hand to drink three generous swigs of wine, burping afterward.

“And the third hero?” someone asked, flattering Yan Song.

Yan Shifan shook his head, confessing to his father with a mock apology: “If my father were ten years younger—no, even five years younger—this title of hero would belong to him alone. Everyone else would step aside. But heroes cannot defy age. My father has grown old.”

“So, who is the third?”

The assembled guests offered suggestions, but Yan Shifan shook his head at each, smiling.

Finally, he revealed his answer.

“The third hero... is me, Yan Shifan!” He pointed confidently at himself.

Yan Shifan’s confidence was not arrogance but self-awareness—and everyone accepted it. Though physically unimpressive, with a large head, big ears, and blindness in one eye, he was exceptionally intelligent. Much of Yan Song’s success as Grand Secretary could be attributed to him. The court often referred to him as the “Little Secretary,” not out of respect for his father, but because of genuine trust in his abilities. When imperial instructions or secret signals confused everyone, consulting Yan Shifan invariably yielded the correct course of action.

After this discussion on heroes of the realm, Zhu Ping’an’s fate was left unresolved. Regardless, the fact that he could describe Shen Lian’s memorial as empty and hollow showed restraint; no severe punishment was necessary.

Young men often have sharp edges; a little discipline would suffice.

Chapter 394: If You Were to Gift Me a Wooden Hairpin

The setting sun cast its lingering golden light across the Linhuai Marquis’s residence. A pair of swallows, circling together in perfect companionship, lingered for a moment before flitting away. In the distance, the creaking of approaching carriages broke the quiet, and slowly, amid the glow of the evening sky, a covered horse-drawn carriage made its way toward the mansion.

As soon as the carriage came to a stop, Zhu Ping’an was the first to step down. He reached inside and lifted the little girl in his arms, holding her gently.

The mischievous little rascal inside the carriage wriggled out and spread his chubby little hands, clearly expecting Zhu Ping'an to scoop him up as well.

"I only carry girls..."

In the end, the little boy could only hear the teasing, slightly annoying voice of his brother-in-law and had no choice but to slide down from the carriage.

"Hey, the girl's behind you. Go on, carry her." Sliding down, the boy planted his hands on his hips, puffed up his cheeks, and called out to Zhu Ping'an.

Behind him, the little maid, Baozi, flushed red, glancing at Zhu Ping'an like a startled rabbit before quickly lowering her head.

"What are you standing there for, silly girl? Hurry up and get down." Inside the carriage, Li Shu urged her.

"Oh... okay..."

Blushing furiously, the little maid clumsily climbed down, looking like a thief caught in the act. Once on the ground, she reached out her small hands to help Li Shu down from the carriage.

"Hey, Zhu Ping'an, as a newly appointed scholar-official, you'll soon get a two-month furlough. Are you going home?" Li Shu asked casually as they walked side by side along the small path leading to the rear courtyard.

“Oh, there’s a vacation like that?” Zhu Ping’an paused, his face lighting up with joy.

“Of course. After the ‘release-of-the-vegetables’ ceremony, roughly ten days later, newly appointed officials get a long furlough. This is a special privilege for new graduates. The two-month break allows you to settle your household affairs and take care of personal matters. After this, you’ll devote yourself fully to serving the state, and there will never be a leave this long again.”

Li Shu nodded gracefully. The golden ornaments on her princess-style hair swayed gently, while a string of agate beads shimmered in the sunset, enhancing her delicate, rosy complexion. She looked like a bud on the verge of blooming in the spring breeze, radiantly beautiful.

Zhu Ping’an had never heard of such a furlough. In his modern studies, he had found no record of such extended leave in ancient times. He had assumed officials only had a ten-day break once per ten days, especially in the Ming Dynasty. Emperor Hongwu was a workaholic, granting only three days off a year: New Year’s Day, the winter solstice, and his own birthday. Later, due to difficulties with leave, it was increased to one month and three days. In modern civil service exams, new recruits often have one to two months, or even half a year, before starting work. To find a similar system in the Ming Dynasty was an unexpected delight.

“Two months? How could I not go home? No matter how beautiful the capital is, it can’t compare to Xiahe.” Zhu Ping’an couldn’t hide his excitement.

“Oh, then you’re lucky. I’m heading home too. My uncle will send a boat for me, and you can come along. Besides, there are so many empty cabins anyway...” Li Shu’s playful eyes glanced at him, her red lips parting as a clear, birdlike voice flowed out.

A boat?

Not bad. The ride on horseback had been jostling and exhausting, with meals and lodging a constant concern. Roads in the ancient world were rough, unlike modern highways. Horses could be slow and stubborn, especially dark steeds with little energy.

Even if it couldn’t cover a thousand miles in a day, a boat would be faster, more stable, and provided a place to rest. Plus, Li Shu’s family chef was renowned for their cooking.

As Zhu Ping’an pondered, Li Shu observed him with her playful side glance, her delicate hands hidden in her long sleeves gripping her embroidered handkerchief.

“Hehe, then I’ll come along,” Zhu Ping’an finally agreed.

Li Shu’s eyes sparkled even more, her proud little face tilted as she teased, “Since it’s empty anyway, might as well let you, my silly little toad...”

With that, she lifted her flowing skirt, twisted her slender waist, and quickly stepped in front of Zhu Ping'an. The ribbons fluttered behind her, leaving him with a coquettish, slightly teasing back view.

By then, they had reached the small guest courtyard where Zhu Ping'an was staying. Watching Li Shu's proud figure, he shook his head, then led the little boy and the little girl back to his guest quarters.

The little boy, thrilled at the news of Zhu Ping'an's imminent departure, could hardly contain himself. Once he left, freedom awaited...

"Brother-in-law, when will you come back?" the little girl asked, reluctantly.

Come back? When he returned to the capital next time, he certainly wouldn't stay in the marquis's residence. But seeing the little girl's large, pleading eyes, Zhu Ping'an couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth. He only said he would return when the weather warmed and the dragonflies danced. Ten days or half a month later, she would probably have forgotten him.

Hearing he would return, the little girl's innocent smile returned.

"Brother-in-law, today's meat buns outside didn't have any meat. Let's not eat them next time," she complained, her small face lifted pitifully.

Those were actually just plain buns.

Meatless buns... Her complaint could rival the naive words of Emperor Jin Hui: "If the people have no chestnuts to fill their stomachs, why not eat meat porridge?"

Living in the deep mansion, the little girl had enjoyed countless delicacies, yet she had never eaten plain steamed buns...

Unaware that on the very land of Ming, some people could not even afford a single bun...

A long road lay ahead...

"Brother-in-law, what's wrong?" the little girl asked, worried as Zhu Ping'an's expression darkened.

"Oh, nothing," he said with a forced smile, shaking his head.

Li Shu returned to the rear courtyard and let her hair down, black strands flowing in the wind. The little maid re-styled her hair into a proper chignon suitable for a hairpin, carefully inserting a finely carved eight-treasure coral pin.

Her pink, floor-length gown, cinched with a satin ribbon at the waist, accentuated her graceful figure. The coral hairpin framed her delicate face, enhancing her alluring charm, her elegance intoxicating.

“She’s so beautiful...” the little maid murmured, gazing at Li Shu in the mirror.

“Flattery suits you. Alright, go rest. We’ve been out all day, and I’m tired too.” Li Shu pinched the little maid’s cheek, smiling gently. The maid, as if praised by her mistress like a happy puppy, cheerfully scampered off.

Once the footsteps faded, Li Shu picked up the peach-wood hairpin wrapped in a handkerchief from the table.

The image of that troublesome little toad placing it in her hands replayed in her mind, making her lips curl slightly.

She removed the coral pin from her hair and casually tossed it onto the table, then carefully placed the peach-wood hairpin in her chignon.

“So beautiful...”

She posed before the mirror from multiple angles, studying it long and smiling softly.

Later, Li Shu moved to the desk by the window, glancing in the direction of Zhu Ping'an's temporary guest room. She picked up paper and pen, and her small, precise script flowed onto the pink stationery:

If you, my lord, gift me this wooden hairpin,

I shall weave my long hair for you;

Washing away all ornamentation, from now on, we face the sunset together, even at the edge of the world.

Chapter 395: Delivering the Umbrella

Early morning mist hung gently in the air. The moment Zhu Ping'an opened the door, he saw the fine rain weaving through the morning light, falling softly at an angle like a delicate veil of mist suspended in the air. Each tiny droplet kissed his face with a cool, refreshing touch, leaving a sense of calm and pleasure.

In the courtyard, a cluster of wildflowers—tossed about by mischievous children—had quietly bloomed, though Zhu Ping'an had not noticed. Red and blue petals mingled at the base of a tree, bursting into color as if a small, radiant sunrise had gathered around its roots, painting the earth with ephemeral splendor.

“Master, make sure you eat breakfast before heading out,” called the young maid, Baozi, carrying a food box under one arm and twirling a delicate oiled-paper umbrella in the other. She had arrived early, making her way to Zhu Ping’an’s little courtyard with practiced efficiency.

Breakfast was, as always, perfectly satisfying. Once finished, Baozi insisted on stuffing an extra paper umbrella into Zhu Ping’an’s hands before she would leave, clutching the food box firmly as if the act of giving the umbrella were as essential as her own presence.

Zhu Ping’an stepped out into the drizzle, holding the umbrella but not opening it. The rain was fine as silk threads, barely touching his clothes, making the use of an umbrella entirely unnecessary. With his sleeves loose and flowing, he moved at a leisurely pace toward the Guozijian, the Imperial Academy, where the day’s ceremonial “Shicai” rites awaited. Today marked an important milestone: Zhu Ping’an and his fellow newly minted officials were to participate in the Shicai ceremony at both the Guozijian and the Confucius Temple.

The Shicai ceremony was the final formal step for scholars entering officialdom. After this ritual, Zhu Ping’an and the others could don the official robes prepared by the Ministry of Personnel. They would shed their civilian identities, stepping fully into the life of government service—entitled to salaries, privileges, and the subtle, heady power of office.

On the way to the Guozijian, Zhu Ping’an met Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen. The three of them walked together, entering the academy side by side.

At this moment, the Guozijian stood as the pinnacle of learning in the Ming Empire—a world-class institution whose influence far outshone any modern university, even Harvard or West Point. Scholars from far-off lands—Central Asia, Korea, Southeast Asia—who could study here were almost guaranteed high office upon returning home.

Located in the eastern district of the capital, the Guozijian faced Guozijian Street, and its neighbor was the Confucius Temple, connected directly via the academy grounds.

For Zhu Ping'an, this was a first visit. Not far from the academy stood the "Dismount Stele"—a marker where all officials, regardless of rank, were required to dismount, a ritual sign of respect for the teachers and traditions. Beyond it lay the main gate of the Guozijian, known as Jixian Gate.

Two towering, ornate paifangs—archways—stood before the gate, their yellow-glazed tiles glinting in the soft morning light, a testament to Ming luxury and grandeur. The front bore the inscription "Huanqiao Jiaoze," meaning "The teachers of Guozijian bestow their benevolence abundantly," while the reverse read "Xuehai Jiegun," referring to the countless students eager to learn. These inscriptions, later replicated in the Qing dynasty, reflected the enduring legacy of Ming traditions, though Qing historians altered many historical records to suit their narrative.

The Guozijian itself exuded a stately air, dominated by red brick and tiled roofs. The moment Zhu Ping'an, Zhang Siwei, and Wang Shizhen entered, the academy's red-hued elegance pressed upon them, an architectural embrace of knowledge and authority.

Inside, fellow scholars and students of the same cohort greeted Zhu Ping'an and his companions with formal bows, which he returned in kind. As the three exchanged polite courtesies, other academy students watched from afar, their eyes alight with admiration and envy. They had known that today the newly minted jinshi—advanced scholars—would perform the Shicai ceremony, and many had claimed vantage points early in the morning, observing from a distance with a mixture of longing and jealousy.

After some time, Ouyang Zishi finally arrived, surrounded by a group of newly minted jinshi. In the court, no one embodied the thirst for office more clearly than Ouyang Zishi. While Zhu Ping'an and his peers waited without seeing any of the academy's leaders, Ouyang's presence quickly summoned the key officials: the Guozijian presiding officer, the supervisory administrators, and several senior instructors.

The previous presiding officer had been Xu Jie, who had been promoted to Minister of Rites. The new presiding officer owed his position to the influence of Yan Song, and he displayed particular courtesy toward Yan Song's nephew, Ouyang Zishi, seeking favor for his own career advancement.

Though Zhu Ping'an, as the top-ranking scholar, should have been the center of attention at the Shicai ceremony, Ouyang Zishi emerged as the ostensible star. Time and again, he displayed subtle superiority before Zhu Ping'an, relishing the extra attentions bestowed upon him.

As they walked toward the Confucius Temple, the drizzle grew steadily heavier. Guozijian officials led the way, while the new scholars followed behind. The presiding officer, supervisory administrators, and other officials lingered near Ouyang Zishi, chatting and ensuring he received every courtesy.

Zhu Ping'an walked alongside Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen. There was no need to follow strict order yet; proper etiquette would be required once they reached the Confucius Temple.

"This rain's picking up a bit, isn't it?" Ouyang Zishi remarked casually, his gaze flicking subtly toward the umbrella tucked under Zhu Ping'an's arm.

The presiding officer noticed, of course. Being Yan Song's nephew and with matrimonial ambitions involving Yan Song's family in the air, Ouyang's favor was valuable. Displaying deference to him was, in effect, a political calculation, signaling respect to Yan Song himself.

“Ah... Master Ping’an, is it?” the presiding officer asked, approaching Zhu Ping’an.

“Greetings, Presiding Officer. I am indeed Zhu Ping’an,” he replied, bowing respectfully.

“And... you won’t be needing that umbrella, I presume?” the officer added, glancing meaningfully toward Ouyang Zishi, who was supposedly fragile and “unable to withstand the rain.”

Zhu Ping’an smiled, offering the umbrella he had been holding to the presiding officer.

The rain was barely enough to dampen clothing, yet Ouyang Zishi, with his flushed, healthy complexion, pretended delicate frailty. Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen exchanged disbelieving glances, silently registering the injustice.

“Ah... but how inconsiderate of you! Then Master Zi Hou will be caught in the rain,” Ouyang Zishi said, taking the umbrella with exaggerated courtesy, his eyes fixed on Zhu Ping’an as if waiting for him to relent.

The presiding officer’s gaze flicked to Zhu Ping’an, carrying an unspoken pressure.

“No problem at all,” Zhu Ping’an said smoothly, “the umbrella is yours.”

The presiding officer stroked his beard in satisfaction, and Ouyang Zishi accepted it with half-hearted resistance, raising it over his head with a subtle air of triumph.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen were puzzled by Zhu Ping'an's ready concession—until he explained with a calm smile:

“If he doesn't raise it, then it's a clear day.”

Chapter 396: The Shicai Ceremony

“Confucius, trapped between Chen and Cai, went seven days without food, playing his zither in his chamber, while Yan Hui laid out vegetables outside his door to show his respect and loyalty to his teacher.” — Fengsu Tongyi

From that moment onward, the act of offering vegetables became a symbol of reverence for one's teacher. The “Shicai” ritual evolved into one of the two major ceremonial practices in honoring Confucius. To perform Shicai was to offer fruits and vegetables in homage to the sage—a gesture of devotion and gratitude. Initially, it was a “ceremony of discipleship,” a personal act of respect. But over time, it extended beyond students: newly minted scholars were required to perform Shicai, offering thanks to Confucius before formally stepping into official life. Removing their coarse cloth clothes and straw sandals signified their entry into the world of civil service.

Upon entering the Confucius Temple, Zhu Ping'an and the others were guided by officials of the Guozijian into a side hall. There, they washed and changed, removing their personal attire and donning the simple, pre-prepared coarse cloth robes and cloth shoes. Following the officials' instructions, they lined up according to the rankings they had earned in the final imperial examination.

In the Confucius Temple, aside from Guozijian officials, there were also ritual officers from the Ministry of Rites. Each had a specific role in the Shicai ceremony—some leading the ritual, some assisting, some overseeing the proceedings.

Zhu Ping'an walked at the very front. Guided by the ushers, he passed through the Gate of Respect and reached the base of the terrace before the Dacheng Hall. Ascending via the east steps, he stepped onto the terrace with a mixture of solemnity and anticipation.

"Positions for all ranks, below the officers!" a lead ritual officer commanded loudly after bowing to the hall, his voice echoing across the courtyard.

Several attendants stepped forward to guide Zhu Ping'an and the others into formation along the east side of the terrace. Once everyone else assumed their designated positions, the ceremony began in earnest.

As Zhu Ping'an took his place, music began to play. He hadn't noticed when a grand orchestra had assembled both above and below the terrace, dressed in crimson ceremonial robes, holding a dazzling array of instruments. The melody was unmistakable—identical to the music played at imperial court sessions, the "Jiajing Chapter."

Soon, thirty-six dancers from the Ministry of Rites' Music Bureau appeared, each carrying three pheasant feathers in the right hand and a short flute in the left, all clad in deep red ceremonial garb. They ascended the terrace and performed the solemn Six-Step Dance, moving with measured grace and precision.

At the same time, the lead ritual officer began reciting the sacrificial text:

“Eternal Sage of Letters, Teacher for all ages,

Your flame of wisdom passes through the generations, never extinguished.

Now we, your disciples, strive to emulate the virtuous...”

“We humbly present our offerings.”

With the ritual text concluded, it was time for Zhu Ping’an and his peers to perform the Shicai. Traditionally, only the top three scholars—the Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua—would step forward to offer vegetables to Confucius and the Twelve Worthies. Today, however, Ouyang Zishi was added to the group, so the four of them represented all scholars in performing the ceremonial offering.

Some newly minted scholars in the crowd murmured in confusion, but the Guozijian’s presiding official quickly silenced them with a stern glance.

Zhu Ping’an approached the offering table first, selecting a stalk of water celery, a bundle of chive blossoms, several red dates, and a handful of chestnuts. He arranged them neatly on a platter and carried it to the terrace.

Each ingredient bore symbolic meaning: the water celery represented the scholars themselves, chive blossoms symbolized talent, red dates reflected early ambition, and chestnuts expressed reverence for Confucius. These were long-established conventions.

“I, disciple Zhu Ping’an, have been blessed by the teachings of ritual and music. Having achieved modest success, I dare to present these offerings to the First Sage, Confucius,” he intoned solemnly.

Kneeling before the statue of Confucius in the Dacheng Hall, Zhu Ping’an placed the offerings with reverence. An attendant handed him a cup of wine, which he also presented with three deep bows, repeating the gesture with three cups in total. Only then was his Shicai complete.

The Bangyan, Tanhua, and Ouyang Zishi then offered their vegetables and bows to the Twelve Worthies. Other scholars on the terrace followed suit under the guidance of the ritual officers.

When the Shicai ceremony concluded, the sun had risen high, nearly overhead. Zhu Ping’an and the others shed their coarse robes and sandals and changed into the official garments prepared by the Ministries of Rites and Personnel, corresponding to their newly assigned ranks.

In an instant, they were transformed—students no longer, now officials in full regalia.

Zhu Ping’an wore the blue uniform of a sixth-rank officer, the front adorned with a patch depicting an egret. Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, along with others, wore the seventh-rank blue uniforms, their patches displaying cranes instead.

“Lord Zhu, please guide me generously in the future...” Zhang Siwei said, winking, his flattery thinly veiled.

“Ah... that depends on how you demonstrate it,” Zhu Ping’an replied, wiggling his fingers seriously, pretending to make an official gesture.

“You two dogs of office...” Wang Shizhen shook his head, smiling and scolding them.

In truth, everyone, now dressed in official garments, laughed and joked, their excitement bubbling over. Years of cold nights studying, endless repetition, all for this one moment, and now it had come.

While they laughed, an official from the Ministry of Works approached with news: the stele commemorating the names of the newly minted scholars had been carved and was ready to view.

A permanent mark in history!

The group hurried to the specially designated stele area of the Guozijian. The official, seeking favor, lingered by Ouyang Zishi, chatting and flattering him, which drew even more scholars around him, eager to bask in reflected prestige.

The reason was clear: the official was showing deference to Yan Shifan, now second-in-command at the Ministry of Works—the Right Vice Minister, effectively a deputy minister. With Yan Song as the Grand Secretary, Yan Shifan held immense sway, and so all the ministry's affairs passed through his hands.

Ouyang Zishi, being a relative of Yan Shifan, naturally received the official's attentions.

For the other newly minted scholars, the glory of the examination was over. From this moment on, past achievements mattered little. A new journey had begun. Advancement in officialdom required effort, yes, but even more, it required patrons—powerful figures whose favor could make or break a career.

Thus, the scholars clustered around Ouyang Zishi, vying for his attention, hoping to secure a foothold in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Zhu Ping'an, by contrast, had only Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen nearby.

"He's... not rising," Zhu Ping'an murmured, pointing to Ouyang Zishi surrounded by admirers.

Indeed, Ouyang Zishi no longer held his ceremonial umbrella amidst the crowd.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen couldn't help but laugh. Others might not have understood Zhu Ping'an's meaning, but they did, recalling his sly remark from the morning: "If he does not rise, it will be a clear day."

At the Guozijian's stele area, rows upon rows of carved stones bore the names of scholars past and present. Under the guidance of the official, each of the newly minted scholars found their own stele.

Seeing his name etched into stone, every scholar radiated pride, imagining their names shining through the ages.

Only Zhu Ping'an remained calm.

The stone was new, the characters firm and vigorous... yet nearby, older steles bore inscriptions faded by sun and wind.

True immortality, he thought, was not carved in stone.

Stone weathers. Only what is etched in people's hearts endures forever.

Chapter 397: A Chilly Welcome on the First Day (1)

Li Shu smiled sweetly, folding her hands in a deep, formal kowtow, her eyes dark as ink, glimmering with a teasing ambiguity as she looked at Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an had just returned from the Guozijian, dressed in his official robes, when Li Shu greeted him this way. Yet, despite the formality of her gesture, the subtle curve of her lips betrayed a playful mockery rather than genuine respect.

Zhu Ping'an let out a helpless chuckle. It wasn't as if he enjoyed parading around in official attire; it was simply the custom after the shicai ceremony. One had to wear the official robes home and only remove them after offering incense.

"Skip the formalities. Come here and let your old master rub your shoulders." Seeing Li Shu's exaggerated posturing, Zhu Ping'an couldn't resist teasing her a little.

"You may be ugly, but you think highly of yourself..." Li Shu rolled her eyes in mock disdain.

At her words, the little maid behind Li Shu, her hair neatly tied like a steamed bun, covered her mouth to stifle her giggles, while the older housemaid trailing behind glanced at Zhu Ping'an's official robes and held back a laugh, maintaining decorum with difficulty.

After the shicai ceremony, Zhu Ping'an officially became a government officer. That evening, the Marquis of Linhuai hosted a celebratory banquet in his honor.

The matriarch of the Linhuai household treated Zhu Ping'an with unprecedented warmth, and the young ladies of the house looked at Li Shu with envious admiration. Becoming an officer in the Hanlin Academy as a sixth-rank compiler was no small feat; it was often considered a stepping stone to prime ministership, a career with unlimited potential.

Zhou the Fatty, sitting at the table, alternated between calling Zhu Ping'an "brother-in-law" with respect and teasing him casually. He even mentioned that he would introduce Zhu Ping'an to some of his friends in a couple of days.

Only the mischievous little boy frowned, his round face twisted in discontent. Sure, his brother-in-law was impressive—but how could he possibly be better than himself?

"I'll top the imperial exams too! I'm the strongest!" His small eyes gleamed with determination, constantly scanning for an opportunity to prove himself.

"Last time I smashed the jar... has brother-in-law ever done that?" he thought, pride swelling in his chest.

The evening was filled with warmth, laughter, and celebration, interrupted only briefly when Zhou the Fatty, unable to hold it in, farted mid-conversation. He claimed he had stepped out for a moment, but the sound had already drifted back inside.

It wasn't a big deal, though. Everyone else at the table was either refined young ladies or scholars trained in etiquette and poetry; they maintained their composure, pretending nothing had happened.

But just as Zhou the Fatty thought the incident would be forgotten, the little boy spoke up.

“Brother Zhou, I’ve noticed you’ve gotten fatter.” He said it with an earnest seriousness that made it all the more cruel.

“You... how did you notice that?” Zhou the Fatty thought the boy was trying to smooth things over for him. He was touched—what a considerate little fellow! He resolved silently to never scold him again, even promising that when he inherited his title and wealth, he’d share some with him.

“From your fart,” the boy replied, his tiny eyes sparkling with mischievous intelligence.

Coughing violently, Zhou the Fatty nearly choked. He tried to maintain his dignity, but inside he felt like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

“You see, your farts used to be loud and clear. Tonight, they sounded muffled... obviously, you’ve gained weight, and your fat is trapping the gas!”

The boy’s explanation was delivered with pride and brilliance, his little eyes practically shooting sparks. (Look! I can tell so much just from a fart! Can brother-in-law do this?)

The words hit with surgical precision. Trapped farts... in his own fat... the insult stung perfectly. Zhou the Fatty could no longer contain himself and burst out laughing, a mix of fury and helplessness.

Even later, in his private room, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but chuckle whenever he remembered the boy's unique observational skills. That child was truly remarkable.

That night, Zhu Ping'an lit the lamp and turned to Chuanxi Lu (Record of Transmission), his mind fully immersed in the teachings of Wang Shouren. As he studied, his understanding of the concept of zhi liangzhi—the cultivation of innate knowledge—deepened. Those three characters were Wang Shouren's concise summary of his philosophy.

He recalled the historical account: when Prince Ning, Zhu Chenhao, rebelled in Nanchang with over a hundred thousand troops, Wang Shouren subdued him in just thirty-five days. This was the essence of zhi liangzhi, the application of moral knowledge to decisive action.

Zhi liangzhi, in essence, was the unity of knowledge and action. Knowing what is right is one thing; doing it is far harder. But with steadfastness and sincere intent, the light of understanding eventually emerges—time was the only variable.

Every reading of Chuanxi Lu offered Zhu Ping'an new insights. Each session nourished his growth like essential nutrients absorbed by a sponge, his mind relentlessly soaking up the wisdom left behind by Wang Shouren.

The feeling was akin to a protagonist in a xianxia novel discovering a legendary immortal's hidden chamber, gaining access to a world-altering manual for cultivation—a thrill he could never put down.

Only when the night deepened into an inky black and the household lay in slumber did Zhu Ping'an finally wash, extinguish the lamp, and sink into a deep, contented sleep.

The following morning, dressed in his official robes, Zhu Ping'an set out with excitement to begin his duties at the Hanlin Academy.

During the Ming Dynasty, the Hanlin Academy was a prestigious institution despite its modest fifth-rank bureaucratic status. It commanded immense respect, responsible for drafting imperial edicts, maintaining historical records, refining official documents, overseeing examinations, and advising the emperor. Its influence could even sway court politics and determine the rise or fall of officials. For example, the Chief Hanlin Scholar, officially a fifth-rank officer, could take precedence over fourth-rank officials during court sessions.

The Hanlin Academy was known as a "cradle for future prime ministers." Young scholars who entered the academy honed their skills, made their presence known before the emperor, and accrued political capital—an invaluable training ground.

Yet, the reality was harsher than the dream. Many entered the academy, but few truly rose to the pinnacle of power.

Because it was the emperor's advisory body, its offices were located close to the imperial residence. At the time, the Jiajing Emperor resided in the Western Gardens, so the Hanlin offices had relocated nearby.

Along the way, Zhu Ping'an met Zhang Siwei, and together they reached the Hanlin gates. Presenting their credentials to the guards, they were admitted smoothly.

But upon entering, Zhu Ping'an immediately encountered a human-shaped icicle—cold, unyielding, and familiar. It was Li Mo, the Minister of Personnel, who had once scolded him in the Jinluan Hall, calling him “a small rascal with no manners, no better than a common scoundrel.” Li Mo now held the additional title of Hanlin Scholar, favored by the emperor.

Li Mo's icy gaze swept over Zhu Ping'an.

This would not be easy, Zhu Ping'an thought, quickly forming a grim conclusion about the challenges ahead.

#### Chapter 398: A Chilly Welcome on the First Day (2)

Today was the day for the newly appointed jinshi to take up their positions at the Hanlin Academy. Li Mo, Minister of Personnel and concurrently a scholar of the Hanlin Academy, had arrived early, awaiting the induction of the fresh scholars.

In truth, Li Mo seldom came to the Academy. After all, as Minister of Personnel, his responsibilities at the Ministry were far weightier and more pressing. In Li Mo's mind, the Ministry's affairs were more critical, and it was here that he held the first line of defense against the faction of Yan Song. Yan Song controlled the Grand Secretariat, his son Yan Shifan dominated the Ministry of Works, and along with allies like Zhao Wenhua and Yan Maoqing, the Yan faction almost ruled unchecked—selling offices for bribes, manipulating state affairs, expanding their circle of followers, turning the court into a cesspool of corruption. Li Mo despised it all, despised it to the bone. Fortunately, as Minister of Personnel, he had authority over appointments within the Ministry, preventing Yan Song's faction from planting their minions freely.

What Li Mo despised most of all was the faction's ability to place their pawns wherever they pleased, turning a once-proper court into a mess of smoke and filth.

When Li Mo caught sight of Zhu Ping'an, memories flashed unbidden of the scene in the Golden Hall—Yan Song and Zhu Ping'an laughing together, completely at ease.

The claws of the Yan faction had even reached the Hanlin Academy! How could this be tolerated? What could not be tolerated?

Though the top scholar's assignment to the Academy technically had nothing to do with Yan Song, Li Mo had every reason to suspect that Zhu Ping'an's jinshi success was orchestrated by him. He had spent so long guarding against Ouyang Zishi, only to have Zhu Ping'an suddenly appear out of nowhere! A feint here, a secret maneuver there—Yan Song, that old fox, truly was cunning beyond measure.

But as long as Li Mo stood, Zhu Ping'an had better not get too comfortable.

Li Mo's thoughts were as turbulent as storm clouds, and naturally, he could not bear to treat Zhu Ping'an kindly. Yet Zhang Siwei, fortunately, was spared the harshest of judgments; Li Mo was not so unreasonable as to strike everyone down indiscriminately.

In Li Mo's eyes, Zhu Ping'an belonged to the Yan faction, but Zhang Siwei did not. Zhang's maternal uncle, Wang Chonggu, had previously sent Li Mo a letter, requesting he keep an eye on Zhang. Li Mo still held considerable respect for Wang Chonggu, the current Provincial Treasurer of Henan.

“Zi Hou, take good care of yourself,” he murmured in thought.

Zhang Siwei could only exchange a helpless, “Take care of yourself” glance with Zhu Ping’an before being led away to familiarize himself with the new offices.

“Student Zhu Ping’an greets the esteemed scholar,” Zhu Ping’an said, bowing fully in accordance with etiquette, his voice calm but respectful.

“Do you think that merely becoming the top scholar makes you extraordinary?” Li Mo’s face hardened into a mask of authority as he fixed Zhu Ping’an with a piercing gaze. “Do you think that being admitted to the Hanlin Academy means you can consider yourself destined to be a prime minister?”

“I have not, sir,” Zhu Ping’an replied, shaking his head, inwardly suppressing a sigh. Actually, he had always admired Li Mo among the ministers of the Ming dynasty.

Yet here he was, immediately receiving such a sharp rebuke upon entering—he could not help but feel a flush of frustration.

“Not so?” Li Mo’s lips curled into a cold, derisive smile. He lifted his scholarly authority like a sword. “Do you know that among all the newly appointed Hanlin scholars today, you arrived last? Young people achieve a little and think they can soar. Do you not know that learning is like rowing upstream—if you do not advance, you retreat? That the heart, like a horse on an open plain, is easy to let wander but hard to rein in?”

Or perhaps you think that your little cleverness can earn you a shortcut?" Li Mo's eyes gleamed with sarcasm, implying that Zhu Ping'an might be trying to rely on connections, seeking favor with Yan Song to climb the ranks.

"I have not, sir," Zhu Ping'an replied again, standing tall, his face open and honest.

"Not so?" Li Mo's face darkened almost to the point of turning blue, vexed at Zhu Ping'an's obstinacy. "Young man, do not dream of shortcuts, do not rely on clever tricks. Understand this: seeking help from others is never as effective as relying on yourself. A man is born under heaven to grow into a towering tree, not a vine climbing someone else's trunk. Otherwise, however high you climb, in the end, you will be unable to straighten your own back!"

Uh... you make a valid point, but I really haven't taken any shortcuts, Zhu Ping'an thought, exasperated.

"Thank you for your guidance, esteemed scholar. I shall keep your words in mind," he said, bowing respectfully.

Li Mo's eyes stayed locked on him. The more respectful and compliant Zhu Ping'an appeared, the more irritated he grew. This little Yan-faction scholar could endure! Just like during the rule of Xia Yan and Xia Fu! Such people were the most dangerous—and the most infuriating.

"You have much more to keep in mind!" Li Mo snorted coldly, launching into a rigorous lecture. "I see that you are young and have already topped the exams. I know you are clever. But sometimes, cleverness can backfire. History is full of clever men. Was Zhao Gao clever? Liang Ji clever? Li Lifu clever? Qin Hui clever?"

Zhu Ping'an froze. Zhao Gao, Liang Ji, Li Linfu, Qin Hui... all infamous traitors and villains in history! Was Li Mo seriously comparing him to them? I have no trace of a villainous heart at all! Zhu Ping'an was completely dumbfounded, utterly unprepared for such a 'high opinion' of him.

"Zhao Gao became chancellor and called deer horses; Liang Ji dominated court affairs for twenty years; Li Linfu served as prime minister for nineteen years, corrupting laws and order, ultimately leading to the An Shi Rebellion; Qin Hui... well, his misdeeds are notorious. As you see, history has no shortage of clever men—but cleverness alone can bring ruin."

As Li Mo spoke of men who brought disaster upon the nation, spittle flicked from his mouth, landing on Zhu Ping'an's face.

Although Li Mo did not call him out by name, Zhu Ping'an clearly understood that he was being criticized. Who could have imagined that the esteemed historical figure Li Mo, after a single conversation between himself and Yan Song at the Golden Hall, would harbor such a deep grudge against him?

A misunderstanding? Then it must be clarified. Being misjudged by one's direct superior is never a good thing, Zhu Ping'an thought, wiping his face.

"Esteemed scholar, actually, I and Lord Yan..." Zhu Ping'an began, only to be cut off.

“Lord Yan?!”

You little brat dare to use Yan Song to threaten me! I am not afraid of Yan Song!

“That is enough! I do not care who you are, how clever, or who backs you. If you serve in the Hanlin Academy, you must first learn to be a proper man! The smarter and more capable a man, the more he must understand propriety. Without this, he will only bring harm. Only by mastering the art of being a man can one serve in office. Keep in your heart the duty to act for the country and the people. Do not stoop to trivial schemes, do not entertain illicit thoughts, do not form factions for private gain, and never silence your conscience to commit wrongdoing!”

Zhu Ping’an had been better off keeping silent. But as soon as he spoke, the words ‘Lord Yan’ were caught by Li Mo’s sharp ears. Misinterpreting it as an attempt to intimidate him through Yan Song, Li Mo’s anger surged, veins standing out on his forehead as he practically shouted in Zhu Ping’an’s face.

“In my Hanlin Academy, remember this first and foremost: be a man before being an official! Otherwise, I will show no mercy, no matter who supports you. Now go!”

Having vented his fury, Li Mo waved him off, letting Zhu Ping’an proceed, his stern gaze finally releasing its hold.

Chapter 399: A Chilly Welcome on the First Day (3)

Li Mo’s outburst at Zhu Ping’an inside the Hanlin Academy had been witnessed by far too many pairs of eyes. Those who saw the scene exchanged glances filled with sympathy before quietly making up their minds: they would be keeping a careful distance from Zhu Ping’an from now on. No one wanted to risk being caught in

the crossfire should the Academy's highest-ranking leader decide to release his temper again. That would be... tremendously unfortunate.

In truth, when Li Mo scolded him just now, it wasn't even time for the Academy to officially begin work. Morning duties hadn't started.

But—he was the leader. And leaders, by right or by whim, were allowed their storms.

Zhu Ping'an touched the bridge of his nose with a helpless little smile as he watched Li Mo stride away, robes billowing like a dark cloud retreating across the courtyard. Then he exhaled softly and continued on his registration journey through the Hanlin Academy.

The Academy sat with its back against the Western Gardens, and because it enjoyed imperial favor, its compound was impressively large. A three-sectioned government yamen stretched inward like nested courtyards; on each side, rows of office rooms stood in neat order. The first section served as the main administrative area. Following the directions of a yamen runner, Zhu Ping'an made his way to the hall responsible for registering new Hanlin scholars.

Most of the other new appointees had already finished reporting in—right around the time Li Mo was berating him—and had been dispatched to their assigned offices. Zhu Ping'an was the last one to arrive.

Inside the hall sat two Shidu Scholars in their forties, the officials in charge of onboarding new Hanlin members.

The first had a gentle, warm demeanour—his face calm, his gaze steady and kind. The second was short in stature, dark-skinned, with unremarkable features yet an unmistakable air of towering self-importance. His chin pointed skyward as if he were examining clouds no one else could see, his expression stiff with pride and emotional distance.

“Junior Zhu Ping’an greets the two honored adults.” Zhu Ping’an stepped into the hall and cupped his hands respectfully toward the pair seated at the desks.

“Please rise. So you are Zhu Ping’an? Such youthful talent—truly impressive for someone so young.” The gentle scholar stood up at once, offering Zhu Ping’an a courteous smile and warmly spoken praise.

The other scholar reacted quite differently. He let out a disdainful snort, his nostrils flaring in a pointed display of contempt—especially when he heard the words ‘youthful talent’ and ‘impressive’. His posture became even more rigid, his dissatisfaction practically written across his face.

“Your words flatter me too much, honored sir. Ping’an merely passed by luck alone, unworthy of such praise,” Zhu Ping’an replied with humble sincerity.

“Young people brim with life and vigor,” the warm scholar chuckled. “Humility is good, but losing your spirit is not. Come, sit and drink some tea while we talk.”

“You honor me, but standing is perfectly fine,” Zhu Ping’an said with a pleasant smile, shaking his head lightly.

Even in the modern world, one would never sit casually during a first meeting with one's superior—much less in an era so steeped in hierarchy and etiquette.

The warm scholar nodded in approval and did not push the matter further. He continued explaining the structure and workings of the Hanlin Academy while Zhu Ping'an stood respectfully before him.

Despite being a Fifth-Rank institution, the Academy housed a surprisingly large staff: a Chief Hanlin Scholar—the position currently held by Li Mo, who also served as Minister of Personnel, a far more prestigious post; two Assistant Shidu Scholars; two Assistant Shijiang Scholars; several Sixth-Rank Readers and Lecturers; nine Eighth-Rank 'Five Classics Doctors,' all hereditary positions typically passed down by descendants of Confucius and Mencius; and over a dozen scribes, attendants, clerks, and record-keepers.

Beyond these were five fellow Xiuzhuan scholars—Zhu Ping'an's own rank—along with more than ten Bianxiu, Jiǎntǎo, and Shùjìshì scholars.

In total, over forty officials held formal ranks within the Academy, not counting the numerous unranked clerks and runners bustling around the compound.

As they spoke, Zhu Ping'an also learned the names of the two scholars before him—and realized with a jolt that both were towering historical figures.

The gentle one was Li Chunfang, later renowned as both a Grand Secretariat Prime Minister and a master of ceremonial qingci. He succeeded Xu Jie as the head of the Cabinet and was, like Zhu Ping'an, a top-ranking zhuangyuan. Perhaps that shared fate made him especially amiable toward Zhu Ping'an.

The other, the arrogant one, was none other than Yuan Wei—a man equally famed for qingci writing, mentioned alongside strict Yan Nai, upright Guo Pu, and elegant Li Chunfang. His talent for composing ceremonial texts was unmatched throughout the empire. That famous qingci—"The black tortoise first shows its auspicious sign upon the Luo River..."—was his creation.

The Jiajing Emperor adored him for such skill. Whenever some strange omen or celestial portent appeared, or whenever praise-filled essays were required on short notice, Yuan Wei's work always stood above the rest. The emperor was said to send urgent notes to the Cabinet in the dead of night, demanding qingci immediately—and Yuan Wei would always produce them effortlessly, perfectly attuned to imperial taste.

Thus, although his official rank was not high, his favor at court inflated his pride to an extraordinary degree.

Zhu Ping'an glanced at Yuan Wei's haughty face and silently applauded the accuracy of the historical records: they described him as gifted yet unbearably arrogant, harshly criticizing any writing that displeased him.

So that's why he looks at me like he swallowed something bitter.

Most likely, Yuan Wei had seen the ceremonial text Zhu Ping'an wrote in the examinations. Even though Zhu had rewritten a piece by Gong Zizhen, it naturally couldn't surpass the original. No wonder Yuan Wei was displeased—it suited his character perfectly.

Legend claimed that his arrogance began in childhood. The day before he was born, both his parents dreamed the same dream: a great black dragon spiraling down onto their roof before soaring away. When their son arrived—a dark-skinned infant with bright, piercing eyes—they believed wholeheartedly that he was the dragon reincarnated. They raised him with the reverence befitting a celestial being.

He never disappointed them. At five, he matched couplets with the county magistrate. At ten, he memorized bagu essays after reading them once. At seventeen, he became a county student; he ranked second in the provincial exam, first in the metropolitan exam, and finally placed as tanhua in the palace exam.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an—a zhuangyuan—assigned the same rank he himself only reached as tanhua, Yuan Wei's heart naturally twisted with displeasure. And after hearing Li Chunfang praise this young scholar, his irritation only grew.

After nearly ten minutes of explanation, Li Chunfang finally shifted the discussion to Zhu Ping'an's actual assignment.

"Well then, that sums up the structure of the Hanlin Academy," Li Chunfang said gently. "Let us return to the matter at hand. While Chief Li oversees the Academy, he is often busy with his many duties. Thus, most of the Academy's daily affairs fall to us Shidu and Shijiang Scholars."

"Today, despite his heavy workload, Chief Li visited the Academy and personally arranged the new scholars' assignments. According to his instructions—Zihou, you will be responsible for cataloguing and organizing the classics, histories, and collected works in our archives. The Academy's collection is vast as the sea, and its arrangement... far from orderly. This task will rest primarily on your shoulders. Other duties may be assigned

as needed, but this will be your chief responsibility. The workload is heavy, and the task demanding—Zihou, you must prepare yourself.”

At this announcement, several people in the hall cast Zhu Ping’an looks filled with pity—or, in a few cases, thinly veiled glee.

Cataloguing and organizing the archives was widely considered the worst, most grueling, most thankless task in the entire Hanlin Academy—and misfortune often found those who undertook it.

Usually, such a duty was reserved as punishment for those who had erred.

What a pity, the onlookers seemed to sigh silently.

Such a waste... for a newly minted zhuangyuan.

Chapter 400: Serving as a Librarian in the Great Ming

Under the mixture of sympathetic gazes and thinly veiled glee from those around him, Zhu Ping’an completed his reporting duties, and—guided by a pair of yamen runners—made his way toward the place where he would now work: the Imperial Library Pavilion.

The Library Pavilion sat solidly with its back to the north and its face toward the south. From the outside it appeared to be a simple two-story structure, but once inside one could see that it actually contained three

levels, with a hidden mezzanine tucked between the eaves. Its footprint was large, roughly the size of six full rooms placed side by side. The entire structure was built of blue-gray stone bricks, and its roof was covered with black glazed tiles. Not a single wooden beam or column existed anywhere in the building—an uncompromising design completely devoted to fire prevention. Even the black tiles were chosen deliberately; in the minds of ancient craftsmen, the color black belonged to the element of water, and water subdued fire. The entire pavilion was a fortress built to protect knowledge from flame.

Outside, a wide man-made pool glimmered with green ripples. Should fire ever break out, water could be drawn immediately from the pool to extinguish the flames.

Zhu Ping'an stood before the pavilion, taking in the serene scenery, the quiet pool, and the solemn stonework. This place is wonderful... so why did everyone look at me with pity? Why that hint of *schadenfreude*? he wondered, puzzled.

Led inside by the yamen runner, he reached his designated work area: a small set of tables and chairs arranged on the left side of the main hall—his future desk. Besides him, three minor clerks, all low-ranking and far from the center of power, worked here as custodians, sweeping dust and watching over the books. The real task of sorting, cataloging, and archiving would fall squarely on his shoulders.

Once inside, Zhu Ping'an began to understand why others had looked at him that way.

The interior of the Library Pavilion was a vast ocean of books, an overwhelming sea of volumes stacked so high and so wide that they blurred into something like mist. On just the first floor alone, there must have been tens of thousands of books, arranged with more chaos than order. Some books were placed neatly on shelves, but many more were piled into the cabinets in crooked stacks, leaning like worn-down city walls. Some volumes had collapsed entirely, spilling into messy heaps.

The bookshelves themselves were made from precious golden nanmu, beautiful and fragrant with age, yet frustratingly impractical—not at all like the clearly labeled, orderly shelves of a modern library. Here, beauty triumphed over usability.

Zhu Ping'an walked through the three floors and quickly saw the pattern: only the volumes of the Yongle Dadian were arranged with any real care. Everything else was in varying degrees of disarray. Compared with the tidy libraries of his own time, this pavilion looked less like an archive and more like a swarm of headless flies.

He had barely settled into his new post when Zhang Siwei arrived, accompanied by another Hanlin scholar of about thirty years, a slightly older man who had been navigating the Hanlin Academy's corridors for nearly three years. His name was Zhang Bo, a fellow townsman of Zhang Siwei, and the two had been fortunate enough to be assigned to the same division.

"Ahem... why is it such a mess in here?" Zhang Siwei muttered as he stepped into the cavernous hall, staring at the waves of books with a helpless sigh.

"The third floor is even worse," Zhu Ping'an said with a small laugh. "Want me to show you?"

"No need. There'll be plenty of chances once I start helping you tidy this place." Zhang Siwei shuddered at the thought and quickly declined. Then he introduced his senior fellow townsman.

Zhu Ping'an rinsed the teacups and brewed a pot of the academy-issued tea. The leaves were plain, nothing special, but he wasn't picky. As they drank, Zhang Siwei promised to bring better tea from home next time. Zhu Ping'an accepted with a grateful smile.

“Zihou,” Zhang Bo began, lifting his cup, “did you offend Lord Li somehow?”

Zhu Ping’an shook his head and recounted his guess about the incident in the Golden Throne Hall. There was no reason to hide it.

“I see. That explains it.” Zhang Bo nodded, lowering his voice. “No wonder. Our Academy Director and Grand Secretary Yan are old rivals. First impressions stick. Even if you tried explaining, it might only make things worse. But Lord Li isn’t an unreasonable man. Once the misunderstanding clears up, you should be able to leave this... well... exile.”

“Exile?” Zhu Ping’an looked around at the books again, confusion deepening. “But this place is—if anything—a treasure trove. Sorting everything will be tiring and time-consuming, yes, but with all these books as company, how is this ‘exile’?”

Zhang Bo chuckled. “Ah, you’re still young.”

“How so?” Zhu Ping’an asked.

“Books are all you’ll have here,” Zhang Bo explained. “We spent ten years reading for the imperial exams—haven’t we read enough? Now that you’re an official, do you think many people still keep up the habit? Most

have already forgotten half of what Confucius and Mencius taught. Officials are swamped with affairs; who has time for more reading?”

He leaned forward slightly. “The Hanlin Academy is a noble place, Zihou, but to be blunt—your assignment is as close to exile as it gets. The Academy is called the nursery of future prime ministers because our daily tasks are more than work—they train us in governance, broaden our knowledge, and build experience.”

Zhang Bo, a natural storyteller, took another sip of tea and warmed up further.

“For example, I’m currently responsible for drafting imperial edicts. By the way, I drafted your esteemed mother’s investiture decree.” He smiled proudly at Zhu Ping’an.

“My thanks, Brother Zhang,” Zhu Ping’an replied quickly.

“No need for thanks—it’s my duty,” Zhang Bo waved off the gratitude. “The point is, drafting edicts may look like a simple job, but it’s actually essential training. You get familiar with state affairs, adapt to government work, learn how things are done in the empire.”

Zhu Ping’an and Zhang Siwei both nodded in understanding.

Encouraged, Zhang Bo continued energetically. “Take Zisi here—he’s working on the Song Dynasty Veritable Records. Doing so helps him understand the political precedents of the Song. The more he understands, the more he learns about the art of governing. Then there’s the lecture service we Hanlin scholars perform before the Emperor—that sharpens our knowledge of rituals, policies, and the workings of the court, while also strengthening our relationship with His Majesty. Sometimes we join policy discussions or court debates, learning from top scholars and powerful ministers. The opportunities are endless.”

He set down his cup with a flourish. “All of these things build experience and polish our abilities.”

Zhu Ping’an refilled his cup again. Zhang Bo nodded approvingly and pressed on:

“But your post, Zihou... is different. No opportunities, endless drudgery, and you’re isolated from the outside world. Cataloging books won’t teach you much, and you won’t get to meet the Emperor or the powerful. And you’ve seen how chaotic this place is. Some books are harder to find than needles in the sea. When His Majesty occasionally sends a slip requesting a specific book...” Zhang Bo let out a long whistle. “The previous two scholars in charge were scolded miserably. One of them, Master Liu, spent nearly all his savings just to get reassigned.”

No perks. No chances. No training. Exhausting, tedious, and worst of all—guaranteed to bring reprimands.

Ah, Zhu Ping’an realized. So that’s why everyone looked at me with sympathy and gloating.

“It’s really not that bad,” he said lightly, sipping his tea.

“Not that bad?” Zhang Bo stared at him in disbelief. “Ah, youth. So fearless.”

“Zihou, just endure for now,” Zhang Siwei added, patting him on the shoulder. “After some time, I’ll ask my uncle to speak for you.”

I’m being serious... Zhu Ping’an thought helplessly.

“At least the Emperor sometimes asks for books,” Zhu Ping’an offered.

Zhang Bo nearly dropped his cup. “Stop right there! You should pray His Majesty never asks.” He raised three fingers dramatically. “In the last three years, I know of three times when the Emperor sent a slip for a book. Each time it was near impossible. Not even a whole team could find it quickly. The fastest took a full day and night. And every time, the responsible scholars were scolded harshly. Poor Master Liu was even beaten with the court rod... it was miserable.”

Zhu Ping’an looked at the mountain of classics and histories rising around him and exhaled silently.

Well... whatever it is, I’m now a librarian of the Ming Dynasty.